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2016 REA Annual Meeting Nov. 4-6, 2016

The Tragic Aspect of Teaching: Hope in the Face of Uncertainty

Abstract

Educators throughout the ages have offered metaphors and analogies for teaching and teachers. Prominent among them are: gardener, midwife, facilitator, guru, sacrament. Each of these metaphors shed light, from a different angle, on the act of teaching. This paper proposes the metaphor of tragedy as a way of shedding new light, from a totally different perspective, on what it means to engage in academic teaching. It explores three areas in particular in light of the metaphor: the quest for certainty, the confessional classroom, and learning without teaching. Tragedy holds the possibility of opening up awareness of the uniqueness of teaching the conversation when placed in critical dialogue with these three areas.

Introduction

Teaching is a complex human endeavor. The introduction of creative new methods and technological tools do not reduce the complexity. Etymologically, teaching means showing someone how to do something (Moran 1997). This showing how is rooted in hope. But, almost inevitably, it is mingled with disappointment. This ambivalent character of our work, with its successes and failures, is a tragic dilemma at the heart of the act of teaching.

Throughout the ages, educators have offered metaphors and analogies for teaching. Prominent among them are: gardening, midwifing, facilitating, incardinating, transgressing. Each of these metaphors shed light, from a different angle, on the act of teaching. This essay proposes the metaphor of tragedy as a way of shedding new light, from a totally different perspective, on what it means to engage in academic teaching. It proposes that, in spite of our best efforts (the search for perfection), all our pedagogical actions take place in a context of incompleteness (unrealized vision). The paper explores three areas in particular in light of these circumstances: the lust for certainty, the confessional classroom and learning without teaching. The metaphor of tragedy is employed to critique the prevailing assumptions undergirding each.

A tragic sense calls into question the idolatry of the lust for certainty, the excessive turn toward therapy in the classroom, and the near absence of the language of teaching in adult education. The indispensable role of doubt, holding in tension three components in the classroom curriculum, and re-situating teaching at the center of adult education, are offered as constructive educational correctives. These educational responses can affirm our hope as teachers in the face of the tragic source of our endeavors. This hope, however, needs a religious grounding for our pedagogical work.

The Lust for Certainty

“For now we see through a glass darkly…” (1 Cor. 13:12)
Jean Bethke Elshtain asks us to view teaching as an aesthetic construction: teaching as drama (1992:54-62). Her proposal seeks to capture a sensibility of the classroom as an ambiance of anticipation, a democratic drama of dialogue and debate, a civic space, an arena of respect for the views of others, a drama with many voices – keeping multiple perspectives in play and in mind. At its richest, it exudes a morally responsible way of being with others. Elshtain notes, “Teaching as drama. Not a world of special effects but a world of special engagement. Not a theater of self-indulgent first person soliloquies, but a theater of crafted and shaped interventions that tap, at one and the same, that which we are coming to know and that which we are learning to be” (62).

The angle of vision of this essay invites us to view teaching as a tragic drama. I do not have in mind here the deep agony and angst of a classical Greek tragedy. Rather I seek to explore and reveal the ecstasy and agony that is an inherent part of ordinary life, especially the practice of teaching.

The tragic requires interdependent elements that are in conflict with each other: chaos and construction, ideal and actual, success and failure. The tragic sense of teaching requires an acute awareness of and a creative navigating between both perspectives. “The issue of tragedy”, Nicholas Burbules writes, “is not a simple one of optimism verses pessimism… [it] refers to a larger awareness of the impediments to success, the prospect of failure and the limits to our efforts. …By maintaining the tragic sense, we admit to ourselves and to those engaged with us in an activity the inherent difficulties and uncertainties of our efforts. By maintaining the tragic sense, we seek to avoid the hubris of believing ourselves to be more effective than we actually are” (Burbules 1990, 471). This is not to wallow in our human inadequacies or our pedagogical deficiencies. Rather it is the height of pragmatism and ultimate realism. It leads to a form of wisdom. It enables us to avoid the two major temptations in education, namely, pessimism and utopianism (Burbules 471-474).

