WABASH CENTER
For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

My Greatest Teaching Failure that Became My Best Teaching Moment

Ralph Basui Watkins, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

Blog Series: Embodied Teaching
December 13, 2023
Tags: embodied teaching | Failure | Roots | Silence | Together

My first year at Fuller Theological Seminary, teaching Introduction to Black Theology, I failed myself and my students. I opened the class with a twenty-one minute clip of the most brutal scene from the television mini-series *Roots,* which aired in January of 1977. The clip showed Kunta Kinte, brutally beaten with a whip, being hung from a post while other Africans were made to watch. He was beaten near to death and made to renounce his African name and refer to himself as Toby. With every lash of the whip the students squirmed in their seats. The lights were out in the room, I knew something was happening but I couldn't see, literally and figuratively.

When I cut the lights on after the clip had played, the students were crying. One student got up and ran out of the room, wailing. The clip had traumatized my students. The students were not prepared for the clip. I had not expected this response. I had not prepared them. They were a mess. The classroom was in disarray and I was paralyzed.

I was not prepared to handle this level of emotion. I stood in front of the class stunned, and feeling like an incompetent professor. How did I allow this to happen? Why didn't I know

better and do better? What now? What do I do? I don't know. I stood helpless, in silence as the students wept, wiped their eyes, sniffled and sat. Sat, still yet squirming, and I couldn't move. I looked at them, with no direction or leadership to offer.

No words of comfort.

No instruction.

We sat together.

As we set listening to the sounds of our emotions, there was an eerie feeling that came over the room. A feeling I couldn't name. It was in the silence that we found our way. We wept *together* in this moment. This moment, pregnant with failure, birthed a new beginning. Not the beginning for the class I had anticipated, but something else. We sat in that moment, talked about our feelings. We felt in that moment and it opened a door. A door I didn't see and could not predict.

The door was a new opening to what teaching could be. Teaching could be emotional. The door of the classroom as a space of embodied experiences. Students and professors gather in the sacred space of the classroom not to be taught, but to experience the presence of the Spirit. The classroom is not just a place we experience in our minds. It is a space to be embodied, to be felt in our hearts, our emotions, our cries, our tears our love. Our love for those whose stories we revisit that shape our own.

This is my story; a story I pray I never forget.

What is your story of failure?

A failure that led to a breakthrough.

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2023/12/my-greatest-teaching-failure-that-became-my-best-teaching-moment/

Published by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion
301 West Wabash Ave, Crawfordsville, IN 47933
(765) 361-6047 (800) 655-7177 fax (765) 361-6051
Fully Funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and Located at Wabash College