Living the Gospel in the Foreign Language Classroom: Shaping Stories and Students

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Abstract

This paper, presented as the keynote adress at the 2007 NACFLA conference at Asbury College, explores the resonances between faith, justice, story, and identity. The stories that both teachers and learners tell themselves about their roles have power to heal and to hurt. Paulo Freire's dialogic model of education challenges many of those stories, opening the possibility of a productive educational story that must leave both professor and student free will and choice, and move beyond blame to provide student and teacher alike a space for learning.

The specific shape of my faith derives from my own personal story but also bears the imprint of the Nazarene community among whom I teach and worship and of the Wesleyan tradition that forms the theological roots of that community. Most particularly I resonate with the way in which John Wesley conjugated faith as an individual quest for holiness enacted in a social context and lived out through a pursuit of social justice. "The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social," said Wesley, "no holiness, but social holiness." We are called to grow individually in holiness as part of a Christian community to whom we are accountable and to minister to the world around us. So I would like to talk today about a place where, for me, stories, teaching, my faith and social justice all intersect. I hope that some of my own personal experiences and thoughts will resonate with you and spark a creative exchange of ideas among us.

Stories. I love the richness, the depth and the power of stories. Even after all these years of studying literature, I still find that there is

JCFL 8 (2007): 10–33

something admitting of both mystery and miracle in the fact that a message wrapped in plot, character and voice has infinitely more power than that same message alone, however clear and unambiguous. Some years ago the 8-year-old daughter of our neighbors arrived at my door distraught because her father had gone ballistic when she had unintentionally broken something he had told her not to touch. I assured her it was just an accident and that he would soon forgive her, but I could see my words provided no help. Then I asked her, over milk and cookies, "Would you like to hear how I accidentally almost blinded my brother?" So I told her of when I was 14 and he was 17 and we were playing hockey in our driveway with croquet mallets and a croquet ball. I was driving the ball towards my brother's goal and he, though initially on my left, changed direction and came up on my right. Since I have no peripheral vision on my right side, I didn't realize he was there and I swung my mallet up and made contact full force with his eye. I came within one millionth of an inch, the doctor said, of blinding my brother for life. As it was, the eye swelled shut within minutes and became black, blue and a very angry green. "Do you know what my brother did?" I asked the little girl. "No," she replied, as a cookie paused, mid-way to her mouth. "What?" "Well," I said, "he went all around the neighborhood the next day and said, 'You see this eye? My sister did this to me. She's tough!'" The little girl pushed her chair back from the table, leaving her milk half drunk, her cookies half eaten. "I'm done," she said. "I'm going home." The message of forgiveness that she could not absorb directly, she understood immediately when it came enveloped in story and lived out over cookies and milk.

Stories empower us to convey message with impact, but they can also disempower us. We regularly construct stories that explain events with family, with friends, with school, with life. Yet, paradoxically, we always risk losing our freedom to the very stories we are free to write. At some point interpretive stories create self-enclosed hermeneutical paradigms and we begin to mistake their interpretive lens for reality itself.

I have often seen the faces of bright, conscientious students cloud over in class when they make even one minor mistake. I can almost hear the names they call themselves inwardly, the scornful, dismissive, accusatory tone in which they berate themselves as failures. I don't know when they wrote the story that they had to be perfect to be good enough, but I can see that they have stopped controlling the story and the story has begun to control them. I know professors who suffer in similar fashion

from an exacting, judgmental personal story that makes looking at their teaching imperfections so unbearably painful that improvement is almost impossible.

I see other students who give up with pained discouragement when they find work difficult or puzzling, students who have told themselves a story about their own inability to learn language or math or history. I see professors who feel equally discouraged and powerless in their own classes, and who move to that discouragement at the first sign of student unresponsiveness. We immediately validate as true the facts that confirm the stories we have created, whereas the facts that contradict our dominant stories are dismissed as irrelevant and meaningless. When Paul tells us to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, surely he means, in part, that we are to question our own angry, judgmental, diminishing stories.

Stories have power, power to heal and power to hurt. Stories have power, but power also has a story. And here, in America, that story is white, it is male, it is middle to upper middle class and it is Anglo. And underneath the story of dominant power that makes white affluent Anglo male the norm, there is an uglier story about the poor, about blacks and other persons of color, about Latinos, about foreigners, and about women.

How does this relate to me? I am a woman, after all, and I in no way accept these negative stories as truths. Let me tell you how I was addicted to cigarettes, probably by the time I was 14, certainly long before I ever smoked a cigarette. I had never put a cigarette to my lips, but I lived in a house where my stay-at-home mother smoked 4 packs a day and my father 2 packs. I lived in a house where I had been inhaling up to 6 packs a day of secondary smoke. And I've also grown up in America, surrounded by American TV, movies and advertising, inhaling sexist, racist and classist attitudes without ever consciously thinking these thoughts. I don't believe that women are worth less than men. But I call my male physicians Dr. Morgan and Dr. Malinak and my female doctors Josephine and Penny. Studies show that even professors who value gender equality still call more often on young men in class, ask them more challenging questions and wait longer for them to reflect before moving on. Has this been true of me? I hope not, but I'm not sure.