The teacher is the protagonist in this moral drama. He or she is an agent of hope in the face of this tragic understanding. Dwayne Huebner writes, “The teacher faces a situation complex as only life can be – filled with doubts, conflicts, humor, pain, frustration, bleakness and beauty, pathos and love, anger and laughter. He (sic) needs to be able to live and work with inconsistencies, opposites, and fluctuations. …He (sic) has to transform the everything into a valued something before it becomes a wasted nothing” (Huebner 1999, 23). Why is this so? It is because of the very nature of education. And the test of education is teaching. Burbules notes, “Education is a perpetually incomplete and potentially unfulfilled process… [the] teacher and learner embark on an endeavor whose intended outcome is, from the very start, inevitably in doubt. Education that is worth anything involve experiencing uncertainty, confusion, and failure. It is not a straight and narrow path, nor is each step in the process a clear change for the better. Every gain is a loss; every deeper insight won is a cherished, comfortable, and familiar illusion slipping away. [it] is less like scaling Mt. Everest, and more like the task of Sisyphus” (Burbules 469,471).¹

¹ Aaron Ghiloni provides a historical perspective for the use of finitude as an educational resource in the Prophet Muhammad’s educational leadership. He insightfully points out how the existential realities of finitude are significant experiences from which we can learn religiously (Ghiloni 2016, 288-306).
The culprit in much of education, John Dewey asserts, is “the quest for certainty” (Dewey 1929)...a yearning for knowledge that is unchanging, uncontroversial, uncontaminated. The assumption is uncertainty and doubt are to be eliminated. Rational explanation offer firm control and enlightenment. However, “this quest for certainty” is fundamentally untenable and contrary to the process of teaching. It is a major temptation in the academic teaching of religion.

Mark C. Taylor notes the emergence of the practice of traditional forms of religion among some college students on campuses today (Taylor 2006). However, he notices something else: “Indeed, it seems the more religious students become the less willing they are to engage in critical reflection about faith” (A39). “For years,” Taylor writes, “I have begun my classes by telling students that if they are not more confused and uncertain at the end of the course than they are at the beginning, I will have failed. A growing number of religiously correct students consider this challenge a direct assault on their faith. Yet the task of thinking and teaching, especially in an age of emergent fundamentalism, is to cultivate a faith in doubt that calls into question every certainty” (A39). Taylor concludes, “Indeed, the 21st century will be dominated by religion in ways that were inconceivable just a few years ago. Religious conflict will be less a matter of struggle between belief and unbelief than a clash between believers who make room for doubt and those who do not” (A39). Some ten years later these observations have tragically become evident worldwide.

The Role of Doubt in Teaching Religion

Teaching religion is essentially creative and unpredictable in nature. It doesn’t function with predetermined outcomes. It doesn’t operate according to a “functional postulate” (Martin 1985). The quest is for understanding within one’s own religion and (outside) in the religious life of the other. The teacher teaches the conversation (Moran 1997:124-148). Orthodoxy and heterodoxy are in a different language game. The classroom is not a place for setting such boundaries. The classroom is a place for testing boundaries. Would that process provoke doubt? It may encourage doubts that every intelligent person has. It would also honor the complexities and uncertainties of our existence and our work. This will be challenging to some of the intellectual foundation of our churches, synagogues and mosques. Claims of “revealed truths”, “special/exclusive revelations” or “fixed certainties” may be opposed and critiqued for their idolatrous character. Each may have to avoid the posture of possessing the Truth.

