Educat[ing for critical consciousness and liberation from oppressive structures and practices in any field requires a commitment to disrupt established patterns and ways of being. This type of education and formation requires a truthful naming of realities and an honest search for constructive responses. One might say this type of work is especially acute in religious education because of the spiritual values out of which this work draws strength and to which it strives. Welcoming the stranger, offering generosity amidst a fear of scarcity, identifying and responding to injustice are a few of these values that are potentially polarizing and conflict-inducing. This is the prophetic and pastoral work my institutional colleagues and I aim to shape among the students we teach and spiritually form in a context of growing diversity and difference. Yet even with this shared purpose, there remains a pressing and growing question: How do we achieve this liberation and transformation within an increasing awareness of microaggressions? Furthermore, does our current context of heightened sensitivities hinder the possibility of intrapersonal and collective transformation? Take as an example the need to speak with political correctness. Does the need to be politically correct discourage persons from even entering a transformational process for fear they might speak out of line? Is it not better to be safe than sorry?

This paper will probe in the first part two concepts, microaggressions and brave space, in order to address the issue of religious education for justice and transformational praxis. The paper then offers a reflection of the transition from safe to brave space with the intent of helping educators embrace transformative learning as uncomfortable as it may be. The final part introduces some initial suggestions in creating brave space. The hope of this paper is for theological and religious educators to step into braver spaces in order to integrate religious faith and formation with critical issues. The paper aims to provide a conceptual piece that utilizes the author’s own teaching experiences in dialogue with an interdisciplinary collection of authors and texts.

**Microaggression: What Is It?**

The word *microaggression* is not a new, but older, concept as Chester Pierce and colleagues initially introduced the term back in 1978. Through a critical examination of television commercials and media construction, Pierce et al. argue that racism against blacks is subtly learned and inherited through media consumption. They name this reality, microaggressions, which are:

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subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of blacks by offenders. The offensive mechanisms used against blacks often are innocuous. The cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in black-white interactions. This accounts for a near inevitable perceptual clash between blacks and whites in regard to how a matter is described as well as the emotional charge involved.2

Several of the words and phrases from this introductory definition are worthy of pause and brief reflection. A microaggression is a “mechanism” that is “innocuous” in intent and yet, nevertheless, “stunning” in impact because it is “subtle” and “cumulative.” A microaggression is not meant to be hurtful but over the long haul, has a swelling effect that slowly breaks down the one who receives microaggressions over time. Derald Wing Sue, an educator at the Teacher’s College at Columbia University and a chief researcher to reintroduce microaggressions in contemporary literature and scholarship, offers that microaggressions “are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group memberships.”3 Sue also expands Pierce et al.’s scope of microaggressions from race to include gender, sexual orientation, and other potential discriminatory isms. Within religious and theological contexts, Cody Sanders and Angela Yarber, both speaking from within the Church, argue that the Church, through microaggressions, unknowingly commits harm to those of traditionally marginalized and oppressed groups.4 To Sanders and Yarber, microaggressions are the small, consistent, under-the-radar ways that demean and malign persons due to their group membership on account of their multiple identities.5 Microaggressions manifest in three delineations: microinsults, microinvalidation, and microassaults.

Microaggression Forms: Microinsults, Microinvalidation, Microassaults6

Microinsults are the small offences that occur in the form of blatant offensiveness to subtle, but no-less-potent, ignorance. The insult transpires when the offender communicates to the receiving person they are not aware of the contextual realities nor the identities that marginalize the victim in the first place (or worse, that they are aware but do not care about the impact) nor are they aware of the power discrepancy upon which this microinsult is established. A presenting female transgender is often addressed as “he” or “him” by her work colleagues, a hiring committee scrutinizes a candidate more than others because of their age, and a person who is pulled aside at airport security for a pat down whenever they fly are three

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3 Derald Wing Sue, Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.), xvi.
5 Ibid., 12.
6 Sue, 28-41; Sanders and Yarber, 13-5.
common microinsults built upon stereotypes and ignorance. Additionally, and perhaps more dangerously, the insult might occur through a veiled form of praise. A woman who is complemented on her driving by a man may feel uncomfortable with the praise and upon further reflection, understand this as a subtle put down due to the belief that women do not drive well.

Microinvalidations are the violations that happen when the feelings and expressions of marginalized persons are disregarded or altered to soften the power and legitimacy behind those feelings and expressions. A person who expresses she has experienced racism only to have it invalidated by another (“They didn’t intend it to be hurtful” “They were just joking; lighten up a little”) experiences the reality of being unseen or unheard when it should be an opportunity to see and understand more clearly. The statement cannot be taken at face value but rather must be proven because it has now been “disproved” or disregarded by the offender. The onus is now placed upon the receiver of the microaggression to convince the offender that there is something of significance occurring.

