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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Tough Conversations, Safety, and Making Mistakes in Sacred Space

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Allow me to be honest. There are few things in my job that I dislike more than having a conversation with someone who is feigning objectivity or neutrality. I call it *academic pretense*. I cherish conversations when people speak from their hearts, even if I disagree with them. This holds true as well in my *collaborative learning gatherings* (aka *co-learning gatherings*, aka the classroom). Over the years, I have learned to face a reality in my own life, namely, there are few areas in which I have no opinions or, at least, have no leanings. If you tell me you are different, no offense, but if you are a fully engaged person I probably won't believe you.

Try as we may to be neutral, as engaged educators who regularly integrate our subjects of expertise with everything occurring around us, we all have leanings and assumptions concerning a wide-range of topics. Professing to be neutral, when in fact, we are not, endangers us by moving difficult conversations to the abstract and impersonal world of the ethereal, often leading to conversations that lack personal investment. How well can we learn if we are not invested in an honest process? I have found that most learning experiences "stick" best when we bring not just knowledge, but our own truth and experience to the conversation. The type of conversation I am suggesting is risky business in the sense that when we put ourselves "out on a limb," mistakes will be made, feelings can be hurt, and positions may inevitably need to be re-directed and corrected--even if that corrective trajectory reaches farther in the future than we envision. Dangerous, yes. But, I think opportunities for real education are worth the risks. How did I come to a place of partiality for "risky conversations?"

My own rough, street-wise childhood taught me to observe everything around me carefully; to assess present threats/concerns and size-up what is really happening underneath the surface of any given conversation. Where I grew up, the dangers of not trusting my own instincts could have grave, unforgiving and intractable consequences. But, as much as I trust my gut instinct, life has also taught me that I can be wrong. Having begun my teaching career later in life, I often found myself asking, “How do I use these skills in an organic discussion setting that will benefit the whole academic learning process?” And, more importantly, how will this discussion make us all better human beings?

Early on in my teaching career, I had to re-teach myself to trust my instincts. What I discovered was that those life skills learned on the streets and in the course of my life can work for me in the classroom. Why? Allowing myself to move freely with what I see happening around me organically shifts the classroom zeitgeist from a theoretical, abstract reality to a more organically-real, shared reality--achieving a deeper level of honesty. *Contributive-learners* (aka *co-learners*, aka students) respect and even desire the level of honesty I am suggesting. Even when discussions don't work out as planned, co-learners respect my honest regrets and my apologies. In the meantime, whether the discussion was a “once-in-a-lifetime” hit or a “write-off,” I am still modeling a paradigm that is teaching them to trust their instincts and go with the organic, sacred moment. Hopefully, I am also modeling humility.

I realize there is a great deal of valid concern over co-learning gathering safeness. Perhaps I view it differently than some of my colleagues. In my experience, safeness has nothing to do with the subject matter at hand. But rather, safeness is primarily about our respect for the sacredness of how we handle the conversation. With social norms changing at a rapid pace, especially in the current political climate, I am discovering that people are afraid to talk honestly with one another, although many, including myself at times, are willing to talk *at* one another. This type of climate only promotes isolationism, binary position taking, and *we/they* attitudes. Education is about people learning from each other. How can we learn if we cannot talk with one another honestly? Obviously, we can't. But, back to the danger. What if it goes too far?

More than once in our discussions, co-learners have taken their polemic too far and hurt another person's feelings. At that point, if another co-learner does not stop the process, I stop the conversation and I do a check. Together as a group, we take two deep breaths and have a moment of silence. I then ask if we are still committed to the values of truth-seeking, mutual respect and the sacredness of the moment we are in?\* Invariably, the person who crossed the line apologizes for their inability to express their thoughts without getting personal. Also, and this always surprises me, the offended person sometimes apologizes for taking it too personally. I encourage the group to share any thoughts about the process and then ask if we are ready to go further in the conversation or come back at another time?

In many of our Native American traditions, we have a prayer that goes something like, “have pity/understanding on me Creator and remember I am just a human being.” The idea behind this prayer is that perfection is the enemy of attainment. We are all simply human beings,

imperfect, but learning from our mistakes. Those mistakes make us human. And, being human, by “climbing out on a limb” in order to reach others, is the most spiritual state of being in which we may find ourselves. I wish I could say I have these sacred moments in every co-learning gathering, I do not. But, I do encourage those moments through risky honest conversations. And when those special moments come, the whole room feels like we have experienced something together that is truly sacred. Perhaps promoting knowledge among my co-learners in an atmosphere of sacred space, is the most important role I have as a scholar and a spiritual leader.

\*This exercise requires pre-teaching and mutual commitment to the process.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/04/tough-conversations-safety-and-making-mistakes-in-sacred-space/>