Beyond Moral Damage:
“Imagining Future Possibilities” as a Pedagogical Practice of Hope

Abstract
Philosophers and theologians alike recognize the strong connection between imagination and the ability to flourish. However, circumstances of oppression and degradation are forms of moral damage that can defile this potential. Using the US carceral climate as a contextual starting point, this paper argues that religious education needs to consider the implications of moral damage for pedagogy. Religious education offers the type of divinely-inspired vision needed to counter the demoralizing effects of moral damage and generate a sense of radical and responsible hope that avoids despair and increases the potential for flourishing.

“A good teacher can inspire hope, ignite the imagination, and instill a love of learning.”

This quote can be found on university websites, in faculty training guides, and enhancing speeches about the power and hopefulness of education. It speaks to an enduring desire — for education to awaken hope, arouse the imagination, and lead to a life of flourishing. However, such optimistic statements risk perpetuating an idea of education that may only be effective on paper and in speeches. The reality is that even good teachers face obstacles when trying to achieve the “educational dream.” What would happen if our same training guides and speeches acknowledged circumstances where persistent despair and perceived hopelessness make hope hard to inspire and the imagination difficult to ignite? I came to this question working as a theological educator in a US women’s prison where the physical and psychological context constrains possibilities for hoping, imagining, and flourishing. As a religious educator, I came to understand this constraint to hopefulness as a moral impediment, a form of moral damage, and recognize its challenge to pedagogical goals and practices. I contend that if religious educators want to generate hope in the world, we must consider the implications and assaults of moral damage.

What follows is the beginning of a much needed exploration into the implications moral damage poses for pedagogy. My experience teaching in prison acts as a conceptual case study to contextualize the difficulty moral damage poses on liberative goals of education. Bringing together the work of moral philosophy and critical pedagogy, I name moral damage as a pedagogical concern that hinders a eudaimonistic vision of education. Turning to an unexpected source, I find help in the philosophical and ethical account of the indigenous Crow Nation. The lessons deduced from the Crow people’s ability to orient themselves in the face of hopelessness...
resonates with the Christian story in ways I find to be both encouraging and energizing for the future of religious education.

*Moral Damage as a Pedagogical Concern*

Moral damage is a concept advanced by Claudia Card that describes damage among oppressed or subordinated peoples to the development of the virtues necessary for flourishing. While moral philosophy identifies several virtues constitutive of flourishing, one with significant pedagogical relevance is the virtue of imagining. In his work *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that humans cannot flourish without learning to be effective practical reasoners; knowing what is best to do in various circumstances. This requires multiple capabilities. The one relevant to our discussion is the ability to imagine alternative possibilities for the future. Simply stated, in order to flourish we must have the capacity to imagine. The capacity to imagine is a conditional quality enhanced or diminished by environment and experience. While the human imagination is a resilient, creative ability, there are persons, events, and institutions that can “inhibit, frustrate, or damage” our imaginative capability and threaten our flourishing.²

MacIntyre identifies two distinct threats to the development of imagination. The first threat is an impoverished or constrained view of the future. For example, think about young adults in Chicago who when asked where they see themselves in ten years, are unable to answer because they do not have a life expectancy for themselves past the age of twenty-five. This is because many of these young people’s views of the future have been constrained and impoverished by generational poverty, rampant violence, intimate encounters with death, prison, and abuse. Moreover, a prison sentence for one of these young people may very well be what they anticipate for their future. Systemic and structural circumstances can impoverish one’s capacity to imagine.

A second threat to flourishing is a lack of *education* in imagining alternative possibilities.³ Educational failure can manifest in two contrasting ways. On one hand, “it can produce a constriction of the sense of possibility through the inculcation of false beliefs about how far our lives are determined by uncontrollable circumstances.”⁴ On the other hand, however, education can conversely “encourage a giving away to self-indulgent phantasy (sic) which blurs the difference between realistic expectation and wishful thinking.”⁵ In this sense, education becomes a practice in optimism because it fails to take concrete reality seriously. Education can play a vital role in developing the capacity to imagine alternative futures but it must balance the injustice of promising too little and the irresponsibility of promising too much too easily.

