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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



“Yes”

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Those of you with kids, or those of you who have simply been spending way too much time on your Netflix account since the pandemic began (no judgement!), may have heard of the movie called *Yes Day*, released in 2021 and starring Jennifer Garner. The premise of this film, based upon a book of the same name, is simple: “A sunny family of five agrees to a day where a mother and father must consent to whatever the kids want in this broad Netflix comedy” (*NY Times* review). The parents will say “yes” to their kids’ wildest requests (after a few ground rules have been established) for a whole day—a welcome reprieve to a life normally filled with “no.” As a parent myself, I find it an interesting, if not somewhat terrifying, idea. As an educator, I am reminded of a more serious possibility, one that Margaret Price, who is an OSU English professor, disability studies scholar, and author of the book *Mad at School*, raised in a recent talk.

In “Everyday Survival and Collective Accountability,” Price shares the experience (recounted to her in a research interview) of an instructor with a disability who needs the temperature of her classroom to be less than 80 degrees or she experiences numbness, dizziness, nausea, and eventually, fainting and seizures. One day, this instructor arrived to find her classroom “stiflingly hot.” Fortunately, she was able to find the building manager and asked him to turn

the temperature down. And “the building manager just did it,” which surprised Price. She goes on:

The thing that really struck me about this story is how simple the actions required were, and how incredible, how incredibly rare it is to have someone simply believe you when you say “Hey, I need something.” This is an interesting thought experiment to practice if you want to kind of try out one of these over the next few days. Stay alert for expressions of need that might be shared with you and imagine what would happen if you simply said “Okay,” instead of saying, “Well, why do you need to miss class?” or “Why is that the particular software that you need,” or “Say more about why this would be the optimal decision.” And, again, I’m not saying we all should, like, this is not a radical “yes to everything” improv kind of proposition. I’m much too uptight for that. It’s more of just a thought experiment. What would happen if someone told you they needed something, and you just said, “I believe you”?

Many of us academics are trained in a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” We are known for our sharp critical thinking skills. We are taught to interrogate, to question, to analyze, to require evidence. Being humble is hard for us. Jumping quickly to critique is much more comfortable. But do these dispositions, these impulses, these habits, interfere with our ability to believe, to empathize, to care—to recognize the real, complex, imperfect human beings in front of us? Who is harmed when we are skeptical or distrustful? Who do we alienate or exclude? Who refrains from coming to us, from sharing their stories with us, from asking us for our help? While Price was focusing on faculty with disabilities in her talk because this is the population she studies (and identifies with), the same point could be made about colleagues of ours with other identity markers, and also about the students in our—virtual or in-person—religion courses.

Higher education creates barriers and inhospitable conditions for many students—a veritable landscape of “nope” for far too many. The disclosure process for students with disabilities, for example, can be expensive, cumbersome, intimidating, embarrassing, and, sometimes, just not worth it. First-generation students have a heck of a time figuring out the “hidden curriculum.” Students of color face “stereotype threat” and have to worry about a “sense of belonging,” not to mention more serious issues. Despite advances from movements like #metoo, women still don’t come forward to report experiences of sexual harassment and assault because of a fear of not being believed, a fear of having to “prove” the trauma and relive it all over again, a fear of backlash and negative consequences. And, of course, identities intersect and experiences of marginalization, discrimination, microaggression, and oppression compound. I have heard these stories, and more, from undergraduates in my own religion courses, even at a university that ostensibly cares about “diversity.” In many ways, our educational institutions are like life as usual for the family in *Yes Day*.

Yet I imagine a different way—a more open and charitable and flexible orientation—would be

especially beneficial for these students, while, of course, benefiting everyone.

A few weeks ago, I checked in with my students in my upper-level race and religion seminar—something I like to do every so often, in class or online, to express care. I asked, simply, “How are you doing?” The biggest (i.e., most common) responses in the word cloud were “tired” and “stressed.” Students are exhausted, overwhelmed, and anxious (like a lot of faculty I know!). Even worse, though, was that they told me I am the only one of their professors asking how they are doing, asking what I can do to help them. All semester long, students have contacted me about missing class because they’re sick or attending funerals, asking if they can leave early for doctors’ appointments or job interviews, turning in the wrong kind of assignment because they misunderstood the instructions, and more. The Emily of two years ago would have found these requests exasperating, eyeroll-inducing. Excuses! Mediocrity! Laziness! Entitlement! The pandemic has radically shifted my thinking about these moments. I hope this lesson remains with me.

What if we simply believed our students (not to mention our colleagues)? What if we simply cared about them, first and foremost, as human beings? What if we didn’t require doctor’s notes or other forms of evidence to make them have to work to prove they’re having a hard time, *on top of the hard time they’re already having*? What if we just granted deadline extensions, what if we just allowed re-do’s, what if just we cancelled class when it was obvious that everyone needed a break? What if we conveyed, in a wide variety of ways, that we trust them, that we recognize their lives are hard (right now, sure, but also, for some students, all the time), that we value them? What if we said “yes” to them—not for a day, as in the movie, but every day, for a semester, all the time, as a matter of default or principle?

To be sure, *Yes Day* is fictional and its antics seem to have resulted in “cartoon-style chaos” and, at best, lukewarm critical reception. And, of course, when applied to the college classroom, we may have considerations and worries that go beyond glitter-filled Mom makeovers (e.g., but what about our beloved “rigor”?) Like Price, however, I encourage us to engage in the thought experiment, even if just for fun. What could a “yes” approach look or feel like in our religion classrooms? What possibilities exist? How could it improve the learning experience, especially of those from underserved populations? How could it transform our interactions with students, our teaching, our own experiences as an instructor?

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2022/02/yes/>