WABASH CENTER
For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Letters of Gratitude: An Assignment of Healing

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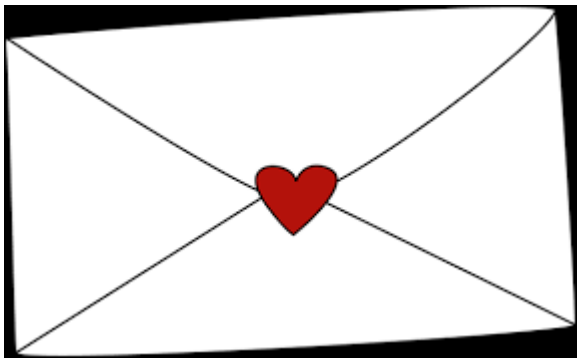
Blog Series: Stories from the Front
March 29, 2016
Tags: liberative pedagogy | transformative teaching | student assignments

So central to my identity is teaching that when I think of the highest honor, the highest appreciation – I think of my gratitude for those who have liberated me through their teaching. I aspire, then, to instill in my students an appreciation for their dearest teachers. I want them to experience the practice of gratefulness as I believe it is a healing practice. When the cold, achy heart feels the warmth of gratitude – that warmth soothes, relaxes, and heals. I want my students to experience gratitude as that experience is a powerful spiritual salve for the wounded heart. Consequently, I have designed a learning activity which encourages the experience of gratefulness for teachers by students.

The assignment is straightforward and elegant. These are my instructions .... (1) Recall a teacher who changed your life. The person might be a professional teacher who you encountered in grade 3 or graduate school. Or, equally acceptable, the person might be your grandmother, your scout leader, your friend. The recall might be focused upon a recent event or it might focus upon a relationship from long ago. The relationship might have lasted for years and years, or the relationship might have been a week or two. Recall a person who taught you deeply and well. (2) Sit with this memory. Let the memory take full flower in your

mind. Linger with the memory so that it is vivid. (3) Using the categories of liberation as described by Dr. Anne Streaty Wimberly in her book *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Abingdon Press,1994, 2005), name, describe and reflect upon the ways your teacher liberated you. (4) As your analysis and reflection deepens and takes shape, write a letter of gratitude, in first person, to your teacher articulating (in the theological and pedagogical language of our class) the liberation you experienced. Your letter of gratitude should be 5 to 7 pages double spaced, with citations from our readings and lectures.



Over the years, I have probably read no fewer than 700 letters of gratitude written by my students to teachers. Each batch of letters feels like waves of love. Liberative teaching can be such a powerful change-agent in the lives of students that when students express their awareness and appreciation - the written word becomes electric. The letters are love letters – healing for the heart for those with gratitude as well as those ingratiated.

A few years ago I added a new dimension to the assignment. Out of all the letters I receive in any given class, I select a sampling of letters to be read aloud in class by the author of the letter. I want students to hear their own voices when in tones of gratitude. During the readings, fellow students hear the analysis of good teaching by peers, and the readings also infuse our classroom with the teeming energetic vibration of gratitude and gratefulness.

Students will often cry as they read their letters. It is, I have been told, a revelation, to speak your deep gratefulness aloud in front of witnesses. The intimacy of liberation is revealed.

I encourage students to mail their love letters to their teachers. If the teacher has died, I encourage students to find a ritual way to honor the teacher – light a candle, grow still and quiet, read the letter aloud prayerfully as if your teacher is present …. and wait.

Every now and then, a student will tell me that there has been no one in their lives for whom this kind of letter might be possible. They report that there is no teacher who is deserving of such gratitude or whose efforts warrant heartfelt gratefulness. I tell them to take more time in recollection. If they return still without focus – I tell them to take more time in recollection because without such a relationship I doubt if they can ever be a transformative teacher for someone else.

I know some students have written letters of fiction – letters to people who they wish had been

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301 West Wabash Ave, Crawfordsville, IN 47933
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Fully Funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and Located at Wabash College

in their lives. I am glad they found a way to get at the work, even in their own imaginations. This gives me hope. Only once have I had a student choose to submit no letter because there was no one to write to or imagine. I still pray for this man.

I encourage all of us to write a long, thoughtful, heartfelt letter of gratitude to the teacher who liberated us (follow the directions above). Then, mail the letter.

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2016/03/letters-of-gratitude-an-assignment-of-healing/

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