



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## God Cannot Be Learned

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

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

December 22, 2015

Tags: student empowerment | teaching for transformation | teaching with the arts

God is unknowable. So, the things of God cannot be learned – they must be revealed.

What does it mean to teach our students to wait for the revelation, to be aware of the revelation, to find joy in the revelation, to trust in the revelation? In what ways might students be better taught to recognize the ubiquitous and concealed revelation? In teaching that which cannot be learned, what is the role of imagination and wonder?

Fortunately, many beloved teachers have journeyed with me throughout my lifetime. Two dear professors are Jack Seymour and Maria Harris. I met Jack in Nashville, Tennessee while in graduate school. He taught a course whose content miraculously realigned my way of thinking and knowing. In other words, it healed me. The course was Ministry and Imagination. In the course we read the novel, *The Clan of the Cave Bear* by Jean M. Auel. This novel is a beautiful story which transports the reader to the dawn of modern human beings and makes privy the lives of peoples who call themselves The Clan of the Cave Bear. Many course sessions were spent discussing the world created by Jean Auel. The final assignment was to think of our own tradition as an unexplored universe, a new world, and in so doing, take a new kind of

expedition into that world using imagination as a tool of meaning making. New doors of thinking about identity, culture, and relationships were opened by the time I completed this assignment. Rather than taking the usual analytical scalpel and pick-axe to look at issues of church and society, Jack challenged us to use our storytelling abilities and artistry to discover what we already knew, but which was yet to be understood. Jack taught me that imagination was not supplementary to ministry, but essential if liberation, transformation and revelation were to be.

I first met Dr. Harris as a professor in a continuing education program in New York City. I enrolled in her course on imagination and ministry. I have vivid memories of paying as much attention to how Maria taught as I did to the content of her teaching. I remember admiring her audacity of presence and brazen-ness of speech. She so boldly spoke of God in a way that felt genuine, sturdy, and intimate - all while she was whirling around the room providing life-giving energies. She gave large, deep, and profound answers to questions which, from my hearing, were small and insignificant. She had the patience of a Sufi master. Maria's answers were bedazzled with quotes from literature, contemporary politics and ancient philosophy. She provided layers and layers of meaning - all seeming to flow through her from a mighty river or a distant star. She, in her freedom, gave to us generously, brilliantly and lovingly.

Under the guise of imagination, Maria Harris taught me about God. In so doing she said, "Mystery is not that about which you cannot know anything; mystery is that about which you cannot know everything." God is unknowable, mysterious... but glimpse-able. You must wait for the revelation - the profound glimpse of God.

On the fourth day of our intensive course Dr. Harris took the class by public transportation to the Cloisters Museum and Gardens in northern Manhattan. We



we were instructed to bring a sketch pad and pencils. Once at the museum, she encouraged us to look around and get acquainted. After a time, she gathered us back and gave these instructions. She said, find some artifact which speaks to you. Once it speaks to you - consider that as an invitation to sketch it. Sit with the artifact; sketch it so you will come to better know it. Then, she went on, set the sketch aside, linger with the object, and if you have been a hospitable guest, the object will speak to you about important things. She ended her instructions with this command, "Listen deeply." That day I learned that the common, everyday ways of humanity can be tools for mystical encounters of grace and mercy - for those who know how to listen deeply.

Since then, like all teachers, I teach what I know and how I know it. It just so happens that, thanks to Jack and Maria, I know some of the ways of imagination and wonder. It has been my pleasure to teach a course entitled Ministry and Imagination seven times over the last sixteen years. Along with students and with many different co-teachers, I have learned, grown, and had mighty-good fun. Together, we have grappled with that which cannot be learned, but shall be realized.

*This is the 10th post in this series by Nancy Lynne Westfield this semester (Fall 2015).*

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2015/12/god-cannot-be-learned/>