This tension haunts me educating in a prison context. I constantly struggle with balancing the need to encourage the students to imagine a life beyond the present and the prison. However, I am painfully aware of the structural and systemic difficulties facing incarcerated people. I am

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³ Ibid., 75.
⁴ Ibid., 75-6.
⁵ Ibid., 76.
also ashamedly aware of the unjust treatment formerly incarcerated people will face when they “return” to society. Cultural norms around prisons and inmates serve to cultivate impoverished and constrained views of the future for incarcerated peoples. Aversion to hiring and forgiving formerly incarcerated persons are concrete examples of the realities of constrained future possibilities for inmates. It is not an ideal world. But I still contend that in order to strive for a good life in prison and beyond, a person needs the ability to imagine something richer and more beneficent than an impoverished future might suggest. The reality of moral damage keeps this contention from becoming another pollyanna statement and keeps me on my pedagogical toes.

Moral damage is often conceptualized in relation to systemic oppression. However, I am drawn to its conceptual power for understanding incarceration. I am careful not to collapse incarceration with the oppression of marginalized peoples, they are related but distinct experiences. Nevertheless, there is an undeniable overlap between marginalized groups and who gets incarcerated in the US. As such, moral damage is a doubly useful conceptual framework for thinking about the impact of incarceration on the people I teach. Philosopher Lisa Tessman investigates the implications of oppression as a morally damaging reality. She critiques the psychological and cultural impact that systemic racism has on black bodies in America. She theorizes about moral damage done to black psyches’ that are consistently confronted with the socially-constructed image of black person as “criminal,” “welfare recipient,” and “moral degenerate.” She maintains that frequent psychological assault can lead to “feelings of hopelessness and an internalized belief in one’s own inferiority.” Moral damage, in this conception, is related to the psychological damage imposed by persistent hopelessness. It is what occurs when a person internalizes feelings of hopelessness and develops an impoverished view of the future, limiting the scope of acceptable options for a good life. Moral damage is the character wound of oppressive structures that hinder one’s ability to flourishing.

A prison sentence can be morally damaging and reveal a person’s ontological vulnerability toward the loss of a coherent conceptual framework for living. A prison sentence alters one’s telos no matter how insufficient it once was for flourishing. The reality is that such an abrupt rupture in living conditions can alter any imagination of a good life at all. When a young woman of 19, preparing to go off to college, is convicted to serve 25 years for vehicular manslaughter, the life she imagined is shattered. When a middle aged entrepreneur is imprisoned for mishandling funds to attempt to pay her bills, her previous life picture is rendered invalid. What do I do when these women end up my class? What might it mean to consider their shattered life pictures and constrained imaginations as I plan to teach?

Many of us, myself included, have a eudaimonistic vision of education. We link the pursuit of education to flourishing and declare that it is morally praiseworthy, redemptive, salvific even. But if we seek for our pedagogies to generate hope, we need strategies to resist the effects of moral damage and cultivate an imagination for an alternative future better than the

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6 Ibid., 90.
7 Ibid., 92.
present. For help, I turn to another scholar searching for answers, Jonathan Lear. Lear like myself is concerned with the way people make meaning amidst major devastation and how we deal with the breakdown of the sense of possibilities for life.

Lessons in Responding to Moral Damage

Jonathan Lear, in his work *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* provides an example of cultivating imagination in the face of despair. Writing about the indigenous Crow tribe, Lear chronicles the way the leader Plenty Coups re-orient his life and subsequently the life of his people amidst the loss of cultural meaning. Every event in the life of the Crow people gained significance within a larger framework of Crow meaning: hunting and fighting. However, when the confinement of native tribes to reservations crushed this possibility, all actions lost intelligibility. Plenty Coups was able to avoid utter despair and imagine a different way of living by grounding his sense of future possibility in a divinely-inspired dream given to him in his childhood. This dream fueled the imagination of the Crow people and served to re-orient them in the face of cultural devastation.

