



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Learning on the Fly: First of 2 Thoughts

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

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Phil Salter, a current student and muse of this Blog, in describing himself as a seminarian, said, "I am learning on the fly." Intrigued by this notion, I have been thinkalating ... Habakkuk has come to mind....Recorded in Habakkuk (v. 2 & 3

Recorded in Habakkuk (v. 2 & 3), *"Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay."*

Suppose a growing number of seminary students are best described as skilled runners who are attempting to read our etched vision tablets as they sprint through the experience known as seminary? When I design a course it is for students who are planning on lingering with me for a time - not moments, but years. I have the expectation that my students and I will gather - a kind of banding together (like Earth, Wind and Fire or Sweet Honey in the Rock). I have worked on my facility for gathering and hospitality as I see this mode of teaching as a sacramental experience. Problematically, if students are *learning on the fly*, there is no

gathering, no banding, no welcoming of the stranger. Our encounter will be only moments, mere seconds, a breath or two - in the scheme of time. If they are *learning on the fly*, then I must change my perspective of teaching in rather dramatic ways. What is the wise, biblical/theological metaphor which might guide this kind of relationship between teacher and learner?

My hunch is that this would be more than shifting from models of cloistered education to the accommodation of commuter students. For *learning on the fly*, the effectiveness of our time together would depend upon my ability to translate the vision into only a few significant, meaningful symbols and eloquent images which conform to the immediacy of the moment and comply with the limited space of the tablet. Our job would be to make the message recognizable and decipherable in the time/space which, from the runners' perspective, is realistically meager/scarce. And, most importantly, which would sustain the runners' life and give them hope in the journey of ministry. I am halted by the precision of artistry seemingly necessary in this challenge.

*Learning on the fly* will require teachers to have the ability to record the vision in large pica --- in billboard clarity for students will not have time for, or intension of, mulling it over. I would need to shift to a new awareness that the Word (singular) was made flesh and not my usual interpretation that the Words (plural) were made flesh. There could no longer be an over-complication of message. The priority of the teaching moment would be simple, elegant and straightforward. Learners would be in need of, deserving of, desirous for, a glimpse of a tablet that can be seen from a far, and then seen better in the approach, then, vivid close up because the vision will have to sustain them for their larger curriculum, i.e. life, vocation - the holy spiritual journey.

If teaching brings center the scribing of the vision for the learner, then roles and responsibilities will need to be rethought. In my tradition, the ones who would write the vision inhabit the role of the preacher, the prophet and the priest. The role of the teacher is not anchored in the giving of the vision. What would it mean to employ the functions, perspectives, identities, and abilities of the preacher, the prophet and the priest in the role and responsibility of the teacher?

Here's the rub - heretofore, I have made a conscious effort not to lay claim to the proclamation



of the vision in my classrooms. I have recoiled from students' response of "...that will preach, Doc!!" when they feel resonance with certain materials. In these instances, I have thought my students to be on the verge of contracting or conflating critical materials into non-critical troupes. I have thought their requests for simplified messaging to be derivative and contrived. My aim has been to guide my students toward my version of exploring the deep, and have, heretofore, disdained translating the deep into what I would call monotony, homogeneity or simplicity.

Perhaps, in my efforts to strengthen my students, I have created an experience of convolution - a kind of Whack-A-Mole of ideas. *Learning on the fly* asks that the vision be revealed rather than shards parsed out over time.

*This is the 6th post in this series by Nancy Lynne Westfield this semester (Fall 2015).*

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2015/10/learning-on-the-fly-first-of-2-thoughts/>