



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## **Belonging- At Least a Little Bit**

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Blog Series: Notes From The Field

September 05, 2018

Tags: anti-racism | student learning | code-switching | student support

Belonging is a yearning of the soul. Our life's quest is often about finding the place, purpose or persons to which or to whom we belong. We need to feel at home; we yearn to feel accepted, swaddled by our relationships. We want to experience being part of something bigger than our finite, individual, selves. The experience of belonging makes us keenly aware of the connectional-joy of humanness. Equally, the experience of alienation, of having no place to call home, of being deemed inferior, is a profound experience of dehumanization and is soul dampening. Twenty-first century racism would have minoritized people believe that we are "welcome," only then to be immersed in experiences of disrespect, disregard and hatred. At best, this creates a psychic quandary for us. At worst, this harm is debilitating to our ability to teach and to learn. The magnitude of the need to belong necessitates a pedagogical priority, especially in those white schools with minoritized persons on faculty, on staff and in the student body.

The seminary where I am on faculty is located in a very affluent New Jersey suburb. The town is a bedroom community for executives and corporate giants of Manhattan. Consequently, we enjoy clean streets, splendid restaurants, a preponderance of shopping, great theatre, and a world-class jazz club. Also, consequently, is the existence of a clear two-tier caste society: those who live here and those who come to work as cashiers, waitresses, nannies, elder care worker, gardeners and secretaries. I, due to faculty housing, live in this town. Typically, the

workers who come to town are African-American and Latinx. The residents are typically white. I am routinely treated by fellow residents, as well as by commuter workers, as if I do not belong here. I am African-American living in this affluent county – an embodied oxymoron, at best. I pay taxes here, vote here, work here, but, from the gaze of the racist eyeball, I do not belong here.... I've lived here for twenty years.

Recently, I was having breakfast at the local diner with our dean, Javier Viera. Dean Viera, born in Puerto Rico, is fluent in Spanish. When the waitress came to our table to take our order, she was, as she always is, pleasant, and, in retrospect, sad. I did not notice her sadness until it morphed into a smile. What made her smile was when Javier greeted her in Spanish and ordered his breakfast in Spanish. When Dean Viera spoke to her in Spanish it both surprised and delighted her. Her face lit up like a Christmas tree. At his speaking, she went from an almost invisible presence to a woman of dignity. This drastic shift happened when she was spoken to in a language which signaled her belonging – or more accurately, her shift happened when she received the signal that she was not alone, not alien. The Dean could have ordered in English. I did. Instead, in that moment he chose a language which invited the waitress to know a little bit of who his people are, what his allegiances are, and the kind of man he is. In this moment of belonging, he code-switched.

A few years ago, I drove into the school parking lot and whipped into a space designated for faculty. I literally parked in front of the sign that read “Reserved for Faculty.” Distracted by my own thoughts, I got out of my car, opened the back door to get my briefcase and bags, then shut both car doors. Still distracted as I walked, I headed up the path to the seminary building, intending to go straight to class. Joe (not his name) was a facilities staff person whose job it was to place temporary signs around campus for upcoming events. Joe had worked at the school longer than I had and by that time I had been there for more than ten years. Joe, seeing me park in faculty parking, stopped hammering a signpost near the space where I parked. He shouted over to me, “You can’t park there.” In Black woman fashion, I decided I did not want to be bothered, this day, with this kind of #\$\$@##. Without replying or acknowledging him in any way (ignoring is a Black woman survival strategy), I kept walking. Joe raised his volume and shouted in my direction, “That’s for faculty. YOU can’t park there.” As I entered the building I looked over my shoulder to see that the sign-man had left his assigned task, walked over to my car and was inspecting the parking tag in my car window. I suspect Sign-man was surprised when my tag read “Faculty.” Even when I “belong,” Sign-man, on the lowest tier of the hierarchy, believes he can police me and tell me that I do not belong. WTH! \$%###!

Though my enthusiasm at the start of any fall semester wanes, my clarity of purpose sharpens. At the end of the orientation worship service I position myself in the hallway. As the new students leave the chapel, I ferret-out the new African American and African students, shake their hands, read their name tags aloud. I ask in which degree program they are enrolled and inquire about their fall course selection. While doing this, I keep an eye on the stairway. If it looks like a student who I have not spoken with is going down the stairs, I, in true old-Black-church-woman style, snap my fingers to get his/her attention, then wave them over to me. As I

corral each student, I use Black church gestures and tones telling them, *don't wait for trouble, then decide to come find me; come sit in my office soon and we will get acquainted*. I tell them to email me and we will have coffee or lunch - soon. I want them from their first day to know, at least a little bit, that they are not alone in this place. I tell them that the protocols and practices of respect, decency, and regard of Black church culture are, with their presence, operative and that I am a representative of our shared culture. I want them to know that this school has something of merit to offer them if they can just figure out how to extract the best and leave the rest. I want my gesture to signal to them my availability to help with this leg of their holy journey. I tell them, I, like the other old women of our church tradition, in any given moment, can reach in and down to my DD-located-coin-purse for a piece of money, a freshly pressed handkerchief, a peppermint candy or a straight edge.

For me, the importance of this gesture is like what our dean did for the waitress. Or, more importantly, an antidote for when, not if, the sign-man speaks to them on our campus. I am trying to communicate, in the midst of all the hollow rhetoric of "welcome," that they belong in our school because our people have fought and won the right for us to be in this place. I code-switch. I code-switch in ear-shot of the public to signal to the African and African-American students, at least a little bit, that their racial/cultural identity is part of this place and that their/our expressions of religion, faith, values and community are here, at least a little bit.

It does not take Jim/Jane Crow era signs reading "Whites Only" at the water fountains and bathrooms to make people of color feel unwelcomed. Strategies of hatred and alienation are maintained in the DNA of the institution as well as by the sign-posters on payroll. By now, I have been at my desk long enough to have a modicum of authority, some institutional voice, and can exercise some mother's-milk-given moxie. At this stage, I possess less fear of reprisal or sabotage and more orneriness. My orneriness is one of the gifts of having survived into crone-hood; it is a gift from the ancestors, a pay-off of having earned the distinction of full professorship and being near retirement. As a person who has earned influence and power in this profession, I feel it my obligation to use this cachet to tell Black students that they belong and then to work until it happens.

This year, after my practice of greeting all the students of the African diaspora, I made my way to the foyer for the buffet lunch. I was joined in the que by a tenure-track faculty colleague who is Korean. A new student came up to my colleague and, in greeting each other, they spoke in Korean. After the brief exchange, my colleague introduced me to the student in English. I was glad my colleague also understands the necessity of code-switching to assist Korean students in feeling that they belong, at least a little bit. Later that week, the same colleague and I went to dinner. We chose a sushi restaurant. The maître d' greeted us at the restaurant entrance, then sat us at a table. He took my friend's drink order in Korean and mine in English. Once the man left the table side - I playfully feigned insult and asked my friend why the maître d' had not spoken to me in Korean. My friend tipped his head forward and, looking at me over his glasses, smiled. The truth telling of his culturally familiar gesture made me laugh out loud.

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