Last year I attended a conference on the relationship between religious belief and social justice. At the end of the conference there were only about 20 of us left, scattered across 3 tables for a last dinner. I had

entered in conversation with 2 other women. We sat down at an empty table and were soon joined by two men, themselves engrossed in conversation. The 5 of us were then joined by a man who came in alone. As he introduced himself and greeted us, a warm, joyous, Christ-filled spirit literally radiated from him. His name was Mondé; he was black and South African. We were all white and Anglo. We greeted him and then the two men resumed their conversation and the two women next to me returned to our conversation. As I leaned over to hear my neighbors better, I saw Mondé's kind face crumple, his gentle spirit wither. Here we were, 5 white people who cared enough about social justice to have traveled 2000 miles to talk together on the topic for 3 days and we had just deeply hurt a loving soul who had done nothing to us other than be different. We didn't do it out of malice or hatred. We were just doing what felt natural, what felt comfortable.

Here's what this showed me. First, racism (or sexism or classism) can come wrapped in good will as well as in malice. Second, when it is wrapped in good will, it is especially hard to eradicate because the perpetrators (like me) are only aware of their good will. Third, as a woman, I am very aware of bias against women; but that doesn't mean I can't be part of a system that enacts bias against blacks or Latinos. The fact that you suffer from the oppression of a group to which you belong does not mean that you do not contribute to the oppression of some other group to which you do not belong. Fourth—and this is what bothers me the most—sometimes being comfortable means living in conformity with what has molded us, what has given us shape and that can include a story of power that we may not consciously accept.

Now this is what I believe. We work in good places, where staff and faculty care deeply about the place, each other, and students. But we could work at extraordinary places where we could build together a story of God's love in action, a story that challenges the story of privilege and exclusion. The university president can't make this happen, nor can the trustees. *We* and the students are the only ones who can do this, because the story we live out is constructed in the dorms, in class, in the cafeteria, in chapel, walking on campus. Where we sit, when we smile, whom we greet, walk with, or just walk by—these little gestures are the threads that weave the fabric of everyday life. We can live a different story than the one we have inhaled. Indeed, as Christians we are called to live differently, to show hospitality to all. I also believe this has *nothing* to do with guilt—we

didn't create the culture we've inhaled. But it has *everything* to do with responsibility—we can choose not to pass on this part of our culture.

How do we do this? I'm not sure, but I know it's not really hospitality if it's offered like charity, with an attitude of magnanimous superiority. Several years ago my brother was teaching Statistics at SDSU and there was an older student from India in class. This Indian gentleman was struggling with the material and my brother agreed to help him outside of class. So every week the Indian came for tutoring. It was a particularly warm spring and my brother's small, windowless office was stuffy. The Indian gentleman sat right next to my brother so that they could work on statistics problems together. The Indian, my brother quickly realized, did not use mouthwash, deodorant, cologne, or scented soap and apparently did not bathe or brush teeth with the same regularity that Americans do. The weekly meetings were, in short, a trial, but my brother persevered, the semester ended and the Indian student passed. After grades had been posted, the gentleman came to see my brother and, standing in the office doorway, he thanked my brother for his help. "You have been very generous and very kind," he said, "but I have a confession to make. It was very hard for me to come here every week and work with you in this small office because we sat so close and the smell of your soap and cologne and tooth paste and mouthwash and deodorant was so strong and so terrible, I really struggled having to be here." It had never occurred to my brother that *his* habits could be experienced as strange, offensive, "other". When we decide to be tolerant towards other people, we must first recognize that *we ourselves* may actually be "the other people".

How then do we live with what we don't understand? Perhaps by being humble enough to recognize that we really don't know what it feels like to be female, to be black, Latino or poor in a society like ours. Perhaps by not assuming that we have the right to be part of anyone's life, by not assuming that our gifts are, of course, the ones of greatest value, by not assuming that if we are willing to be friends with a black person, that, of course, he or she will want to be friends with us. Perhaps by being willing to offer hospitality with the humility of spirit that comes from knowing that we often receive an abundance of hospitality from the people to whom we open our hearts. Maybe even, in memory of Jesus Christ, who did not regard equality with God as a right to be grasped, maybe even, we can occasionally step away from the privileged white, male, rich American position (not because it is inherently bad but just because it can't be used to

measure the rest of the world), maybe we can step away from our privileged perspective in order to extend hospitality to others.

Clearly concern for social justice has a direct relation to what we teach. Foreign language, culture and literature all offer the possibility of expanding the boundaries of students' hearts and minds, of challenging their tendency to use white, Anglo, affluent America as the standard by which to measure everything. But the embedding of social justice into one's teaching demands more than just presenting subject content. Tolerance and mutual respect will not be taught effectively by a dogmatic professor contemptuous of students.

To present a message effectively, we must live out a new story with students. What is needed is not just a message, but a meaning wrapped in living story, a message embodied, a word made flesh. If the message alone had the power to save, God could have just sent the Bible. But what was needed was the message embodied, lived out, enacted. To be Christ-like teachers, we also need to live out the message we want students to learn. We do this by what we teach *and* model, by what we show *as well as* tell. We are challenged to live out a story that contradicts a dominant model of injustice and unequal value that as Christians we reject.

This relates very directly to teaching as a place where one can establish a set of values radically different from those of the society at large. Many educators talk about this kind of teaching in a way that makes sense to me—Dallas Willard, Parker Palmer, Ken Bain, bell hooks, Ira Shor. But the one whom I have found most deeply inspiring has been Paulo Freire, the 20th-century Brazilian educator whose radical methodology revolutionized the education of the poor in Brazil, exerts a powerful influence on education today in Africa and Asia, and continues to impact education elsewhere.

