



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Calm and Routine Might Be a Sign of Impending Conflict

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

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What is happening in the world is happening to each of us.

On May 3, 2023, Dr. Vivek Murthy, United States Surgeon General, released an advisory calling attention to the public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection between people in our country. Disconnection fundamentally affects mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual health. Even before the COVID-19 quarantine, approximately half of the U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness and isolation. Since the quarantine, we can imagine the sharp increase in isolation and fear. We, students/faculty/administrators, are part of this affected demographic.

Newspapers, in small towns and major cities, provided news that fed democracy and linked people overwhelmed by otherness and isolation. In the recent past, print, and digital news provided a “watchdog” service aimed at holding our civic institutions accountable. The newspaper industry has reported a period of immense disruption and financial distress leaving news deserts across the country. Public service journalism that spotlighted the major issues confronting communities has shrunk. This leaves residents without the information they need to discuss and to solve their problems. Whether delivered over the internet, airwaves or in print, the lack of vitality in local news coverage exacerbates our feelings of isolation.

Our loneliness is further compounded by the dichotomized assumptions promoted through social media. People depend upon memes, soundbites, and social media threads for facts, storylines, and information on complicated issues. Students/faculty/administrators, like the public, are immersed in social media culture. The rhetoric of “us versus them” has saturated our thinking and has become a presumed framework of discourse.

The barrage of loss, hatreds, separation, grief, and rhetoric of division is affecting us – all of us.

We are living in an extended and deepening national moment of blaming, clinched fists, gritted teeth, and suspicion for people beyond our chosen tribes, beyond our chosen communities, beyond those people with whom we agree and have chosen political affinity. There is growing suspicion of difference. There is a feeling that “the other shoe is about to drop,” without knowing when or what the shoe will be.

Here is the strangeness. While the country becomes more polarized and less informed - our daily lives and routines are relatively unchanged. How can it be – business as usual?

Our everydayness continues relatively unscathed. We shop in the same grocery store. Go to the same big box stores. Perform the activities of employment. Participate in the same schools, churches, and mosques. Use the same online streaming services. While we suffer from profound loneliness, our everydayness has not changed much.

We are simultaneously uninterrupted and fractured.

Division and social upheaval are smoldering while we operate in the relative customary school year start. School has begun. Teachers/students/administrators are re-convening with the same rituals, rites, and routines as always. Syllabi have been distributed. Lessons have begun. Committee meetings are back in swing. At-a-glance, we look fine. Yet, fear and uncertainty are palpable.

We must be aware that loneliness, fear, and isolation tend to manifest, not where it is easily seen in our daily activities, but in our interior spaces. Our fears are performed in relationships. Our isolation becomes apparent when we are with one another. Our trouble, pain, and turmoil are witnessed when we are working together and with others.

The start of school makes us vulnerable to seeing and being seen. We are, when we gather-back, reconstituting our relationships while we are knee deep in our loneliness. Our relationships expose our fears, isolation and mental unwellness. Conflicts will soon arise. My caution is that, given the effects of the wider political climate, the veneer of calm and routine will soon dissipate. Are your classrooms ready for conflict?

The most vulnerable people are those who bring diversity and difference into the faculty/student body/administration. For those faculties and student bodies who have, recently or over a very long period, accepted the challenge of diversity – this is potentially a very troubled moment for teaching. Diversity (race, class, political, gender, nationality, creed) is

precisely what is not tolerated in the growing USA climate and yet diversity is what is needed to move us away from isolation and toward conversation, toward peace, toward community.

The lack of tangible conflict, or the absence of specific dispute, does not mean that institutional fissures are not forming along the lines of diversity. Unaltered routines, unexamined practices, and undiscerning leadership will miss the hushed emerging crisis in community. Do not wait until difference turns into intolerance, vindictiveness, expressions of hatred, and war to invite your school into meaningful conversations.

There are no recipes, formulas, or roadmaps for this brittle moment. Your school must engage its own communities as they are unique in the world and as you live together in this uncharted malaise.

Gladly, there are some big ideas to which we can attend to help us make sense of the places where you teach and learn. Now, during the beginning of the semester, find ways to collectively reflect upon these kinds of questions in anticipation of conflict:

- What are the consequences of difference?
- What are the effects of difference?
- What meaningful project can we work on together?
- What sustains us through conflict?
- What is a good conflict and how are disputes processed with fairness, justice, and for maturity of community?

Consider facilitating these kinds of habits and practices in your school or in your classroom:

- acknowledge the diversity and celebrate it;
- make the community aware of the diversities which exist;
- demonstrate how diversity strengthens the mission of community;
- attend to creating cultures of respect and regard for difference;
- create conversation groups across diversity to listen to one another;
- construct institutional processes and protocols before there is conflict;
- create an ombuds position;
- message into the community that difference is a strength and not a weakness;
- design new rituals and rites that support and honor diversity;
- facilitate conversations on the nature of hatred and the detriment of animosity;
- create policies of zero tolerance for hate speech;
- work on practices of solidarity;
- make a communal project of peace, empathy, compassion and forgiveness;
- admire courage and bravery;
- award truth telling;
- create artwork and expressions which honor difference;
- complexify dichotomous thinking;
- find ways for people to work together against divisiveness, objectification, and authoritarian assumptions.

When, not if, the ugly expressions of hatred and entitlement bubble up in your community - be ready. You will not have the luxury of feigning surprise. Conflicts, subtle or violent, will arise along identity fault lines and your institution must be ready so that those targeted by the dispute are not severely hurt, ostracized, or killed.

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