Margaret Farley, writing from a Roman Catholic moral theological perspective, asserts, “The truth that the church as a community holds and shares with the generation of believers is not the totality of all truth; it is not a truth that is once and for all fully possessed. The moral insight that believers achieve is always partial, always the object of further search in ever-new human situations” (Farley 2002, 60). Farley advocates the removal of the “albatross of certitude” hanging over the church preventing it from effectively and credibly teaching to the modern (and postmodern) world. Its task is to risk becoming a “community of doubt” in need of the insights of others on the critical moral issues of the day. This “grace of self-doubt” is what allows for epistemic humility. “It allows us”, Farley notes, “to listen to the experience of others, take seriously reasons that are alternative to our own, rethink our own last word. It assumes a shared search for moral insight, and it promotes (although it does not guarantee) a shared conviction in the end” (69).
The litmus test of any educational process, and in particular the teaching of religion, is its ability to affirm and incorporate the healthy function of doubt. This does not mean thoughtless skepticism or the negation of belief, but rather a form of protest which stays within the sphere of faith. It is inherent to the religious drive. Paul Tillich describes this indigenous Protestant principle as the need to question our certainties in the very moment when they become absolutely certain. Tillich saw doubt as the very consequence of the risk of faith, and the two as poles of the same reality. The dynamics of faith, he claimed, always include doubt, not as an unwelcome threat, but as a needed instigation to personal growth (Tillich 1959, 16-22).

Robert Baird, in a concise and lucid essay, lays out a four-fold argument in defense of the creative role of doubt in religion:

1. Creative doubt is a means of constructively acknowledging human limitations. We are not God.

2. Creative doubt plays a role in keeping one’s fundamental beliefs from becoming dead dogmas. It keeps them alive: ever ancient, ever new.

3. Creative doubt serves as a check against the idolatrous worship of one’s own religion and its symbolic expressions and practices. There is no god but God.

4. Finally, the creative role of doubt refuses to abandon the burden of freedom and responsibility for personal quest. Mature religion requires ownership of one’s convictions (Baird 1980, 172-179).

The task of the teacher of religion is to “show how” this dynamic flows at the center of the classroom conversation.

Dwayne Huebner wisely observes, “We are required to be comfortable with reasonable doubt, openness, and unsureness if we are to respond afresh to that wish is given to us afresh. This openness and doubt is the source of the insecurity and fallibility of teachers. It is not a consequence of ignorance. It is not a sign of incompetence. It is a manifestation of a life that is still incomplete and open”. Huebner continues, “the insecurity of teaching is what makes teaching a vocation, and is inherent in vocations. We cannot take on a calling without risk” (Huebner 1987, 25).

The Confessional Classroom

Religious education has two major forms, processes and aims. The verb “to teach” captures both sides. The first side is to teach religion as an academic subject. The second aspect is to teach people how to practice a religious way of life. The first aims towards understanding. The latter is directed towards nurture /formation. The classroom of the school is mostly the setting of the first. A religious community is the arena of the second. These are two opposite but complementary forms, with opposite but complementary aims (Harris & Moran 1994, 30-43). When these two teaching forms and aims are confused, for lack of clarity about this distinction, we may end up doing neither task adequately: the academic may not be challenging enough and the formation may not be particular enough. This can be a tragic state of affairs.
During my graduate studies, I enrolled in an intensive inter-session course. It was a deep and rapid immersion into the subject-at-hand. The course topic was titled, Sexuality and the Social Order. The course would change my life and worldview. First, I had the experience of being a minority. I was one of four men in a class of thirty-one. Second, the course was my introduction to feminism and feminists. It was an experience in transformational learning. One element of the course, however, unsettled me. As the course progressed the role of the designated teacher receded and assigned texts tended to be set aside. A personalistic group pedagogy took over. Encouragement was given to self-expression, self-revelation, emotional unloading and confessional declarations. In retrospect, it seems like a forerunner of an Oprah Winfrey or afternoon cable-tv talk show. As the course turned more into a form of therapeutic encounter, I felt more ill-at-ease. The dynamics seems more appropriate in a counseling setting or in a church confessional.

Lucia Perillo relates a similar experience in teaching poetry to her students (1997). She relates how students were eager to be done with her introductory lectures “so that they could get down to what they saw as the real business of the class: writing and discussing their own problems” (A56). Frequently, she notes, student wrote about intimate matters: psychic turmoil, sexual violence, emotional hurts, abortions. Good teacher that she is, Perillo seeks to clarify the difference between poetry’s therapeutic and aesthetic uses. However, she faces in the lives of her students the profound shift in U.S. culture towards the expressive, the confessional and “the Triumph of the Therapeutic” (Rieff 1966). Perillo observes, “This public support for confessional has affected all of the academic disciplines in which self-expression is given value, from sociology to literature to the visual arts. In doing so, it begs the question of what kind of space the classroom is: a courtroom where aesthetic theories are rigorously interrogated, a marketplace where personal grief is traded for consolation, a hospital where the products of imaginative labor are either healed or pronounced dead and autopsied, an analyst’s office where what is under consideration is not so much a text or a painting as a real human being’s life?” (A56).