Finally, microassaults are those injuries that occur through blatant attack. These are conscious and executed with intent. They are mistakenly conflated with flagrant forms of racism as one might witness through segregation, Black lynchings, the Holocaust, etc. These explicit forms of racism differ however from microassaults in that the latter, in a contemporary pluralistic context that values diversity and honors (fears?) political correctness, influences these expressions to take on an “underground” dynamic. Explicit racism is now witnessed through graffiti; anti-immigration sentiment is empowered through group demonstrations at political conventions; and true intrapersonal sentiments lash out when pushed to the limit and a loss of control results. Sue offers that microassaults more readily exist when at least one of the three dynamics are present: (1) anonymity of expressed action will safely protect the offender (e.g., graffiti), (2) there is group social power and thus mob mentality (e.g., political conventions), and (3) one is pushed to the brink, loses control, and their biased attitudes are revealed (e.g., Michael Richards – better known as Kramer – at a Los Angeles comedy night club).7

“Are We All A Little Too Sensitive?”
Why Sensitivity to Microaggressions Is Potentially Problematic

Before critically reflecting upon the notion of microaggressions in transformative religious education, I offer that diversity and justice education, and intercultural competency lie at the heart of who I am as an educator both in the academy and in the church. The expression of my faith values and beliefs are intricately bound in the teaching and formational expressions of these commitments. Furthermore, my scholarship and writing also take on critical dimensions with regards to race, gender construction, theology, and cultural studies. As a second-generation Korean American from a pastor’s family with immigrant parents, I am fully

7 Sue, 28-31.
committed to this work because my faith does not allow me to live otherwise. I am, as the blind man at Bethsaida once was, on the journey of seeing people more clearly as people, and less as trees (Mark 8:22-26) and in order for this to occur, diversity, justice, and interculturalism are key pieces to my growth.

Perhaps it is for this very reason that I am uncomfortable with leaving the act of teaching microaggressions as the last, or one of the last, actions or words to be had. That is, as religious educators who aim to transform reality towards our highest images of life, creation, and the sacred, it is not enough to provide students with the theory of microaggressions and then to let them be. At its best, an understanding of microaggressions causes persons to pause and self-reflect before speaking or acting. At its worst, an awareness of microaggressions paralyzes and even prevents persons from engaging transformative and life-changing encounters.

The question in the subheading, “Aren’t we all a little too sensitive?” was asked in a class I taught from a person who is historically marginalized in society on account of race and contextually marginalized at an ecumenical and interreligious school as ours on account of the student’s more “conservative” theological commitments. The student posed this question as we worked through Sanders and Yarber’s book and the theory of microaggressions in a course entitled “Ministry in a Multicultural Context,” a course that specifically addresses issues of diversity, justice, power, and interculturalism. Initially, I found it a tad ironic that a student who experiences marginalization, othering, and other oppressions in society and at our school, was the one to offer this question. However, as I further reflected upon the question and the person who asked it, I was drawn to where it left us and where it left me. My immediate class response was to say that the social violence and harm present in society is cause enough for us to err on the side of being too aware and sensitive to the realities of others than to err in indifference and apathy. This still holds true and yet, as a religious educator committed to transformation, I have wrestled with the thought that to be sensitive and to create safe space is a beginning, and not a culminating, step in our educating.

**From Safe to Brave Space**

Creating safe space in one’s teaching fosters power and security for it affords both the educator and learner the opportunity to explore oneself amidst other exploring selves in a relatively controlled and predictable setting. For some, a safe space is a place to be accepted as one is; it is refuge. This is especially powerful for those whose identities are marginalized. The created safe space is a place to hear one’s own voice and to strengthen it in an environment potentially less rife with fear or threat. This type of space reflects a “separatist” approach and

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8 “Conservative” “liberal/progressive” are paltry words when understood or expressed only in a binary sense. I struggle to find better words that are not polarizing and yet express the difference that this student experiences with others who are more “progressive” in their theological and spiritual commitments. “Traditional” “Orthodox” “Non-traditional” “Non-orthodox” also do disservice to the reality that most of us have some traditional, progressive, orthodox, conservative, etc. pieces to who we are. These concepts are fluid within most, if not all, of us.
serves as a site of resistance to the harmful daily encounters a person usually experiences in society. A black fraternity, an Indian-specific church, a women’s only gym, a senior community center, and Japanese basketball leagues are a few examples of separatist safe spaces. For others, a safe space is an “inclusive” space that aims to include all diversities and viewpoints. These are often the goal of teachers in a classroom or a religious institution in welcoming newcomers. Their hope is to create an inclusive space that feels safe because all are important and all are welcome to join and participate. A common commitment of inclusive safe spaces is the promise to invite all to speak and contribute and to hear all who do without judgement. Finally, a third type of safe space is the “paradoxical” safe space where a commitment to differences and diversity results in a simultaneously safe and unsafe, and inside and outside, reality. Here, the space is safe because those who enter this space acknowledge that these spaces are never politically or value free and yet, the acknowledgement of these seemingly contrasting dynamics inherent within any one space, allows for more genuine encounters.