Plenty Coups received a vision from a divine source that told him that the traditional way of life would come to an end. The dream advised Plenty Coups that he must shift from virtues associated with the War Eagle (i.e. hunting and fighting) to virtues associated with the Chickadee (listening and wisdom). These Chickadee virtues would provide the Crow people with resources to survive cultural devastation. Plenty Coups' divine vision called for a teleological suspension of the ethical — a suspension of what formally constituted a good life. Instead, Plenty Coups was able to imagine new alternative possibilities for flourishing because he had faith in the goodness of the divine vision. The Crow people were thereby educated in imagining alternative possibilities for their future based on this divine story. Consequently, instead of persistent hopelessness, the Crow people were imbued with what Lear calls a “radical form of hopefulness” that avoided despair.9

Through the wisdom of the Crow people, Lear offers us pedagogically and theologically rich lessons on how to respond to moral damage. First, Lear emphasizes that in order to avoid despair, imagination needs a source beyond itself. The reason the Crow people were able to reimagine life after devastation was because of the divinely inspired vision. The Crow people exhibited faith in a goodness that transcended understanding because they believed that the source of the vision was God and Good:

God—Ah-badt-dadt-deah—is good. [Our] commitment to the genuine transcendence of God is manifest in [our] commitment to the goodness of the world transcending our necessarily limited attempt to understand it. [Our] commitment to God’s transcendence and goodness is manifested in [our] commitment to the idea that something good will emerge even if it outstrips [our] present limited capacity for understanding what good is.10

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10 Ibid., 94.
Second, Lear accentuates that in order to avoid despair and generate hope, imagination needs to be accompanied by a type of visionary pragmatism. It needs a set of ethics by which to govern life. Plenty Coups’ divine vision offered a different set of ethical guidance for the Crow people — to become like a Chickadee. The Chickadee provided a new set of virtues by which to order life; a new set of virtues crafted for a new context.

Finally, Lear insinuates that proper education in imagination should generate radical hope. Radical hope is that which is “directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is … [It] anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.” Radical hope for the Crow people was a hope for revival, for “coming back to life in a form that is not yet intelligible.” Radical hope avoids despair but it is not wishful thinking or mere optimism. It does not short-circuit reality, failing to take realistic, practical steps to bring about change. It encompasses what Ellen Ott Marshall calls responsible hope:

If hope is to generate and sustain moral agency, it must forever be cognizant of the obstacles and threats to its object. In places and times of security and health, we must work harder to remain connected to these perils and to those people who struggle under their weight … In our desperate moments, a sense of possibility may be hard to come by, but it may also be all we have. In times of comfort, therefore, it is imperative that we 'call into presence' those who continue to suffer, grieve, rage, resist, and survive. They keep us accountable to the vulnerability of life and to the imperative of hope. If we fall to optimism, we trivialize their suffering. If we fall to despair, we disrespect their memory.

Hope that is both radical and responsible is focused on the future but is firmly grounded in the present. Lear’s concept of radical hope challenges me to equip inmates with a story that can guide their life toward a vision of something beyond the here and now, something beyond the constraints of the prison. Though the prison environment may be morally damaging and contribute to the impoverishment of imagination, education in hope can offer a counter-response by providing opportunities for people to imagine alternative possibilities for their lives.

A Pedagogy of Hope

Educational theory, specifically critical and transformative pedagogies, stress the importance of imagination in the educational process. Educational theorist Paulo Freire calls this “developing a capacity to dream” and argues that it is constitutive of humanization. Humanization is one’s ontological vocation to regain a sense of humanity in the face of dehumanizing systems, structures, and forces. It is the hopeful act of recovering one’s lost humanity, of strengthening one’s resolve in the face of ontological vulnerability. For Freire, the job of an educator is to unveil opportunities for hope. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire defines hope as an epistemological and ontological need which is related to humanization. Furthermore, he concretizes hope by anchoring it in practice. Hope must be more than wishful thinking for Freire

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11 Ibid. 103.
12 Ibid., 95.
13 Ellen Ott Marshall, *Though the Fig Tree does not Blossom, toward a Responsible Theology of Christian Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), xvii.
and grounding it in practice makes it become “historical concreteness.” Freire advocates for an education in hope, for pedagogies that guide learners to desire something beyond what is present. It is an education in the imaginative work of envisioning alternative futures.

