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I'm Not Moving, You Move!

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Blog Series: Teaching and Traumatic Events

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Interrupting Institutional Patterns of Trauma (Non)Response

Moving is difficult. In the past twenty years, I've moved fifteen times and I am in the middle of another move right now. Some moves were by choice and others due to unexpected circumstances. Moving is laborious—packing, reimagining space, anticipated and unanticipated expenses, unpacking, broken pieces of cherished material items, revisiting old stuff, exposing the insides of a home to anyone who offers to help at a time when one needs a lot of help, communicating address changes, responding to the questions that arise: now why are you moving? In the academic life, moving takes valuable time away from research and good teaching, service and self-care, thinking and writing.

At least three times at three very different parts of my life, I have been offered the opportunity to move when faced with a potentially traumatic set of circumstances. Someone in the building is threatening? You can move to another building. Something happened that violated the safety of your placement? You can move to another placement. Something in your classroom is disruptive to your teaching? You can move to another classroom. The subtext is often “deal with it or move, nothing is going to change here.” And I have found myself responding on a visceral level: *I'm Not Moving, You Move!*

I've also seen this response given to colleagues and students. Institution is toxic? Go back on

the job market or switch schools. Toxic roommate? Move to a different dorm. Toxic work environment? Move to a different floor. Internship is not holding up its part of the bargain and supervisor not supervising? Switch internship placements. Instructor made an inappropriate comment that made a student uncomfortable? Move the student to another section. The subtext remains “deal with it or move, nothing is going to change here.” And still, I hear that visceral voice: *I’m Not Moving, You Move!*

Moving in order to leave a toxic situation can be life-saving and should not be minimized. In my pastoral care classes, for example, I teach students to partner with local domestic violence shelters to know whom to call to help future parishioners, clients, and colleagues be ready to leave (seminary doesn’t train pastors for this, so they need to partner). The underreported statistics are clear: every institution has some history or current instances of violence and, as a leader, you are identified as a safe or unsafe person to consult for help.

Sometimes students can’t believe that it can take an average of seven attempts to leave a dangerous relationship of intimate partner violence. Sometimes students say, why can’t *they* just move? Survivors in the community know the answer: moving is difficult and intertwined with all kinds of complexities. Moving itself can be life or death. At worst, immovability advocates don’t just tell more vulnerable persons with the least moving expense resources to move, they say, “move or die.” In one of the *FaithTrust* training videos, an interviewee who left an intimate partner violence relationship and was the pastor’s wife, said that she could have stayed, but then she’d be a dead pastor’s wife.[1] Moving can be life itself, but who is asked to move?

From an interpersonal to a systemic view, why do systems foist all the moving on the more structurally vulnerable party, often requiring nothing of the system? Again, we know the answer--moving is difficult. According to Sarah Ahmed’s research on complaints in higher education around harassment and diversity-related infractions, it is the nature of institutions to put up brick walls where they don’t want to or can’t imagine moving.[2] All the packing, unpacking, exposing, digging up old things, hidden expenses, phone calls to change over all the bills, address changes, explaining the move--in the best of cases, it’s a lot. In more dire situations, it can be so emotionally draining to move. Why can’t the system take on more moving responsibilities? Why can’t the toxicity makers be made to move so that everyone can live in a less toxic environment?

Someone in the building is threatening? Make the building community safer. Revisit policies, revising and setting up new accountabilities. Something potentially threatening is happening in your placement? Take the placement off the list for now and rethink training, supervision practices, and accountabilities for placement supervisors. Something in your classroom is disruptive? Increase reporting and responding channels so that the classroom supports learning and thriving. Instructor made an inappropriate comment that made a student uncomfortable? Believe the student and move the instructor, providing training and counseling for all parties. Use the policies in place for this situation or create them.

Somedays I think I never want to move again. I don't want anything else to break by accident. I don't want to fill out another mail forwarding request and hope I remember to move everything over to a new address, finding out months later what I forgot or not finding out at all. You'd think I'd have all this down by now, but moving is exhausting. I have experiences of having been asked to move without any movement on the part of anyone else who could have moved and helped the situation immensely. Other times, it's clear that I am part of a system that rewards immovability and I must remember the importance of moving together and then move. But I do like the experience of having moved because having moved can restore and create possibilities for new life.

Where in your life, work, and institution can you see needs for such restoration? Where in your institution are more minoritized or more vulnerable community members being asked to move and change while the system remains unchanged? What can you do to influence systemic change to flip the script: *You shouldn't have to do all the moving, I'll move too?*

[1] See www.faithtrustinstitute.org

[2] Ahmed, Sara, *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2018/07/im-not-moving-you-move/>