



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## **My Big, Scary Move! ... toward freedom**

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse

January 01, 2020

Tags: teaching | learning | discernment

With the possible exception of Drew University Theological School where I was on faculty for twenty years, the Wabash Center has been the most influential institution to my vocational formation. I participated in my first Wabash workshop in 2000 and received my first grant in 2001. Since then, I have worked as a consultant, workshop/colloquy leader, blogger, and committee member. For twenty years, I have been a stalwart fan of the Center's important mission. I have regularly traveled to and from Crawfordsville, Indiana – but never thinking, in my wildest dreams, that one day I would call C-ville home.

Peering out of the van windows as I was being comfortably driven to and from the Indianapolis airport, the sight of confederate flags made me uneasy. I have noticed on many occasions the gun racks and guns in the pick-up trucks parked in the drug store parking lot. Like many towns in America, racial/ethnic diversity is still a contested issue in Crawfordsville. The Wabash Center staff has learned to be conscious of the racist climate and prejudicial views of some members of the Crawfordsville community, and they make every effort to limit negative interactions and foster hospitable space for participants when we leave the campus and venture into the town. The generous hospitality of the Wabash Center always seemed to overshadow the backdrop of its location in small town middle America. However, visiting, even regularly, is quite different from taking up residence. I have become a resident of 47933!

How did this happen?

The Tuesday before Thanksgiving 2018, my phone rang. When I answered, my enthusiastic colleague informed me that the position of director for the Wabash Center had been posted. The friend was calling to encourage me to apply for the position. I asked smugly, "Is the Center going to still be in Crawfordsville, Indiana?" With the response of yes, I changed the subject. I had no interest in living in a small, rural town in Indiana. The call ended with my friend asking me to consider applying and me saying, unequivocally – no! Over the next weeks, my rigid response gave way to a full-blown process of vocational discernment.

During the weeks, I quickly learned, again, that vocational discernment is not for the weak hearted, cowardly, or those who give a hasty "no."

As I pondered the possibility of the move, the new job, the new responsibility, the new reality, many people, trying to assure me that I should consider the position, reminded me that the most stressful times in life are divorce, death of a loved one, and moving across country. I cannot say I was grateful for the data.

My discernment churned deeply – unearthing unfamiliar, difficult, and at times exhausting, questions. To lighten the burden of the challenging discernment process, I turned to read the masters. In this instance, the masters I read for guidance, wisdom, and strength were Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison. When you put Maya Angelou in conversation with Toni Morrison – you get inspiration and more to the point – you get trouble. In my case, tectonic plate shifting trouble!

Toni Morrison spoke first as I wrestled with whether or not to make application for the job of director of the Wabash Center. Morrison spoke to me directly, personally, through her novel *Home*. In the novel, after the character Cee has gone through a long regimen of prescribed healing, Miss Ethel talks to her about freedom ...

*Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed your own land. You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world.*

As I reflected upon Morrison's lesson, I was confident I had accomplished a modicum of the work of freedom in my 57 years on the planet and in my womanist approach to teaching. Yet, in considering if I should make application to the post at Wabash, I was being asked to do it again, some more, but deeper and with more tenacity. I was haunted in my discernment by the notion of re-locating and getting re-acquainted with my inside free person. I did the work of conversation, meditation, and prayer; she found me. This time she informed me that we were moving to Crawfordsville, Indiana.

I cannot say exactly when in this discernment and transition that Maya Angelou reached out to

me and joined the conversation – but she did. Through her poem entitled “On the Pulse of Morning,” Dr. Angelou spoke into me to...

*Give birth again  
To the dream....  
Each new hour holds new chances  
For new beginnings.  
Do not be wedded to forever  
To fear, yoked eternally  
To brutishness.  
The horizon leans forward,  
Offering you space to place new steps of change.  
Here, on the pulse of this fine day  
You may have the courage  
To look up and out upon me,  
The rock, the river, the tree, your country.....*

In my big scary move toward freedom in, of all places, Crawfordsville, Indiana, I am placing new steps of change, giving birth again, and eager for the pulse of the fine day. I have moved to Crawfordsville, and, so far – I like it very much.

I am not suggesting that anyone else uproot their lives and move to unfamiliar spaces. I am bearing witness to my experience from which I have learned that the work we are about as teachers committed to being free people and committed to the work of freeing others has chasms, demands, and opportunities which, regardless of how long you have done this work – will surprise and disorient. I am learning anew that the work of freedom requires new-fangled excavations, renewed explorations, and new ideas about old thoughts for the doing of good in the world. I’m thinking about buying a pick-up truck.

To say that I tumbled into Crawfordsville is an understatement. Like most cross-country moves, there was stress, distress, decision fatigue and *moments* of utter confusion. As well, there were experiences of family, friends, and strangers helping in my uprooting and successful replanting. I am soundly in this new place, in this new job, in this new phase of freedom and free-ness, of being free and of teaching freedom in new ways. I am especially grateful for new friends, and new fictive kin who are helping me get oriented, set-up and settled in. My big scary move was met by folks with large hearts and willing hands of compassion and care.

The Wabash Center will be celebrating twenty-five years of service in 2020 - at the same moment I am assuming the position of Director. I am humbled and glad to be part of the staff in this celebration. My blogging will continue under the moniker *Teaching on the Pulse* as homage to my wise-ones, Morrison and Angelou. In my blogs, I will keep you updated on the work of the Wabash Center as well as provide my observations and testimony to the goings-on in the religion academy and world.

I am pleased that the Lilly Endowment, Inc (our exclusive funder) will be conducting a year-

long program assessment. This program evaluation will allow us to dream about future directions and foci of the Wabash Center. During the year of assessment, our programming will not be curtailed. Also, the staff and I are adding a few items to the program planning for which I am focusing. I will be convening a group of senior African American women colleagues to write a second volume of the anthology *Being Black/Teaching Black*. This second volume, written in creative non-fiction, will focus on the ways the cultural, intellectual, racial, and spiritual formation of African American women shaped their classroom teaching. We are partnering with the Malcolm X Institute on the Wabash College campus to celebrate their fifty years of service. This blog will keep you informed as we move forward with assessment, the typical programs, and these new initiatives.

Loosing my free person from inside me has begun in Crawfordsville, Indiana and at the Wabash Center!

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/01/my-big-scary-move-toward-freedom/>