



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Applaud Wildly for Work Well Done

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Blog Series: Notes From The Field

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The power of affirmation lies in the acknowledgement of a job well done.

When colleagues applaud our success, we feel more a part of the enterprise, more connected, and more accepted. Being affirmed is being seen, noticed, made visible in erasing workplaces where so much of our work feels like it goes unnoticed or simply taken for granted. Feelings of isolation and separation are lightened with applause.

Recently, I facilitated a workshop on teamwork and collaboration for a group of women who work as administrative assistants for a large corporation. For the most part, they feel unappreciated and under-valued. I led them in an activity which was intended to spark appreciation amongst them. I divided them into pairs and instructed each pair to interview the other. The interviewee was to share two of her recent successes at work. Then the roles were switched. When it came time to report back, each pair member was told to tell the entire group one of the interviewee's successes for which the entire group would then applaud wildly. I gave the instructions and asked if there were any questions. One woman commented that if we applaud too loudly security might come. I told her we would risk it. The group quickly divided into pairs and began the conversations.

After a bit, I reconvened the group and asked the first pair to report. I reminded the group to

get ready to applaud for each person. The first woman told of her partner's success. I began applauding and the group members joined in. With each success story, I extended the applause and added a cheer and called out the woman's name. The group followed suit. Smiles appeared on each face, and the woman being applauded sat up a little straighter in her chair and smiled-a little bit. By the time we finished, the energy in the room was vibrant. It was an affirmation fest!

At the end of the last session, as our benediction, we repeated the exercise. Rather than being interviewed, each woman told of an accomplishment she had in the last week or so. Without prompting, the women applauded wildly for each other. Security did not come. I encouraged the women to find ways to routinely inquire about each other's professional successes as well as personal accomplishments. I ended the session, gathered my belongings, and opened the door to leave. A senior executive was standing in the hallway. He looked surprised when the door opened. He commented, without smiling or making eye contact, in a chastising tone, "You all are very raucous." I said, "We most certainly are," as I walked past him without stopping.

The postal service was still the preferred mode of communication for important documents when I was working on my dissertation. I had sent my advisor a draft of two chapters. When the mail was delivered to our home, there was a thick, thick envelope. I looked at the address label. The huge envelope was for me, from my advisor. My heart sank. I was mortified. Why was the package sooo thick? I assumed that she did not like my work and had included the paperwork needed for me to withdraw from the program. I assumed she hated my work and wrote, in many pages, to inform me of my inadequacy. My fears paralyzed me. I left the package unopened for a day-too afraid to open it.

Finally-after having driven my family crazy with my whining and self-criticism-I opened the package. Much to my surprise, relief, and delight, my advisor had so thoroughly read my work that her comments, affirmations, and edits were two pages for every one page I had written. My advisor had done the closest read I had ever received on my work. Her extensive comments were on the ways I could continue to strengthen already sound chapters. Her affirmation reduced me to tears. What she thought of my work meant the world to me. Hearing that my work was good and could be made better was a life-changing experience. Knowing that she poured over my work, considered my assertions, and resonated with my argument, made me take my own thoughts more seriously. It made me want to write better, deeper, more clearly. She had sent me a package of affirmation.

When I was in elementary school, on report card day, my brother and I received \$1 for every A, 50 cents for every B, nothing for a C, and we owed our parents for anything lower than a C. My parents were not paying us for the grades we made. They were affirming us, in a very tangible and pleasant way, for our hard work. They were teaching us that our good grades needed to be celebrated. They wanted us to know that our good grades were noticed and that our good grades were a point of pride. After we were paid by my father, my brother would ask to go to the store so he could spend his bounty. I, more frugal, put mine in the log cabin bank on my dresser. I was planning on buying a blue Ford Mustang on my 16th birthday.

Our faculty has a ritual which has been quite meaningful for me when it was been my turn, and for which I love to participate for others. At faculty meetings, when someone is tenured and promoted, we read aloud excerpts of the letter sent to the Trustee Board. The excerpts extol the value of the work by the celebrated colleague. The excerpts make reference to their successes and accomplishments, and proclaim the good efforts of the colleague. Once the words are spoken, the colleague receives thunderous applause and the entire faculty lifts champagne glasses and toasts the colleague for a job well done. It is an elegant gesture. It is a moment when the collected body affirms the individual for the contribution made for the flourishing of the whole. It is a lovely moment.

Performance, per se, is not the world I know. Beyond third grade, I have never taken a bow with other cast members of a play; I have never bowed after performing with a band or choir. What I have experienced is, after giving a scholarly paper at a guild meeting, noticing the decibels of applause after my paper. In those moments, I am appreciative of the applause. If/when the applause seems to linger, even a bit, I am especially pleased that the audience signals their affirmation of my work. It is a small thing, but it sustains me, lifts me; there is no applause after writing a book.

A challenge of teaching adult students is that they want to be affirmed for what they already know. When the desire for affirmation is at the expense of openness to learning, this is not applause worthy. Refusing to learn, yet still wanting applause, can be disconcerting to the hopeful teacher. I recently survived end-of-the-semester student presentations. For the students who engaged the assignment, worked at exploring new materials, and created a meaningful and feasible project, I gave strong and clear affirmation. For at least three students I clapped loudly, uproariously, gladly. For the students who presented half-baked projects which lacked thoughtfulness and made me, at times, question my vocational choices, I did not give negative words of criticism. I instead sat in silence, withholding the anticipated affirmation. Students seemed confused when their paltry presentations did not garner the expected affirmation. I am disappointed when they choose to opt-out of working hard in a course they have enrolled in under their own volition. I am amazed when they are confused about not getting affirmation for poor work.

Here's the thing about applause. It is a gracious and generous gesture which is needed by us all. It is not to be squandered or provided disingenuously. It is not to be demanded for lazy efforts. The sound of applause and the feeling it conjures is that for which so many of us yearn. This yearning is not selfish or grandiose. It is a heartfelt desire to do work that counts, to do work that is meaningful and held in high regard by our peers and elders. The applause of a single human being is of great consequence.

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