

Some Particulars – Pedagogy

We make a very great impression on our students not only by what we teach, but how we teach it. So it should be no surprise that the Lutheran understanding of human being and human knowing will have implications for teaching. Looked at from the other direction, we would expect to find that every mode of teaching has its own implicit anthropology and epistemology as well. In this section I want to identify four attitudes or approaches that I think fit the Lutheran tradition particularly well, but I certainly don't think these are the only ones worth looking at.

1. *Teaching that leaves room for wonder.* The noted biologist, Ursula Goodenough, tells the story of teaching, with two science colleagues, a year-long science survey. This class included astrophysics – the becoming of the cosmos from big bang to the formation of planetary systems, geophysics – the coming of planet earth, and biochemistry – the coming of life. Each of the instructors taught their own specialty and gave a comprehensive test at the end of their respective sections. Goodenough taught the last one. As the class was coming to an end, she engaged several of the students in conversation, asking them what they thought had gone well and what had gone badly. The student comments were overwhelmingly positive with a few complaints about how hard the exams had been. Goodenough said she was feeling really good about her own (and her colleagues') work when one of the students said, "The three processes you revealed to us are so awesome and so amazing, but you never gave us any chance in an assignment to process or assimilate that awe and amazement. The fact that you based grades only on exams said to us that our own reactions to what we were learning were not important. Is that what you meant to say?" Goodenough then went on to say that she and her colleagues had, because of that student comment, changed the way they taught that course. They now structure group discussions and personal response papers on the course. "The awe and wonder of science was certainly a large part of our motivation as scientists; why should we have all along been denying its importance to our students?"

I think the lesson Goodenough learned can be applied to all of us, not just to scientists. Anyone that teaches something that is deep, profound, awe-inspiring, provocative, challenging, invites a human response. That human response, thought out and articulated, is a very important part of learning. We should not only recognize it, but honor it by making room for it. Too often we, as faculty, run away from learning occasions that spill out of our academic boxes. "It's not my speciality," we argue. Sharon Daloz Parks laments:

We have become vulnerable to exchanging wisdom for knowledge and moral commitment for method. Moreover, professors have been vulnerable to functioning as less-than-whole persons ... Accordingly, young adults are bereft of the mentors they need, professors are too often mere technicians of knowledge, higher education can articulate no orienting vision or offer leadership toward a coherent unity, and discrete academic disciplines disclose only isolated (and thus distorted) aspects of truth. As a consequence, some of the most important questions of contemporary world are difficult to address within the prevailing rubrics of the academy.

I think it frequently happens that we hide in our expertise because we are genuinely afraid of encountering ourselves and other selves in their full humanity.

2. *Teaching that shows respect for language, for argument, for the tools of thinking and reasoning and investigating and creating.* This is the learning of the disciplines of what used to be called "workmanship." I don't know of a better name. Every field and every discipline has something like this as part of it. My father left me a wooden trunk/tool chest that he made and the set of hand tools that fit in it. But along with, and more important than the tools themselves, he taught me how to use them and how to take care of them. I remember him showing me, then aged eight or nine, how to sharpen a plane blade and told me, "If you take good care of it, this blade should serve you your entire life." He showed me how to sweat a copper pipe joint and what it ought to look like when the job was well done. I still have that chest and those tools, many of them now over a hundred years old. Some of them are not now used much, some replaced by power tools, but all of them are still usable, and I'm proud to say, in good working order.

Cy Running, art professor at Concordia College, showed me how to stretch canvas, how to boil a pot of rabbit-skin sizing and size the canvas. I learned from him how to make a cartoon and "ponce" it onto the wall or canvas the work would finally be on. He was also very particular about how he cleaned and stored brushes, and this was part of our learning as well. He would frequently say, "Learn to respect the materials."