Freire's pedagogy is less a methodology or set of techniques than it is a particular approach to learning and to the teacher-student relationship. Four specific aspects of Freire can serve to capture the core of his approach. First, Freire proposed a dialogic pedagogy that opposed the traditional banking model of teaching where an authority (the sage on the stage) stuffs student heads with an interminable list of inert ideas. Instead Freire proposed a dialogic model of education that stressed people working with each other in dialogue rather than one person acting on another.

This dialogic model of teaching directly challenges the traditional

hierarchical power imbalance between teacher and student. "Dialogue is a give and take of ideas, a sharing. You cannot dialogue and attempt to impose your own ideas on another. You *can* dialogue about their ideas and yours." (Freire, "Oppressed" 149) Dialogue thus implies that the teacher is not the only one who teaches and students are not the only ones who learn. (Freire, "Letters" 74) To state this yet another way, knowledge thus conceived is a social process in which whole persons interact with each other in the construction of understanding. "This simply means that the relationship called "thinking" is not enclosed in a relationship "thinking subject-knowable object" because it extends to other thinking subjects (Freire, "Letters" 74).

A second characteristic of Freirean pedagogy is the importance of praxis, of specific actions or practices that embody knowledge generated in learning. Freire does not stress the importance of action per se, but rather the critical connection of knowledge and action. Knowledge finds its purpose, its logical extension, its embodied meaning in action, and action needs to be well grounded in knowledge. Divorced from knowledge, action is simply demagoguery; separate from action, knowledge is mere verbalism, just so much blah, blah, blah.

A third characteristic of Freirean pedagogy is Freire's insistence on helping give a voice to the voiceless, on helping the silent learn to name the world, and thus on helping empower the poor to inherit the earth. Rather than teach his personal version of social justice, Freire helped his students articulate their own ideas of social justice. Freire wanted his students to critically engage the world, but he understood that the terms of their critique needed to be theirs, not his. Students are the ones best equipped to formulate a critique of the current world since it is more their world than ours. This does not mean that the students' world and the terms in which they automatically construct that world are accepted uncritically by the professor as the end terms of education. The students' world is the starting point of education, not its end point. The professor helps to sharpen, focus, and hone the students' critique of the world, but its essence flows from the students' understanding. She pushes students on their certainties so that they seek arguments to defend their ideas, but she respects popular knowledge and cultural content, through by what Pascal calls an ulterior idea, "une pensée d'arrière."

This Freirean stance devolves from a deep faith in the capacities of human beings. "Every human being, no matter how "ignorant" or sub-

merged in the culture of silence he or she may be, is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others" (Freire, "Oppressed" 14). Dialogue demands a deep faith in the possibilities latent in human beings and the equally deep humility that comes from realizing that one shares those capacities with billions of others. Dialogue requires humility; you cannot truly dialogue if you place yourself above another, seeing yourself as the exclusive owner of truth. Thus education is never just transmission of knowledge concerning the object or the topic; it is instead a process of helping students learn to construct knowledge.

Finally, Freirean pedagogy situates educational activity in the lived experience of the participants. Certainly this is important in establishing dialogue and in creating a field of critical commentary that develops student voice. But it is also a crucial act of empowerment. In a traditional educational scenario, the student is the object, he who is acted upon. But with Freire, the student becomes a subject in the educational process, she who learns and who acts upon her world. Dialogue requires faith in humanity. "Faith is an *a priori* requirement for dialogue. Founding itself upon love, humility and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence." (Freire, "Oppressed" 71)

Freire took the poorest of the poor, those of whom Clarice Lispector writes so movingly in *The Hour of the Star*, and *showed* them that they could change their world by allowing their reality to help shape their class. He found a way to give them a power in the classroom that they lacked outside that space. In so doing he not only created a motivation to learn, he deeply impacted their lives, taught them to be agents in their own world, and gave them a vision for how they could help bring about greater social justice in Brazil.

A pedagogy like Paolo Freire's that can empower social change, re-humanize the oppressed, and reduce, if not inequities of distribution, at least the resulting psychological inequities that help perpetuate them, is good news to all who desire greater social justice and who imagine the college classroom as one of the possible cradles in which to nurture agents of social change. As Freire's ideas have moved into North American educational discourse, however, Stanley Aronowitz (8) believes that we, pursuing our general pragmatic obsession, have tended to domesticate and trivialize Freire by reducing his ideas to mere methods, thus, ironically, depoliticizing and de-contextualizing a thinker whose pedagogy centered on

allowing student *context* a more central role in education and education itself a more purposeful connection to *politics*. Thus domesticated, says Aronowitz, Freire becomes just another progressive liberal voice urging interactive classrooms, student-professor dialogue and a pedagogy more open to student voice and reality.

Now, I agree with Aronowitz that Freire's agenda is social, far-reaching and revolutionary. In Freire's system, "the locus of the learning process [shifts] from the teacher to the student … overtly signif[ying] an altered *power* relationship, not only in the classroom but in the broader social canvas as well" (Aronowitz, 8-9). I also agree that most American theorists following in Freire's footsteps have lost the distinctly radical flavor of Freire's work, perhaps because they see America as less damagingly stratified than Freire's Brazil, or because they only want to empower students to speak in certain pre-determined ways, or because they have simply adapted Freire's pedagogy to fit their different student population.

