WABASH CENTER
For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Say Something

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It's a heavy time at our university. The pandemic is still with us (a funny/not-funny tweet I read recently said, "i didn't realize 2020 was gonna be a trilogy"). Within the first few weeks of class, I had six students from my Religion and Pop Culture class out with COVID symptoms or positive diagnoses; there are only 17 of them enrolled. Throughout the semester, they have emailed me with health updates, how they're feeling, when they're getting tested, what the test results were. I myself got sick at the start of the semester and had to cancel the first day of class and hold the next two online.

Worse, if possible, there was a shooting on a college campus just a few miles from us, at the beginning of February, resulting in the deaths of two beloved campus safety officers; this is a college always considered one of the safest places to attend, in a town always considered one of the safest places to live. Many of our students, as well as faculty, hail from the surrounding areas, so this event affected our community deeply. And then, just a few weeks later, there were two suicides on our campus. Information was scarce, privacy protected. The administration sent out emails of support, with urls and phone numbers for crisis hotlines, but nothing seemed like enough. Faculty and students were struggling, are struggling still. Mental health issues are on the rise. We are not all trained counselors. Nobody is equipped.

Life isn't stopping.

But there is something we can do. We can acknowledge the difficulties, the events, the overwhelm. We can give them a name. We can convey our shared humanity. We can create space for processing. We can say something. This seems so basic, but it is crucial.

After the Bridgewater College shootings, I came to class and told my students I was really sad about what had happened. I said it felt utterly stupid to me to be trying to talk about the definitions of pop culture (our topic for the day), in light of the tragedy. I opened up space for them to share any feelings or reactions. Many students chose to talk. They said they felt scared. They said the event brought up memories and connections to other shootings, other trauma in their young lives. They said they were left with a "it can happen anywhere, it can happen here, to us, to me" sense.

I then led them through a gratitude exercise. (Gratitude, as a practice, has been shown to increase happiness.) I asked them to write down what they were grateful for having in their lives. I told them about a quotation that struck me many years ago: What if you woke up tomorrow with only what you were grateful for today? I encouraged them, if any people appeared on their list, to let those people know. As the shootings show, you never know what can happen.

Later, a student told me I was the only one of her *six* professors who had said anything about the incident. The only one.

I imagine, of course, there could be many reasons for such silence. It could be that folks didn't know what to say or how to say it. It could be that they felt awkward. It could be that they didn't want to make things worse or cause harm. It could be that they didn't know, or want to presume, what students needed in that moment. It could be that they didn't want to get too personal, especially if this was out of character for them or the learning environment. It could be that the lesson plan for the day didn't seem to allow time to detour. It could also be that they themselves were feeling traumatized. It could be that this event was indistinguishable from other shootings on or around campuses (like what happened near Virginia Tech just recently), or the other acts of violence in other spaces, that continue to happen on a regular basis. It could be that they have reached a point of compassion fatigue, a numbness that has been settling over us all because of the terrible things that keep happening and our inability to cope with it all. I understand all of these hesitations. It's hard to know what to do and difficult.

But I still think we have to say something. Even if it is imperfect, halting, awkward, uncomfortable, uncertain. It's similar to the way social justice educators recommend we handle microaggressions in class (e.g., here and here). Don't let the incident pass in silence, in avoidance, in complicity. Silence is damaging. It itself communicates something and that something, I worry, is: nothing of note happened; I don't care about you all as whole humans, only the topic or lesson at hand; people died and it didn't matter. There are a lot of moments in class where we can acknowledge and honor our students' humanity, and our own. When terrible events, like shootings or suicides happen, these are moments to stop, to slow down, and to say something.

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