I do not work with physical tools and materials in the teaching of philosophy, like my father and Cy did in their work, but there is a dimension of workmanship that needs to be learned here as well. Words are our material, concepts and arguments and arguments our tools. It is important in philosophy that they be kept both clean and sharp, otherwise all kinds of intellectual messes can be made. I know a story, told about the American poet E. E. Cummings, but I have not been able to find the source for it in print. A young man came to see the poet at his house and begged him to give lessons in the writing of poetry. Cummings said he was not able to give such lessons but that he knew a book the young man might find helpful. Cummings told him that if he came back the following day he would give him a copy. The young man returned, full of enthusiasm, expecting a book of instructions. Cummings handed him a dictionary and then closed the door.

Part, perhaps a large part, of learning any art or discipline is learning to respect, even to love, the tools and the medium. For poets and for philosophers the medium is language, for chemists and biologists it is the apparatus of their laboratories, for painters the canvas and paints, etc. Learning to be stewards of and with these tools is an important dimension of learning.

Sometimes students are surprised that their essay grades reflect points deducted for lack of care in grammar, construction, as well as argument. They whine, "But this isn't an English composition class." What this shows me is that not everyone in the university they submit written work to is holding them to a high standard. Learning to write, and proof, and re-write is part of the workmanship of the academy, and it should be expected to all work students do.

3. *Teaching that is an induction into a community of discourse.* College education can be viewed as the training and induction of persons into a community of discourse. When students become part of that community they have to learn what is expected of them. Both for their own good and the good of the community created the expectations should be very high. When my own kids went off to begin college they were anxious about what would be expected of them, but very eager to find this out and to meet the challenge. One of my daughters remembers going to a recital the first week of her freshman year, where the senior students in music were asked to perform for the first-year students. She remembers being so impressed by the seniors' preparation, their presence, their professionalism. She came away thinking to herself, "Now I know what's expected of me. Now I know what I have to strive for." And she was excited by it, not put off by it. I think we should do something like that for all our incoming students, demonstrating for

them what a really good performance, or piece of lab work, or essay looks like, and what the critical standards are that it embodies. We should be saying to them, "Here's what studying X requires of you. Here are the critical standards we expect you to meet. We are training you to be full participants in a community that respects these standards and performs to this level." In the Lutheran tradition this attitude toward workmanship is connected to the idea of stewardship, which is, in turn, connected to vocation and a respect for the creation.

4. *Teaching that encourages student creativity.* Creativity is the natural partner of critical thinking. We will not be very creative if we always assume that there is one right answer or one right way to do things, particularly if we also assume that we know what the right answer and right way is. This is part of the reason we see children as creative; they are not yet burdened with knowing the right way, and so are able to think of others. As a consequence a good part of learning towards creativity needs to be de-constructive, an unlearning of things we have supposed have a kind of necessity about them.

I frequently teach a course on philosophy of religion and I like to begin this course by examining our assumptions about what religion is. I like to show some slides of Hellenic vases that picture nude males running, wrestling, throwing spears, discuss, etc. I ask students, "What's being pictured here?" The most common answer is "athletes training." But I can count on someone saying, "But why are they naked?" Someone else will then suggest this isn't athletics at all, but sexual goofing off. Then the question is usually raised about why such things would be preserved in a work of art? Some even suggest there's a kind of homosexual eroticism at work here. I usually ask, "Any other ideas?" There are seldom any. A long silence ensues. I then ask, "How about something religious? Is something religious taking place here?" They almost always dismiss the idea. What could possibly be religious about naked young men racing or wrestling? For most, such activities are the very antithesis of religiousness. The suggestion is shocking, to some even disgusting. I then show some slides I took at Delphi, Olympia, and Epidaurus, pointing out that all these important religious centers in the Hellenic world had running tracks and a stadium in which people could watch athletic contests, and that the pan-Hellenic games, precursor of the Olympics, always were also a religious celebration and a festival. Those old Hellenes had blended together things we normally keep very separate: religion, drama, the arts, athletics, and even a bit of "sexual goofing off." I then show some pictures of Sumo wrestlers, of Native American games and contests, and read the passage in Samuel that describes David dancing naked before the ark of the covenant.