In an ecumenical and interreligious setting such as ours, creating a safe space in class is a necessary move. Students who have some prior exposure to religious difference are challenged in their ability to coexist in mutual respect, even more so for the student who comes with limited encounters. In this context, there is great need to foster safe space so students feel like they will not get run over or be dismissed in their learning amidst such difference. Questions of identity are abundant and it is within safe and secure spaces that we navigate through these questions.

Transformational learning for a more just and humane world are two other key commitments of our school and university which then lead us to a potential conflict of differing pedagogies and teaching philosophies in light of the previous commitment to create safe spaces for learning. Do we, as religious and theological educators, do a disservice to our students and our mission when we create only “inclusive” safe spaces? Do we fear unintentionally enacting microaggressions towards our peers and thus would rather be preemptive and abstain than engage in messy discussions and complex practices?

So that our religious and theological education is transformative, we must commit to transitioning from creating safe spaces to creating brave spaces. Some theorists propose that safe space in social justice education is brave space when rightly understood because safe spaces acknowledge that classrooms are neither politically nor conflict free while calling

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10 It is important to note that the use of the term “separatist” does not necessarily convey a negative connotation. While there are separatist compounds that may do harm, there are also separatist groups that serve as refuge.
11 Rosenfeld and Noterman, 1355-6.
12 Though some religious and theological institutions may not have the interreligious and ecumenical diversity that other institutions or regions might have, I contend that if we probe closely enough, there are many diversities inherent within a group, even in a separatist group as noted above. This is not an ecumenical and interreligious issue only but one that asks religious educators how far we will and need to go in engaging the distances these differences bring.
persons to enter in and engage others with a risk-taking posture.\textsuperscript{13} While a strong argument exists for this understanding of safe space, I follow the lead of Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens who make explicit a move from that which is safe to that which is brave.\textsuperscript{14} By explicitly naming a space as brave, the educator communicates that transformation through bold contributions in discussions and other actions is the hope and aim for which education exists. Feminist pedagogy offers that there is greater opportunity for transformation when education includes the whole self: one’s physical body, cognition, social relations, and emotions. This does not imply that safe spaces are not sites of transformative learning. Rather that the aim of brave space (i.e., facilitating experiences and learning that are transformative) is clear for all who participate.

In another class I taught on community, a mainline Protestant student asked if we could pray for a fellow Catholic student (with this student’s permission) concerning a family matter. As a United Methodist with Evangelical spiritual roots teaching during my first year at a progressive ecumenical and interreligious school, I, as the professor, felt uncomfortable with this request mostly because I was unsure of how to proceed and what language to use wondering whether it would be offensive to those who knew of my Evangelical roots. \textit{Am I to invoke the name of Jesus? Am I to ask for God’s providence and intervention and pray for a miracle or am I to pray a prayer of empathy and peace along the journey? Am I to petition a personal God or to pray to ‘Holy Mystery’?} What ensued was an entry into brave space for both the class and myself. I shared with the class the request and then asked the students if they are ever afraid to pray at the school in front of others. There was a resounding chorus of affirmations and a number of head nods taking place. The students continued sharing that in wanting to be respectful of the myriad religious and spiritual expressions among the constituents in the school, they did not want to offend others with their own religious identity and practices. That is, they did not want to enact any microaggressions on others and ended up abstaining from practicing forms at school they regularly do in their “safe spaces” at home and in their houses of worship.

I shared with the class that I too hold these same fears and inhibitions. And yet, if we are to move to places where the education we offer is forming students to act and live, not out of a place of fear, but of transformation, our class (me included) would need to work through these potential microaggressions and hold enough respect in this community of learning to live with our mistakes, which is a natural part of transformative learning. If religious education does not provide spaces where people encounter both their securities and insecurities, we may fall short of that which we aim to do in transformative and social justice education, helping people’s meaning-making frames and ensuing actions change.