I disagree, however, that Freire's pedagogy, American-style, has lost all potential for revolutionary force. Although far fiercer in his natural, unfettered habitat, even when caged, a lion is still a lion. And interactive, dialogic pedagogy, even stripped of conscious revolutionary purpose, still has power because it gives students a space, because it calls forth and affirms students' words and their world, because it indeed signifies an altered power relationship. Because the dialogic classroom radically restructures its microcosmic social relations, it helps students and professors restructure some of the internalized psychological mechanisms that prolong our society's inequities.

Ira Shor, one of Freire's closer American disciples, sees "education as one place where the individual and society are constructed," and the liberating classroom where "teachers pose problems derived from student life, social issues, and academic subjects, in a mutually created dialogue," as a social act with the potential to change society (25). Parker Palmer's classroom, where "students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject" ("To Know" xvi), represents an even more "domesticated" yet still transformative Freirean learning space. Similarly, David Smith and Barbara Carvill, in their book *The Gift of the Stranger,* posit a foreign language classroom where hospitality and an open-hearted dialogue with otherness can reshape our response to the world. John Bennett, in his very recent book, *Academic Life: Hospitality, Ethics, and Spirituality,* also recommends hospitality, along with conver-

sation and community, as necessary to the dialogic classroom, as cardinal virtues of all vital academic life.

The perplexing and frustrating dilemma about transformative classrooms is their scarcity, despite excellent descriptions, detailed instructions of how to create them, and the apparent desire of both students and teachers for dynamic, mutually energizing spaces. If creating such a class depended merely on technique or conscious desire, the books on techniques and on vision would have done their work. But technique cannot, of itself, transform a hierarchical, competition-driven, banking-model class into an open, dynamic, dialogic community.

Parker Palmer indicates one reason for the rarity of transformative classes when he reports the oft-repeated explanation for the disappointing results of teaching.

> When I ask teachers to name the biggest obstacle to good teaching, the answer I hear most often is “my students.” When I ask why this is, I hear a litany of complaints : my students are silent, sullen, withdrawn; they have little capacity for conversation; they have short attention spans; they do not engage well with ideas; they cling to narrow notions of “relevance” and “usefulness” and dismiss the world of ideas. (“Courage” 40)

Although I do not hold this view of students, the frequency and familiarity of this jeremiad points us to an important obstacle to transformative teaching. According to Dan McAdams, a proponent of narrative therapy, we construct stories of the self to make sense of past events and “explain ‘the vicissitudes of human intentions organized in time” (29). Although similar to metaphors, about whose connection to teaching much has been written, story has distinctive characteristics justifying special attention. First, given that we are creatures co-constituted in relationship with a network of others, narratives best embody personal truth because they capture and embed this truth in a storied context of interwoven relationships. Human lives are “too socially inflected to support any argument that says the truth resides solely within” (McAdams 12-13).

Equally important, while metaphor serves to predict, providing a goal and direction and implying a set of standards, story functions in an explanatory fashion, making sense of the past. We narrate the past to ourselves in a complex story to explain it and encourage ourselves. Meta-

phor is an image of how things should work, but story masquerades as reality, telling us how things turned out and why. Metaphor is theory; story is mythology.

Although McAdams focuses on master narratives, he recognizes that myriad limited, overlapping narratives lie within these sweeping stories. We tell ourselves multiple smaller stories about our relationships with family, friends, spouses, children, work, colleagues, students and so on. As in the case of our master narrative itself, these smaller stories form what McAdams calls "a heroic narrative of the self" allowing us "to live well, with unity and purpose …" (11). This narrative serves to protect the self against severe threats.

It is exquisitely painful to teach a course for which you have done hundreds of hours of preparation, only to have students greet your efforts with apparent apathy. To face this experience multiple times, to attempt to remedy it only to fail again, perhaps even more spectacularly, can inflict a deep narcissistic wound, so we construct a storied explanation of our experience that leaves our basic sense of self strong and intact. How else can we bear to enter class another day?

Our educational story about teaching automatically projects a story about our students. Ironically, a story constructed to protect us from feelings of failure or shame by blaming poor learning on students may actually serve to hinder student learning and deaden classroom atmosphere. Students who do not arrive "pre-educated" and who may struggle with the material will understandably hesitate to join in community and dialogue with a professor poised to interpret unresponsiveness as sullen rudeness, hesitation in argument as short attention span, and desire for connection between education and one's world as terminal stupidity or incapacity for conceptual thinking.

When a professor enters class hopeful at the surface, but with a protectively negative story about students and education firmly rooted, students will immediately sense the story. The professor's underlying story will have guided the construction of the course and will be expressed in professor-student interactions. A negative educational story about the student will inevitably present the classroom as yet another world where, to borrow Freire's words about the oppressed, "the ordinary person [in this case, the student] is crushed, diminished, converted into a spectator, maneuvered by myths which … turn against him …" (Freire, "Consciousness" 5).

Why, then, does an unproductive story not change? First, the

success of a few pre-educated "star" students and the relative merits of a larger number of students adapted to the dominant educational model, those "strategic" learners who know "how to play the game", reinforce our belief that the real problem lies with the mass of struggling, persistently mute and immobile students.