The point of all this is not to shock students. That's easy enough to do. The point is to loosen up the gridlock that our categories often have on our thinking that keeps us from seeing, understanding, and imagining alternatives. I need that exercise as much as the students do. What happens in this dialogue is that we all come away with less rigid ways of thinking about the religious, but also less rigid ways of thinking about the athletics, about the human body, about spirituality, and about the way we, like those ancient Hellenes, celebrate human struggle, the *agon*, in our sports, the stories we tell in fiction, the movies and TV, and the arts. A de-constructive of those categories allows us not only to see and understand many things about Hellenic culture, but also to see and understand many things about our own. A serious study of the religious dimensions of sports activities is thus made possible, and the running back pointing toward the heavens after scoring a touchdown takes on a different dimension of meaning. The creativity here is not in an artwork produced or a new theory devised but in a more flexible and more self-aware way of thinking about the world. After such a deconstruction I often ask myself, what other part of my way of thinking about the world actually limits my perception of it? Where else has a hardening of the categories taken place? Where else would we all benefit from a rethinking or perhaps an un-thinking of things?

Creativity is seldom enabled simply by a blank sheet of paper and the demand, "be creative." Herbert Kohl relates his experience getting young children to write poetry. He says that the blank sheet and the demand to write a poem will get nothing but a blank stare in response. What is required is a prompt that challenges with its peculiar mixture of particularity and openness. So he suggests it is better to start by saying, "Try a four line poem, not more than six words per line, and each line should have a color word in it." Or from a visual arts teacher I heard, "It doesn't do any good to say, 'Draw an interesting shape.' But its much more productive to say, 'See what interesting shapes get generated by the overlapping of thick capital letters.'" The latter gives the student less creative space to play in, but is a much better enabler of creativity.

Are there some areas of learning where creativity is inappropriate? I suppose there might be, if what one is supposed to learn is some established way of doing things, sorting things, naming things. There may be an importance in learning this way. Some people do have to pass standardized tests that demonstrate their mastery of such things. But it seems that after such things have been learned there is still the possibility of posing the questions, "Is there another way to do this?" Is there another way to name this? Is there another vocabulary with which to think this through?" Posing such questions loosens the grip that categories have on our minds and may move us toward a better way of doing things.

When I taught at Concordia College a friend of mine bought property in the hills just east of the Red River Valley and built a house there. One weekend I was helping him with some finishing work on it. While I was there many folks who lived in the area drove over to see what this "new place" looked like. I remember overhearing their comments: "look at the way these big windows look out on the woods on one side and the rolling hills on the other. What does our big window look out on? Our driveway. Why didn't we think of that?" The husband replied, "The picture window is always on the same side of the house as the front door. Everybody knows that." Of course the husband is right; 99% of houses have their biggest windows on their front-door side. But what his wife had been able to do was see the lack of necessity in this and the inappropriateness of it if the house was situated in the country, not a street in town, and situated where there were beautiful views to be seen from the house in other directions. Knowing that "this is the way it's always done" may be an advantage in some circumstances, but it may also be a terrible handicap in others.

Whether one is a student in art or music, psychology or physics, communications or philosophy, I believe there is occasion for creativity in all learning. It honors reality, honors the spirit of the learner, and makes teaching a whole lot more interesting. Alfred North Whitehead wrote:

The justification for a university is that it provides the connection between knowledge and the zest for life by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning. The tragedy of the world is that those who are imaginative have but slight experience, and those who are experienced have feeble imaginations The task of a university is to weld together imagination and experience.

The assumption of Whitehead's approach is that the old will provide the experience and the young will provide the imagination. But my experience is that the young are just as likely to lack imagination, to be thoroughly confirmed in the world's account of how things are, as old folks are. And sometimes the old are not particularly experienced either, or have learned little from the experiences they have had. It requires a particular attitude in both the old and the young, an attitude of openness that needs to be continually exercised, to make creativity possible. Yet this is what makes the academic life particularly attractive, that it is an adventure and all of us who are learners are embarked on it. I really cannot imagine teaching the same things, year in and year out, without the promise of learning something radically new. Curricular space and a community that honors creativity – both of these are as important to faculty as they are to students.