Working Through Microaggressions: Some Considerations

Classroom Environment

When I sense that a class is on the brink and at a threshold of new learning, as an educator, I utilize the white board to foster a space of mutual learning and to appropriately destabilize my own power in the class.\textsuperscript{15} In this move, I have students, when ready, come to the board and write down a word or phrase to answer a given prompt. The hope is for students to feel ownership in this space and to enter into braver space because they feel more a part of it. In the previously mentioned class scenario, I tweaked this process a little. After sharing my own vulnerabilities of praying at the school, I asked students to offer any requests for prayer which I wrote up on the board. Approximately after ten minutes of fielding requests, the whole board was filled and we were ready to pray. I encouraged students to offer out loud, as one was led, a prayer that was true to their own religious identity and that we, as a class, would honor that person and prayer, by respecting their language, theology, and genuine intent. We prayed; it was awkward; theologies clashed. At the same time, there was something beautiful occurring. We were taken to a different place of exposure, growth, and learning on account of the brave space this community of learners was willing to enter.\textsuperscript{16}

Education as Spiritual Formation: The Person as Educator

Parker Palmer’s writings are invaluable resources in considering who it is that teaches.\textsuperscript{17} His challenge to those who teach is for us to become aware of our inner landscape so we minimize the harm we might cause others in our teaching while also nurturing our gifts in order to connect more deeply with our students. Giving attention to our own inner landscape positions us to see more clearly the fear our students bring into education in addition to the fears we ourselves bring. “We cannot see the fears in our students until we see the fear in ourselves” is a simple and yet, profound statement religious educators would do well to consider for it expresses the truth that education is not a disentangled and objective science to be mastered but a complex and fluid art to be reflected upon because it involves a web of relationships with persons who are intricate beings.\textsuperscript{18} We see the fear (and joy) in others as we are in touch with our own fear and joy. This is a prophetic and spiritual act because this kind of teaching is dedicated to transforming the whole self and social systems. It takes a deep

\textsuperscript{15}To “destabilize” my power as the professor is to first acknowledge that my authority in the classroom can never be fully relinquished, nor should it be. However, it is to also acknowledge that there are models of teaching that are established upon the sole authority and expertise of the educator and educator alone. I take a constructivist approach to teaching and learning and in this sense, try to make my classrooms as mutual as possible so students feel like they can own the class.

\textsuperscript{16}Students offered during our break that they were thankful for the discussion and opportunity to pray together. Expectantly, there may have been those who felt the time a waste or offensive to their own spiritual commitments.

\textsuperscript{17}One resource I find especially helpful is The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of A Teacher’s Life (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998).

\textsuperscript{18}Palmer, 47.
awareness of self, the other, and the created relationship between self and the other. The least we can do is to teach our students to be politically correct and aware of their microaggressive acts. Yet being politically correct is not enough if we are to make substantial changes throughout society.\textsuperscript{19} We can speak well of others and yet, be persons who fall short, very short, of justice, generosity, respect, and love.

**When Does Creating Brave Space Make A Difference?**

Admittedly, this is a difficult question to answer for in a context of increasing learning assessments, how can one really gauge a spiritual endeavor until long after the class has occurred and time allows one to see the fruit of these efforts? Classroom evaluations are helpful but the sustenance of such transformation is usually not afforded in a matter of a few weeks or class sessions. In the Multicultural Ministry course previously mentioned, at one point in the class, I encouraged the students to be brave and to speak from their own religious identities. I had sensed students were hesitating to speak from their hearts and were speaking logically, rationally, and with caution trying not to offend others. They were not willing to risk being called out which in my estimation, provided a safe, but not as transformative, space. As I offered this encouragement, and the class worked through the microaggressions book in addition to other diversity and justice learnings, I could sense a boldness arising within our students. Instead of me encouraging students to be bold, it was students who were either encouraging their peers to “be brave” or who were stepping into their own voice. “I’m just going to say it but for me, I believe in the miracles of the Bible and the Bible is a source of power and strength for me,” “At the risk of being microaggressive, I need to point out that when you say ‘Catholic or Christian’ this is offensive because Catholics are Christian” are two examples of what I witnessed in that course. Students felt safe and brave because we were committed to our growth as a community of learners. When I asked students to bring a symbol of power, there was a white male student who, unaware of the historical significance of his symbol, brought a rope in to show something that is strong. I found out later, that some of the students, including one of the African American students, began to feel uncomfortable. I did not address it, in part, because I thought it would have been so blatant a gesture of mimicking the lynchings that I was willing to give the benefit of the doubt to the student. A fellow non-African American student eventually discussed this with the student at which point the student, in realizing his error and regret, offered a written apology to the rest of the class. Perhaps we know creating brave space works when our students are willing to self-monitor and spur one another on to further growth. When they are willing to step out of their fear and into unknown space maybe we are working through our fear of microaggressions, through our political correctness, and into transformed lives.

\textsuperscript{19} Kathleen T. Talvacchia, *Critical Minds and Discerning Hearts: A Spirituality of Multicultural Teaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 4-7.