Second, in self-perpetuating manner, a story empowers us to see reality in terms the story itself privileges; our story so deeply selects and shapes past memories and present perceptions that we can easily mistake our story for reality itself. Attribution theory, a well-researched tool of social psychology, has found that people explain (i.e. attribute causes to) their own and other people's behavior in ways that work to keep pre-existing beliefs unchanged (Fletcher 27-29). "Causal attributions are one powerful means by which the relative permanence of any pre-existing belief, attitude, or social knowledge structure can be maintained" (Fletcher 29). When faced with a classroom of unresponsive students, the professor whose story involves a hardworking teacher preparing an intellectual feast for a herd of un-teachable ingrates will perceive living proof of students' dull minds and hardened hearts. But student silence could also indicate fear, confusion, uncertainty about what to say next, or even thought.

Third, it is a truism in cognitive psychology that people are slow to update strongly held convictions. They interpret new ideas in the light of old ones, even though these may be false. Even when the facts contradict their presuppositions, they will "perform […] all kinds of mental gymnastics to avoid confronting and revising the fundamental underlying principles that guide […] their understanding" (Bain 23). We see this process at work in students who try to decode French or Spanish or German language and culture as though they were American.

In addition, an unproductive story may persist because self-perception and story appear so interwoven that we feel we cannot change the story without in some way destroying the self. Ironically, we may cling all the more strongly to an ultimately self-defeating teaching story when our teaching has been going badly and we therefore feel too fragile to let go of the minimal stability the story provides. Finally, we may resist changing a story that blames the student for class inadequacies because we can only conceptualize one alternative—a story that blames us.

Paradoxically, the student-blaming story so many faculty cling to not only damages a classroom environment, but also damages the very sense of self it purports to protect. While at the surface the story acquits

the faculty member of all wrong doing, it also says that the teacher has no real impact on the students, that they arrive either capable of learning or beyond hope. The story of one-sided student responsibility hides a story of faculty impotence, uselessness, immobility and despair.

Students may also be making it hard for us to change this story. They will have constructed a story of their own, their own protective version of "this isn't my fault". We may sense this silent reproach in their lack of response in class, in their persistent refusal to connect. Although this story of total professor responsibility may allow students the illusion of more emotional room in a class, it remains unproductive for students and professor alike by undermining the atmosphere of a course. In classes going badly, it can immobilize a professor with guilt and feelings of incompetence; in classes going "well", it can breed a professorial arrogance and self-sufficiency that erode professor-student connection and undermine critical self-assessment. And, most important, in all situations, it implies that the professor's actions can account for (i.e. control) student behavior and performance. Students, like most people, will either resist a story that robs them of agency or, being stripped of agency, will remain passive and lethargic.[1] Any story built around one-sided blame really involves one-sided power and is unlikely to provide a solid foundation for open dialogue and energized response.

Although this level of concern with the psyche of the professor may seem far removed from Freire and his desire for social justice, Freire himself is acutely aware of and concerned with the interconnection between the macro-level of social justice and the micro-level of individual psychological mechanisms. Following Fromm's work, Freire notes that the fear of leaving a familiar self-image, even a personally destructive one, works against the automatic development of critical consciousness after economic change (Freire, "Consciousness" 15). And, borrowing from Freudian psychology, Freire suggests that one of the major obstacles to liberating education is that the oppressed are both themselves and the oppressors whom they have internalized (Freire, "Oppressed" 61). According to Aronowitz, "Freire's pedagogy seems crucially directed to breaking the cycle of psychological oppression [especially the introjection of oppressor domination] by engaging students in confronting their own lives" (14-15).

Finally, Freire openly recognizes that, for the professor at least, creating a classroom truly conducive to student growth comes at a personal cost. "The educator for liberation," says Freire, "has to *die* as the

unilateral educator of the educatees, in order to be born again as the educator-educatee of the educatees-educators. An educator is a person who has to live in the deep significance of Easter." (Quoted by Paul Taylor, 1993: 53) In order to become a teacher who learns and to train learners who teach, the teacher must abandon the identity of single, infallible authority. We cannot afford to place our personal worth in our perfection as teachers. If we depend on student feedback and classroom success for a sense of individual worth, then slow and unresponsive students will always risk angering us because they will always threaten to devalue us.

A productive educational story must leave both professor and student free will and choice, must move beyond blame to provide student and teacher alike a space for learning. Students need the freedom to learn by trial and error, to grow as learners, while professors need the freedom to learn about teaching and about students. Indeed the story must help push teacher and student to excel, to strive for improvement. And, if we are to complete our wish list, somehow the good story must be able to connect our students' learning to the possibility of meaningful interaction in the world. Christianity, I believe, offers a story with the scope to do all this. The Christian story of a God whose love seeks the loved one (as the shepherd searches for the lost sheep), whose love works to heal and restore just relationship through forgiveness (as the prodigal son's father does when he rushes to meet his youngest son and when he helps reconcile the bitterness of the older son), and whose love, embodied in the person of Jesus, models for us a path of paradoxical perfection we are called to walk[2]—this story can sustain a transformed and transforming classroom presence.

The Christian story encompasses free will and choice because it centers on God's free choice to love humanity, a costly, effortful choice in no way determined by our behavior or character.[3] It is also the story of humanity's choice—the choice to respond to God's love or to refuse that love.[4]

In the classroom, because the professor models an internally-motivated, seeking love, not contingent on student behavior, she constantly searches new ways to connect the material to students, to reveal the relevance of the material to the students' world. But the professor also seeks to identify what the student already knows, already can do, the knowledge and skills on which the student can build. The professor offers this love knowing the student has the choice to respond or not and ready to leave the student free to make that choice, without risk of rejection.[5]

The Christian story centers on Jesus' sacrifice, the act by which forgiveness replaces blame and lays a foundation for the healing of relationships, our relationship with God and our relationship with each other. A professor cannot effectively live out forgiveness for students if she is unable to forgive herself. By internalizing the story of loving forgiveness, the professor learns to allow herself to be a learner of the material and a learner about teaching and students. Loving forgiveness both accounts for our failures and opens up a free, less charged, internal space in which change can take place. Being forgiven gives us the courage to look at our faults.

This is the very gift a professor can give her students. She expresses her forgiveness of their intellectual imperfections and their personal ones by a refusal to let knowledge of these imperfections reduce her affection for students or her faith in their ability to grow. This affection and faith give students the inner strength to look at their actual failings and begin to work at removing them and even refocus from grades to actual learning. Once again loving forgiveness accounts for failings and opens a space for change and growth. And the professor is empowered to forgive the student's slow, hesitant learning path because the professor has learned to forgive her own tortured, halting learning path towards effective teaching.[6] As Freire points out, "Only by virtue of faith … does dialogue have power and meaning: by faith in man and his possibilities, by the faith that I can only become truly myself when other men also become themselves" (Freire, "Consciousness" 40).

As the story of the prodigal son suggests, we may need to transform not only our "prodigal" students, the students who are not learning up to their potential, but possibly our "good" students too, those who are getting wonderful grades and appear to be learning well. Some of these students have learned to use the system to create an identity where they can look down on their slower fellow students and feel powerful through their identification with the professor, much like the oppressed who internalize the oppressor's image of them so that they only desire to become oppressors themselves (Freire, "Oppressed" 62). Like the prodigal's older brother, they may feel anger and frustration when they sense our support of their "lesser" comrades. Or they may attempt to form a narcissistic bond with the professor by showing a frustration or amusement at others' slowness. As the professor refuses to bond in this manner yet offers warmth and love on other terms, she helps these students reshape a relationship

with fellow students to one of solidarity, support and mutual respect.

Finally, the Christian story presents a love embodied in Jesus who came not simply to speak the truth, but to be the truth and calls us to live in similar fashion. The call to embody truth means that a professor must strive to be the truth he wants to teach. This is a call to a paradoxical life that Jesus has modeled. Jesus is a god who abandoned divine privilege and became as a man; he is a god who exercises power in suffering, leadership in servanthood. As Christian professors we are called to serve students, but they are not our masters; we try to exercise power so that we can effectively give it away. We have an authority based as much on our ability to admit ignorance as on an assertion of knowledge. This life of paradox forces us to think carefully in all we do.

Since students have independent lives in which we have only a small role, their behavior centers on their own lives, not on us. What we can interpret as rude behavior, critical of us, may simply be the outward sign of the fear, anxiety, and sense of worthlessness our class has triggered. Certainly students sometimes respond to these fears and anxiety in a self-absorbed manner, interpreting everything in class in self-referential fashion. But we cannot teach students to be less self-referential if we interpret all student reactions as being about us. You can only encourage students to recognize others' existence and importance by recognizing the separate (from your desires, wishes, comfort zone) existence and importance of students.

Likewise, if you wish to encourage students to focus on the learning not the grade, then you need to be obviously less concerned with student reactions to you and more concerned about learning to teach students more effectively. The rude student will not learn politeness towards others by being humiliated or ridiculed in class. Students will not learn to get their work in on time if you are consistently late returning papers and exams. Nor will they learn fairness if you apply one set of standards to you and another, more demanding one to them.

Rather than sentimental, lazy, paternalistic love, this love is clear-sighted, effortful, intellectually demanding. I believe Freire means this kind of love when he says, in his *Letters to Those Who Dare Teach,* "It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up. In short, it is impossible to teach without a *forged, invented, well-thought-out* [italics mine] capacity to love" (3). This love is not a "feel-good process, … a paternalistic nurturing that

takes the form of parental coddling" (Freire, "Letters" 4). Paternalistic coddling indeed often covers a very negative view of student capacity; discouragement and disbelief can be packaged with a smile as easily as with a frown.

Instead, we must practice effortful clarity of thought—not just about our discipline, but about students and ourselves. The Christian story urges us to conceptualize our work with students in the broadest terms possible. We are not just teaching an academic subject. We are teaching people, teaching them how to live a life, how to be human. As Freire points out, unless we engage the humanity of our students, working to empower, cultivate, and grow that humanity, we cannot teach them much of anything else. If we want students to grow wider understandings of the world, then we need to risk widening our understanding of students, visibly, in class.

Parker Palmer points out that "…an authentic spirituality of education will address the fear that so often permeates and destroys teaching and learning. It will understand that fear, not ignorance, is the enemy of learning and that fear is what gives ignorance its power. It will try to root out our fear of having our ignorance exposed and our orthodoxies challenged." (Palmer, "To Know" xi) We may even need, as Julia Kristeva suggests, to see ourselves as *other* in order to make a space wherein others can be themselves.