Ken Homan insightfully lays out some of the “hazards” of personalistic teaching methodologies. While they help students come to a greater sense of participation in and ownership of their knowledge, enabling them to see themselves as “living human documents” with their own narratives, there are risks he notes, that such pedagogies involve. They may involve the student too intensely, too personally, and the course becomes a form of therapy. While affirming to a degree this turn to the human subject and the importance of personal experience as a source of knowledge, Homan cautions against a type of academic intimacy where the teacher is imagined as a type of nurturing mid-wife who labors with the student (Homan 1977:248-64). Therapy should not predominate in the academic classroom. When this distinction becomes blurred or collapses, tragedy prevails.

The Interplay of Three Components in Teaching Religion

The educational corrective to the “hazards of personalistic teaching” (Homan) and “the cult of personal experience” (Elshtain 55) is to re-focus our teaching away from the behavior of the student. What is at stake here is the restoration of balance. Dwayne Huebner writes, “I do not wish to displace the individual from a position of primacy in our thinking. I do wish to claim an equal place for the past and for the community. In thinking about education we cannot effectively start our thinking with the individual and then make the past and community
secondary. Rather our thinking must start with all three: the individual, the past, and the community. Then we can ask how all three are interrelated” (Huebner 1999a, 188).

Three forms of content, then, need attending to in the educational setting of the classroom: the past (traditions), the community (social and political structures) and the individual (students). The task of the teacher is to highlight the distinctiveness of each; have each stand out and bring them into creative tension with each other. The teacher directs this drama. He or she orchestrates the interplay between the three components. Each has limitations. But it is the tension within the limits of each that is the basis of creativity. The teacher stimulates awareness of limits so that these limits can be broken through and transcended. Teaching is a constant pushing forward of the horizons of life. The teacher teaches the conversation, imaginatively showing how the play between these three sources of content can disclose possibilities for students in the setting (Huebner 1999b, 198-211).

Teaching is a process of traditioning, an act of passing on the past and the present. It makes accessible to the neophyte cultural wisdom, “the funded capital of civilization” (Dewey). This cultural wisdom is embodied in texts, materials, practices, rituals. These are our knowledge resources. The teacher of religion offers these embodied forms of the tradition, not as a finished product “to be believed”, but as perspectives to be considered. A religious text mediates between a community of the past and a community of the present. The teacher’s task is to see that the text has the chance to fulfill this role. The student is invited into dialogue and dialectic with this printed or visual text with its perspectives for his/her acceptance, rejection or modification.

Jaroslav Pelikan offers an instructive distinction between seeing tradition as a token, an idol, and a true image or icon (Pelikan 1984:55-57). “Tradition becomes an idol”, Pelikan writes, “when it makes the preservation of the past an end in itself; it claims to have the transcendent reality and truth captive and encapsulated in the past, and it requires an idolatrous submission to the authority of tradition, since truth would not dare to appear outside it” (55). Tradition as a token does point beyond itself but it does not embody what it represents. It is merely a means to an end and an arbitrary representation. Tradition, however, as an icon is what it represents. It invites us to look at it, through it and beyond it to the living reality of which it is an embodiment. Pelikan asserts, “tradition qualifies as an icon...when it does not present itself as co-extensive with the truth it teaches, but does present itself as the way that we who are its heirs must follow if we are to go beyond it -- through it, but beyond it – to a universal truth that is available only in a particular embodiment” (56).

The teacher is conserver and trustee of the tradition (Huebner 1987, 20). However, if the tradition is to retain its liberating and life-giving quality, an never-ending hermeneutic is required. Teaching is this critical and creative interpretive process. When it is done imaginatively and skillfully, tradition becomes “the living faith of the dead” rather than “the dead faith of the living” (Pelikan 65).

