WABASH CENTER
For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Paying Attention

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One of the cruel ironies of teaching in Atlanta is that the so-called fall semester always begins in the damp-flames-of-hell climate that is August in Georgia. But this morning, as I sit with my coffee on my back porch, I recognize the halting, modest signs that a proper fall may arrive after all, despite all evidence to the contrary. I see a few yellow leaves drifting to the grass from the weeping cherry tree. Likewise, I notice the tip top of the Japanese maple tree is hinting at its fall purple-red glory. The air, while still sticky, carries a whisper of crispness. I could sit here for a while, if I can just slow my mind and let my senses help me pay attention to the world.

Embodiment *should* come easily to me. I am a practical theologian whose specialization is the relationship between theology, education, and ecology. This intersection can hardly be imagined absent a strong commitment to embodiment, to the ways in which we understand our bodies to inhabit particular places and relate to other bodies; to see, to breathe, to taste, to hear, and to touch. In honoring the body's knowledge, we name its vulnerability, and the ways in which we are tied to the vulnerability of other bodies.[1]

I have tried to counter false narratives that would suggest that a real academic somehow transcends her embodied self. I have developed practices to help ground me in my heart and body, and when I'm able to commit to these practices, everything else seems to flow: my research, my teaching, even those administrative tasks.

Easier said than done, though. In our institutions of higher education, serious inquiry has been conflated with dispassionate objectivity, learning with the cognitive work of recalling and interpreting.[2] We might even struggle to recognize the needs and honor the knowledge of our own bodies, as individual scholars and human beings.[3] Speaking for myself, I might spend hours crouching at my computer, loathe to break my supposed focus. With high hopes, I might have scheduled a workout or a walk with the dogs for later in the afternoon, only to abandon those plans when it seems I do not have time. I might eat breakfast and lunch at my desk.

Now, after two years of remote work and learning, I think the question of embodiment is insisting itself to us in new and powerful ways. I think we begin to find our way toward an answer by first looking within.

How do you begin your day? Environmental education scholar Mitchell Thomashow writes, "Consider two different ways of greeting the day. You can step outdoors wherever you may be in order to feel the temperature, wind conditions, light, sounds, and smells, or whatever visceral impressions fill your senses. Or you can immediately glance at your phone to check your messages, email, or whatever virtual information gets you oriented."[4]

On good days, I might begin the workday at my writing desk at home, which faces out a window, and quietly work on research and writing projects for an hour before the rest of the family awakens. Sometimes I might check in online with some colleagues who also arise early to write before turning to our other daily tasks. It's a tiny act of resistance to the culture of accelerated and sometimes frenetic work demanded by the pressures facing so many of our institutions.[5]

But more often than I would like to admit, I start my day by checking my institutional email on my smart phone before my feet even hit the floor. It's a seemingly small thing, but the net result is that, from the start, my mind is in a reactive state. I respond to every demand, every email, every knock on my door, with little sense of purpose or vision. I end the day exhausted, my eyes and shoulders strained, with seemingly little satisfaction to show for it.

This way of being is not sustainable, of course. And as orientation approached this fall, I was confronted in a new and urgent way with the limitations of approaching my work without mental and emotional intentionality. Even deeper, I was confronted with the poverty of the life of the mind absent a steady, trusting, and grounding practice that honors my own body's knowledge.

Thanks to a benign but persistent virus that took up residence in my inner ear in August, I found myself unable to be in crowded spaces, to process complex visual or aural stimulation, to look at my computer screen, or even read without becoming very dizzy. I would clench my jaw and "power through" whatever task was before me, practically racing back to my office to close my eyes—no fluorescents, please!—or rest my head on my desk until the next thing. I barely got my syllabus revised and was grateful for a colleague who volunteered to build my course website for me. To my surprise, though, I could work in the yard, walk the dogs, and

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even do yoga with little difficulty. The body that found itself queasy and unsteady after just twenty minutes of looking at my computer screen was calmed and centered by these practices that grounded me in sensory experience, slowed my mind, and allowed room to reflect, think, and be present. Embodied practices that I once had perhaps too eagerly broadcast as a countercultural "choice" became a necessity and a source of salvation.

As I write this, episodes of dizziness and disorientation are, happily and as expected, becoming less frequent and less severe. Yet I am clinging to a reordered pattern for the morning, landing me here, on my porch, greeting the day with all of my senses, watching the leaves turn and listening to a chorus of birds and bugs.

There is so much to do, it's true. But might you also find a place to pay attention to the world, and your body's place in it? A place where you could sit, just for a while?

[1] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso Books, 2004), 26-27.

[2] Furthermore, the ways in which learning is structured in so many of our institutions reveal a disembodied "implicit curriculum" observable in how our classrooms are arranged, the kinds of assignments we make, and the reduction of embodied exercises and classroom breaks to reluctant "accommodations" we make so that the mind can continue the work of learning, unencumbered by the inconvenient needs of the human body. See Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs* (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 97.

[3] It is, of course, important to acknowledge that "embodiment" has historically carried additional risks for too many scholars and students in institutions with unexamined racist, sexist, and heteronormative assumptions. See, for example, Carol B. Duncan, "Visible/Invisible: Teaching Popular Culture and the Vulgar Body in Black Religious Studies," in *Being Black, Teaching Black: Politics and Pedagogy in Religious Studies*, edited by Nancy Lynne Westfield (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 3-15.

[4] Mitchell Thomashow, *To Know the World: A New Vision for Environmental Learning* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020), 75.

[5] Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, "Introduction," in *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 1-15.

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