Will this be enough? I agree with Freire, probably not. A positive story will not automatically make a class transformative. But without that inner work, with a story purposed to cover narcissistic wounds, no manner of technique or desire will change the class to a liberating space. Freire himself notes, "… it is not possible to be a teacher without loving one's students, even realizing that love alone is not enough" (Freire, "Letters" 15). To make our classes communities of real learning and growth, we must stop blaming ourselves and students for being learners; we must learn to love and forgive. We must stop blaming students for what they don't know and stop fearing that same blame for what we don't know and can't yet do as teachers.

We must not, notes Freire, conceptualize liberation purely individualistically. The oppressed often do so because they identify with the oppressor rather than with other oppressed (Freire, "Oppressed" 49-50). Yet even here, individual psychological reality must be broached, if only to transcend it. The social changes needed for greater justice can be helped or hindered, if not prevented, by what happens in individual psyches.

Education may only change systematically through political power, but limited, individual educational projects can successfully create the psychic infrastructure to support larger, systemic changes (Freire, "Oppressed" 54). And ultimately social justice is built or destroyed in the myriad complex and conflicted social interactions of individuals. Ironically, we may advocate for justice most powerfully when we treat with kindness and respect those in our classes who are most openly resistant to and critical of the social justice we hope to teach, when we treat with tolerance those students who display belligerent intolerance and closed-mindedness towards the foreign languages and cultures we teach.

Those of you who are as impatient as I am may think, as I have at times, "Why not just tell students that the world should be more just, that society needs to become more equitable, that grades are less important than learning, that all men and women are created equal and we should treat them that way. A message enveloped in plot, character and voice has more power than that same message alone, however clear and unambiguous. Students need a message enveloped in story, a meaning embodied, a word made flesh; they need a story lived out in class, not simply a story recounted. We need to live out a carefully constructed story about who we are, who they are, what we are doing.

Living out a story is not simply some discrete pedagogical technique that is pasted on to what the professor has been doing all along. "The key to understanding the best teaching," says Ken Bain, "can be found not in particular practices or rules but in the *attitudes* of the teachers, in the *faith* in their students' abilities to achieve, in their *willingness* to take their students seriously … their *commitment* to let all policies and practices flow from central learning objectives and from a mutual respect and agreement between students and teachers. (78) Not only does this demand the "well-thought out capacity to love" of which Freire speaks, but a simultaneous ability to master "tactics adequate to our strategic dreams" (Freire, "Letters" 51) and to keep a clear focus on those dreams despite the myriad details that tend to derail us.

In an article on liberal arts education, Jedediah Purdy implicitly compares good teaching to good gardening and suggests some truths about teaching in the picture he paints of his mother gardening:

> I sometimes think that … she must have resisted [any] union of thought and dirt. Thought resents the gnarled

> roots that trip it, the mud that sullies it, the endless tasks that stake it to a place and a routine. Thought wants the privilege of cleanliness, and the liberty to leave. Yet [my mother] has succeeded in embedding her thought thoroughly in the dirt, the growing things, and the labor of that place. Her thought, which might once have carried her away, is now her way to stay. The shape of her thought is her concern for her place, her love of it, and her fear for its future, and so her devotion to the work that its maintenance requires.

As a gardener of student hearts and minds, I resonate with this image, with the desire to find clarity of focus and freedom of thought in a universe devoid of the gnarled roots of student problems, academic and emotional, no longer tethered to the stakes of homework and class preparation or to the messy complexity and categorical fuzziness of the real world. I long at times for the ivory tower, that idealized place of solitude in which to work, a place where I can teach ideas and not worry about their application inside or outside my class. But Purdy is right. The things I care most about grow in dirt, in the repetitive, mundane, ever-so-human daily reality of a classroom with real students, with real problems, with real limitations, doing real work that I really have to grade. I care about ideas because they *can* make a difference in the world, in my world, in my relationships, in my life.

Taking communion at church recently, I was struck by the phrase used as each of us came up to take the elements. “The gifts of God for the people of God,” said the communion server. This, I thought, is the perfect phrase to capture this aspect of teaching, this well thought out, effortful shaping of student character by shaping the classroom environment and carefully monitoring one’s own actions and reactions.

We are gardeners called to help grow Christian character in young people whom our world so desperately needs. And to live out that call, we must be offering the gifts of God—patience, empathy, love, faith, hope, perseverance, joy, longsuffering, and generosity—to the people of God, those that God has placed before us, in our classes. This is not really about some specific techniques (although in each particular living out of this task, technique is involved), but rather about a determination to have all choices flow from a central vision and a relationship of mutual respect between yourself and the students, respect of yourself as a teacher who is

learning and of students as learners with much to teach you. (Bain, 78)

What is frustrating for me as a speaker trying to convey what I think this kind of teaching requires is that if I talk about the central vision, it may seem a bit general if not simplistic and idealistic. And if I try to talk about what it looks like in a lived reality, I will never be able to encompass all the details, because this vision needs to impact everything we do and will necessarily vary from class to class, professor to professor, even from student to student. What I would like to do, however, is offer a few concrete examples of this kind of teaching in its detailed specificity.