Educational theorist Henry Giroux offers a similar defense of education as a practice of hope in his essay “When Hope is Subversive.” For Giroux, educated hope is what is needed to craft new language and a new vision for a more just society — it is the belief that “different futures are possible.” However, it is more than just a belief. Giroux acquires his theory of hope from philosopher Ernst Bloch who argues that hope must be concrete. It is not “something like nonsense or absolute fancy; rather it is not yet in the sense of a possibility; that it could be there if we could only do something for it” … “hope is anticipatory rather than messianic, mobilizing rather than therapeutic.” As such, hope is both discursive and concrete. It is the language of possibility and the discourse of critique and social transformation that concretizes such possibility. In this sense, Bloch and Giroux’s understanding of hope is implicitly theological. It is eschatological in nature concerned with the hope of things yet to come and it is deeply ethical concerned with right action informed by an imagined future.

As religious educators, we are uniquely equipped to provide the Christian story of forgiveness, redemption, and transformation as a divinely inspired vision and source of ethic in the face of moral damage. Thomas Groome names this vision the reign of God, an eschatological hope in the in-breaking of the kingdom. Groome defines education as: “a political activity with pilgrims in time that deliberately and intentionally attends with them to the activity of God in our present, to the Story of the Christian faith community, and to the Vision of God's Kingdom, the seeds of which are already among us” (italics mine).

The story of the Christian faith and the vision of God’s Kingdom are for Christians what the divine-vision of the Chickadee was for the Crow people, that which empowers hope and provides us with an ethic for how to live when life seems unintelligible.

So how might I educate with the goal of enhancing an inmate’s ability to imagine alternative futures in the midst of a prison? I contend that through literature, the arts, history, and personal stories, the classroom can become an access point for possibilities beyond current circumstances. These practices can introduce different ways of thinking, processing, and feeling that unveil new opportunities for living in the world. In this way, even in a prison, acknowledgment of a future beyond what is known is made possible via educational practices. As a religious educator, I commit to nurture radical and responsible hope in the prison classroom — hope that different futures may not be easy but are indeed possible. Education in general and religious education in specific can offer the type of divinely-inspired vision needed to counter the demoralizing effects of prison culture. As such, the cultivation of radical hope and imagination becomes a necessary pedagogical response to moral damage.


16 Ibid., 38.

Concluding Thoughts

A pedagogy that takes moral damage seriously is not just a concern for the prison educator. The reality is that we are raising a generation for whom news stories of unarmed black bodies being gunned down by police are commonplace. Fear-inducing speech has become the lingua franca of politics. Immigrants are shunned as walls are proverbially constructed. Gender and sexuality are policed in increasingly more subtle and subversive ways. Hatred masquerades as free speech. We must consider moral damage as a pedagogical concern when we teach black students after the shootings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille, when we teach Latinx students in the midst of persistent immigrant-phobic rhetoric, when we teach Muslim students in an increasingly Islamophobic culture, and a trans-student after the HB2 bathroom law passes. We are constantly bombarded with images and narratives of terrorism and bigotry. Such frequent devastation, disappointment, and despair can damage us all.

Lisa Tessman warns us that “something grim emerges when one tries to work with a eudaimonistic moral theory while examining oppression, for one centers the importance of flourishing and then confronts the terrible fact of its distortions or absence under conditions of oppression.” The same is true when we rely on eudaimonistic educational theories that fail to consider the reality of moral damage. The fact is that we teach in environments where people are assaulted by hopelessness, where future possibilities seem impoverished because of social and structural challenges that seem too big to confront alone. This is the world we live in. And critical attention to moral damage is imperative.

We must take the impact of despair on the lives of the people we teach and of ourselves seriously. It is our responsibility as educators to continue to trust the Christian story to provide a relevant vision for today, one that ignites our imagination and generates a hope that is radical and responsible enough to move us forward toward alternative possibilities for our students, for ourselves and for the world.

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Selected Bibliography:


