



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Don't Lift the Pot Lids!

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When you are a teenager, at least in the 70's, the house with abundant food and a loving mother was the place to gather. Our house had both. Unlike all the other mothers in the neighborhood, Nancy Bullock Westfield was a stay-at-home mom. Consequently, homemade meals, fresh baked everything, and gallons of iced tea was our joy.

One afternoon, I was sitting at the kitchen table talking with my mother. Brent, my brother, bounced into the kitchen accompanied by six friends. Having just won a pick-up basketball game, the boys were hungry for snacks and wanted to play video games in our basement. I knew all but one of the friends. Brent introduced the new guy - Sid. Kenny, my play brother, helped himself to the ice tea container in the refrigerator. He got drinking glasses for all the boys. Sid glanced around the kitchen, and then eyed the pots on the stove. The cauldrons, I'm sure, promised him something delicious with their wafting delicious smells. Sid walked past Kenny, who was by now passing around full glasses of sweet tea, and toward the stove.

Then it happened - it was simultaneous and instantaneous - in slow motion, like a bad action film.



When Sid got to the stove, he lifted a lid on one of the pots, peered inside and smiled at what he saw. A HUSH! fell over the kitchen - everyone instantly froze. Sid, with pot lid in hand, turned and looked over his right shoulder - confused by the abrupt silence. Both my brother and Kenny hurled themselves at Sid. Kenny got to Sid first - grabbed Sid, which startled the pot lid out of his hand and onto the floor (Help us Jesus!). My brother, still in motion, was screaming, "Man, What Is Wrong With You!" In mid-air, seeing that Kenny had hold of Sid, my brother changed directions trying, in vain, to catch the pot lid.

While Brent and Kenny were dancing with Sid and the pot lid, the other boys stampeded, with full tea glasses in hand, fleeing to the refuge of the basement. My brother scooped the pot lid from the floor, tossed it to me like a Frisbee, grabbed a bag of chips and a plate of sliced ginger bread and he, Kenny and Sid were down the stairs, in one- fell-swoop.

In African-American, southern culture, all are welcome to eat, drink and be satisfied, BUT!, it is the height of disrespect and disregard to lift a pot lid. Clearly, Sid did not know this. Sid felt welcomed, at home, and free - because he was. However, being welcomed, at home and free does not mean there are no rules, no protocols or no boundaries which must be honored. Sid's offense was his misplaced, presumptuous familiarity.

Students come into our classrooms and, rightfully, feel welcomed and free. All classrooms have formal and informal protocols which are expected to be honored. All teachers have personal sensitivities about classroom decorum and comportment for which students must also be aware. The "Sids" of our classrooms too often presume the rules of our classrooms are the same as the rules which govern their own homes, their personal neighborhoods or their local churches.

Articulated rules and protocols are needed most in classrooms which make use of dialogue as routine learning activities. While clear learning goals and objects shape and direct the dialogue, care must be taken to establish and maintain the rules of engagement to keep critical conversations from being hijacked or derailed. Inevitably, dialogue brings to the foreground the complexity that is human interaction. Dialogue, invariably brings some measure of conflict, clash or disagreement - mild or violent.

From experience we know that dialogue can lure students into the need to defend and protect their pre-formed opinions, un-explored biases, and micro-aggressions. As well, dialogue can render students vulnerable to the assaults of the opinionated and the un-informed peer. Conversation, unchecked, can privilege the bold personality, those who thrive upon competition and leave little room for silence of thought or whispers of insight. Discussion can leave students more closed minded than when they entered the discussion.

And so I ask: By whose rules will the critical conversations flourish? Is monitoring for racial/cultural faux pas, micro-aggressions or downright rude behavior a mutually shared responsibility (like with Sid)? Whose voice is stymied or lost when it is assumed that all conversations follow the protocols of white, patriarchy? If/when an offense happens, how is forgiveness enacted? Is an ethic of respect passé in 21st century adult classrooms?

This is the 5th post in this series by Nancy Lynne Westfield this semester (Fall 2015).

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2015/10/dont-lift-the-pot-lids/>