I have begun to believe that some of the most productive moments in teaching are those very moments that we all hate and that at the surface appear to be a total waste of time. I am speaking of the moment when an A student comes up, anxious, frustrated, even teary, wanting to quibble over the point on an exam that would raise her grade from a 93 to a 94. Or the moment when the student who rarely shows up for class tells you, somewhat belligerently, that he will never need what you are teaching. Or the moment when a student who has insisted on earning a D informs you that you just don't understand. She can't get a D or else her aunt will no longer pay for her education. Or the moment when a student tells you he must miss class because his roommate's grandmother's dog has died and the funeral is tomorrow, and were you going to do anything important in class?

These moments are rich opportunities for us to enact the commitments we hold most dear, to embody the message of our heart and mind, to embed our meaning in a lived moment. These are moments when we can indeed offer the gifts of God to the people of God. When responding to the hyper-anxious over-achiever, I might put the desired extra point in perspective and then ask the student about the real, internal source of her concern. "Let's talk about this point. Given that each of these quizzes is worth 5% of your total grade, that point is worth five one thousandths of a point towards your final grade. What concerns me most here is how anxious you are over five one thousandths of a point. You are a good student and you pay careful attention in class. I have no doubt that you will continue to learn and excel. But it feels to me as though you believe that a 93—which is an A—just isn't good enough. You act as though you really believe that you have to be perfect to be good enough. None of us can be perfect. But that's the meaning of the cross of Christ. He has made up the difference."

To the student who has belligerently asserted the useless of my class, I might respond, “This is wonderful news. This could be a great class for you. I understand you don’t want to be here and that you will never use foreign language. Of course, like it or not, you have to take a foreign language. But there will be numerous times at your job, with your children and with your spouse when you will need to do something that you don’t really want to do. So, if all you get from this class is the ability to do the unpleasant but inevitable duties of life with good grace, this will probably be the most valuable class you ever take. You’re right; these moments are frustrating and challenging. If you ever want some help on how to get this job done, I am always available to chat in my office. Just let me know.”

Finally to the D student who told me that I just didn’t understand that one more D would result in her aunt withdrawing the financial support on which the girl depends, I replied, “You’re right. I didn’t know that. You, however, have known this all semester. And yet you overlooked opportunities to make up work or get help. I am stunned that you would have taken such risks with your future. Help me understand how you could have painted yourself into such a corner. Do you believe your future is not important enough to plan for? Or are you so convinced you are incapable that you think you can’t learn to work?” This eventually leads to a more productive conversation about facing responsibilities and dealing with unpleasant realities.

If I have to name the techniques I use, I guess they would be as follows: respond with empathy, never with anger or annoyance; name the attainable horizon, the growable place; identify the strength already there in the student, name it, show its use; encourage the student; believe in her ability; question his poor assumptions and faulty logic, but express trust that he will want what is good for his life. When you respond in this way, you are modeling the academic truth you want them to absorb. It is not about the grade (your judgment) but about the learning.

I hesitate to name these techniques because the ones you need to use may be somewhat different, designed to fit who you are. We are all called to love and care for students, to believe in them and give them direction, power and hope but we may need to get there by different paths. In a lovely little book on teaching, Robert Boice quotes some interesting professorial response to difficult classroom moments.

A particularly fine example of grace-filled ingenuity is the response

of a professor when two students appeared to have cheated on an assignment. The professor called the two to his office and opened the conversation in the following manner. "Look, I need your help with this uncomfortable situation. The two of you turned in papers that are very much alike. How can we figure out what happened and what to do about it?" (Boice 18). Neither angry nor accusatory, this approach forces the students to be responsible for their behavior and accountable to each other as well as to the professor. As the students begin to try to work towards a solution, the professor can simply help them evaluate what responses are personally, ethically and logically appropriate.

However differently we live out this need to love students, to hear their silence into speech, to empower them, we are all gardeners and the work is dirty because it is so real. It is frustrating because growth, both ours and our students', takes so much time. And it is tedious because it takes so much repetition, makes so many false starts, leads to so many dead ends. But the work is important because our students are the future of our church and our country and our world, because the growth of Christian hearts and minds is indeed God's work, and because there is as much—no, more—joy in the path itself than in the end product. So I publicly thank all of you, my fellow gardeners for your patient, painstaking labor in the soil God has provided us. And I end with this somewhat tritely phrased but nonetheless apt wish: Christians of ever deepening character, ready to become bread in a hungry world, prepared to become water for a world thirsty for meaning, poised to become Christ's love in a hurting world, Christians of such character—may we know them, may we be them, may we raise them.

NOTES

[1] Given the developmental stage of late adolescents, in particular, this unempowering story is unlikely to motivate since it robs them of the very agency they are striving to attain.

[2] See Ephesians 5:12; I John 4:11.

[3] See I John 4:10, 19.

[4] And, of course, it is the continued story of God's choice to love mankind, even those who have not yet responded to His love. The parable of the workers who sign up at the 11th hour speaks to God's continued call to those who have not yet responded.

[5] Recognizing and celebrating student independence and self-governance will also mean that we may have to stop congratulating ourselves on our highest achieving students, and perhaps stop feeling so guilty over those who learn the least.
[6] The practice of loving forgiveness not only heals the relationship between the professor and herself, between the professor and the students, and between each student and himself. This forgiveness also extends (with the professor's help) from one student to the next.

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