Teaching is showing students how to live by the best lights of the tradition. However, the student’s past and present experience is a distinctive content in and of itself. A healthy critical and creative tension ought to ensue between the content of the tradition and the content of the student’s life. Good teaching directs this conversation to the mutual benefit of each. A living tradition offers students the promise of new life. The tradition, in turn, can be renewed by the
novelty and challenge of the neophyte. Students have their own life narrative with their own unique archeology (past) and teleology (future). Attention must be paid to their unfolding life story. However, their individual life story (or text) is immersed in a tradition, a societal story (or text). Good teaching is rhythmically meshing of both unfolding stories. Both can participate in the formation and reformation of the others story. The student’s life can be renewed through the truthfulness of the tradition, and the emerging truthfulness in the student’s life-story can reshape the tradition.

Teaching-learning is frequently viewed from a psychological angle. However, it is also a social and political process and project. Teaching religion takes place in communities with social and political structures and arrangements. These social and political arrangements form the third content in the educational environment. No education is neutral. Teaching religion is a political endeavor – it seeks to influence by directing the conversation. What are the governing structures and the social-political arrangements operative in the setting? What are the power dynamics? What is the relationship of the student to the tradition? Whose interests lie behind religious knowledge? Who is powerful and powerless in the setting? Our current educational language of socialization, initiation, political control, growth and behavioral objects frequently hide the power dynamics operative in the setting. Good teaching brings under suspicion and lays bare the relations of one person to another and the relation of teacher and student to the tradition.

Nicholas Lash, in reference to the Roman Catholic Church, notes, “I have long maintained that the heart of the crisis of contemporary Catholicism lies in…subordination of education to governance, the effect of which has too often been to substitute for teaching proclamation construed as command” (Lash 2010,17). Those with the task of exercising the pastoral teaching office seem not in fact, Lash asserts, primary to be teaching. “The teacher”, Lash writes, “looks for understanding, the commander for obedience …What we call ‘official teaching’ in the church is, for the most part, not teaching but governance” (18). Failure to attend to oppressive patterns of power in the classroom teaching of religion can silence and marginalize students and fail to honor the tradition at its widest and deepest. The key to teaching to transform, then, is to hold the three sources of content in interplay with each other. To hide this creative tension is to slide into tragedy.

Learning Without Teaching

There is no greater tragedy in education than to assume that you can learn without being taught. Yet, Allen Tough provided the first comprehensive description of adult “self-directed learning” under the title, Learning without a Teacher (Tough 1967). This turn towards learning undergirds the theoretical basis of the literature of secular adult education. It also brings with it a set of philosophical assumptions underpinning the enterprise. Part of the tragedy in church and synagogue education today is its near uncritical acceptance of the presuppositions on teaching and learning rooted in secular adult education.  

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2 A constructive exception is the recent work of Sarah Tauber in her rich portraiture of three rabbis as teacher: gardener, midwife and learner (Tauber 2015).
Malcolm Knowles is widely acknowledged as a founder of contemporary adult education as a separate discipline in the United States. Knowles worked from the assumption that adult students are a wholly different breed. This set the stage for the claim to uniqueness of the field: adult education is unique because it is different. Its clientele are different. Its processes are different. Its purposes are different—exclusively different (Knowles 1980). These claims quickly acquired the status of a rigid orthodoxy guarded by a self-regulating guild of professional adult educators.

The starting point of adult education is not the teacher but the learner. Sarah Tauber notes, “the literature on adult education has concentrated on the learner and the learning process” (Tauber 2015, 18). Any of its theoretical insights on the role of the teacher and teaching grow out of psychology of learning theory. The teacher, Tauber observes, is never the focus of the research.

In light of this new emphasis, a dominant conceptual model of adult learning emerged in theory and practice in the United States. Knowles introduced (with language from Edward Lindeman) the concept of andragogy as descriptive and prescriptive of this model. For Knowles, andragogy is the art and science of helping adults learn. In contrast, pedagogy is the art and science of helping children learn. A striking contrast is set up to the teaching of children: the child is dependent, the adult is independent; the child learns subjects, the adult solves problems in which they are interested; the child’s learning is directed by others, the adult is a self-directed learner. And most of all the child needs to be taught, the adult does not need teachers—they learn on their own. Tauber notes, “...it was Malcolm Knowles’ (1973/1984, 1980) research on the concept that established andragogy as a dominant, widely disseminated model for applied theory and practice since the 1970’s” (19-20). Even though the model has been modified and critiqued (Brookfield 1985; Pratt 1993; Collins 1991), it seems impermeable to fundamental change.

Adult education, in its attempt to carve out a distinctive place and discipline for itself has, in fact, separated itself from the rest of education. With the guiding model of andragogy, it has intentionally defined itself over against the child, the teacher and the classroom in the school. Implicitly, this creates crude stereotypes of the adult learner and the child learner that are a disservice to both. Children and adults are not different learning species. There are differences (physical and social), of course, but the modes of teaching and learning do not differ for each. There are emphases which shift from age to age. There are differences in degrees but there is no difference in kind. We need to describe learning that shows the continuity of development from birth to death. There is no sound basis for a distinction between andragogy and pedagogy. Teaching, it is claimed, is something done to children and accepted as an authoritarian form of teaching. On the other hand, adult education sought to get away from teachers and teaching with its contrived language of andragogy. Adult learners, it is proposed, need democratically to have their learning “facilitated”, “mentored”, “guided”, “coached”. The language slides into the therapeutic. Teaching is suspect. And this is a profound tragedy.

Re-Orientating Adult (Religious) Education

The first task is to reunite teaching and learning. They ought to be imagined as a single process at opposite ends of a continuum. Teaching is showing someone how to do something. Learning is responding to being shown how (Moran 1997, 39-42). Moran writes, “I begin with this premise that leaning always implies teaching. In fact, the only proof that teaching exists is
the existence of learning… they are descriptions of one process, seen from two different directions. Where there is teaching, there is learning, and where there is learning, there is teaching” (40, 60). This enables us to look at teaching-learning not only psychologically. It enables us to see it also as social, political and religious relation. People learn because they have been taught throughout their lives.

The second task is to reground and reclaim the fullness and richest meaning of teaching in all its diversity (Moran 1997). Teaching needs to be re-set and reviewed within the perspective of lifelong teaching-learning. It is an enriching and transforming human activity that runs from birth to death. It is the transmission of what is most valuable for one generation to the next. Within this process, critical questions need to be asked at every step of the way. But at its fullest realization, it is actively directed by adults toward adults. Here is where the academic teaching of religion is most valuable.

Finally, the reason for the traditional antipathy of secular adult education toward teaching may be found in its attitude toward religion. The enterprise has been driven by rationalistic enlightenment ideals of the human person. It has incapacity to deal with sin and death. Sarah Tauber writes, “The scholarly study of adult education historically avoided [the] three domains of spirituality, religion and faith. “Slowly”, she notes, “researchers are increasingly giving attention to them” (25). There is an urgent need today for the education of adults in our churches, synagogues and mosques. And this urgent need needs to include any ways people express their religiousness. Our religious traditions, however, are the chief repository of the rich meaning of teaching. This meaning needs to move to the center of our educational work.

In one of his earliest writings some fifty years ago (1962), Dwayne Huebner envisioned the teacher as artist and teaching as an artistic process. He writes, “Teaching is almost an impossibility, really, when all of the complexities and difficulties of teaching are enumerated… [It] is this constant search for perfection, for satisfaction, and in a sense, for beauty. It is the frequent disappointment and sadness of vision unrealized, and the joy and contentment of occasional success” (Huebner 1999, 26). It is the permanent tension between conservation and change, between tradition and transformation. And yet we must persevere without falling into pessimism or utopianism. As we enter the classroom to teach religion each day, the final words in Samuel Beckett’s tragic drama, The Unnamable, resonates in our bodies:

“You must go on.
I can’t go on.
I’ll go on” (Beckett 1979, 382).

…with hope in face of uncertainty…lured by the Transcendent.
References


