

May 2012

Teaching as Ministering

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Recommended Citation

Ricca, Bernard (2012) "Teaching as Ministering," *Verbum*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 21.
Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol9/iss2/21>

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Teaching as Ministering

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"It is sometimes said that we live in violent times, or in a violent world. While it is undoubtedly true that there is much violence in the world, and even overt violence in our schools, it is also true that there is a more subtle violence that permeates our schools. This violence calls for not just teaching, but ministering, and in doing so, provides a lens through which to look at teaching and teachers."



Dr. Bernard Ricca

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It is sometimes said that we live in violent times, or in a violent world. While it is undoubtedly true that there is much violence in the world, and even overt violence in our schools, it is also true that there is a more subtle violence that permeates our schools. This violence calls for not just teaching, but ministering, and in doing so, provides a lens through which to look at teaching and teachers.

Violence in Schools

A *schola* was, at one time, a place of study where

Students [were] supposed to be in the exceptional situation that allows them to reflect on themselves and their society under the guidance of competent teachers. They have set aside a certain amount of time in their lives to look explicitly at their own conditions and at the condition of the world in which they live in the hope of being better able to understand and act accordingly. (Nouwen, 1971. p. 4)

This sort of “exceptional situation” does not seem to apply to modern day K-12 schools or to modern day colleges. K-12 schooling is compulsory, not exceptional. Even college attendance cannot be considered “exceptional” even though less than one-quarter of adults will earn a bachelor’s degree. Further, if a survey about the purposes of schools were given to almost any group of people - adults or children - it is unlikely that reflecting on one’s self would rank high in the frequency of responses. Schools are certainly different than what Nouwen presented.

Such changes are not necessarily a bad thing by themselves. However, when we look at what has replaced reflection and explicit looks at “the condition of the world,” we may see some disturbing events: For many, schools are a place of violence. The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, commonly known as the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) Act, has heightened the pressure for all students to pass standardized tests, and has raised the stakes for the teachers of those students. As the curriculum has become more focused on test outcomes, the further disconnect of the curriculum from the lives of the students, and the resulting alienation, have contributed to students being one person outside of class and a different person inside of class. In this way, more and more students suffer from some version of *double consciousness* (DuBois, 1903). Competition for jobs or places in the next higher educational level often means that the success of one student must come at the expense of another student. This competition can even show up in classroom discussions: Instead of listening to colleagues and seeking to understand what is being shared, many discussions consist of attempts to impose one’s ideas on the group. In college, many students must make difficult choices between time for working and time for studying, and students still accrue a large college loan debt despite their best efforts. Through it all, a functioning adult is supposed to be constructed from a young child along the lines of Dr. Frankenstein’s monster, out of pieces assembled from different origins, all under the guise of some knowing doctor of curriculum. All of these situations, and many others, are a form of violence, as they separate students from themselves.

Teachers are immune neither from either the effects of this violence nor from spreading this violence. Teachers

spend a great deal of time just getting things “under control”, lest the classroom erupt into overt chaos. Further, Peter Ramus, in the 16th century provided “an organizational chart of his approach to the organization of curriculum, thus ‘methodizing’ (and indeed universalizing) that which had previously been quite personal” (Doll, 2012, p. 9). Teachers still labor under this type of organization of curriculum, and largely are taught how to implement this impersonal curriculum, using such devices as *lesson plans*, *unit plans*, *standardized assessments*, and so on. Teachers are called upon to implement this carefully constructed curriculum, and to do so almost without regard to the actual needs of the students in their classrooms. (Even calls to “differentiate instruction” are usually made as an addition to the basics of teaching rather than being at the foundation of teaching.) Even the way that teachers refer to themselves often reflects this impersonal approach: Teachers say “I teach math” (or any other subject) much more often than they say “I teach students”.

Teaching as Ministering

While an exact definition of “ministry” or “minister” is beyond the scope of this piece, any understanding of minister probably includes the roles of healer, peacemaker, and the like. Hence, and this is the important piece of ministry here, those subjected to violence require ministry. Hence, the situation of subtle, pervasive violence in schools calls all of us, but especially teachers, into the roles of peacemaker and healer. In other words, teachers in today’s schools must be ministers, and so it is appropriate to look at teaching as ministry.

Teachers as ministers

Nouwen claims that “[p]erhaps we have paid too much attention to the content of teaching without realizing that the teaching relationship is the most important factor in the ministry of teaching” (1971, p. 5). Teachers, and teacher educators, spend a great deal of time and energy on many aspects of teaching. Rarely, however, is much time or energy spent explicitly examining the relationships between teachers and students, despite its importance. The standards that are applied to teachers do not say anything about student-teacher relationships, except to provide legal boundaries for such relationships. Hence, a quick look at the teacher certification programs here at Fisher really does not find anything about student-teacher relationships in any of the course descriptions. (In this way, the Fisher programs are not much different than any other teacher certification program.)

And how are teachers exemplify the “first characteristic of a redemptive teacher-student relationship...to evoke in the other his [sic] respective potentials and make them available to each other” (Nouwen, 1971, p. 12)? There exist some explicit examinations of the relationships that are at the basis of teaching as ministry. Parker Palmer (2007) shares his own reflections on teaching and the “inner landscape” of teaching; a thorough exploration of that landscape is necessary for building relationships with students. Jayne Fleener (2002) takes this exploration even further, connecting *heart* to *curriculum*. In her view of curriculum, the product embodies the process, and curriculum must therefore start with heart to be non-violent. The purpose of planning is *not* to produce a better lesson plan for the teacher to deliver to students, but instead the purpose of planning is to create a safe space in which students and teachers can explore together. It is only in such safe spaces that a sort of academic healing can begin, where students can put themselves and each other back together, and where the important parts of their lives do not have to be kept compartmentalized.

Writing in the journal *Complicity*, Seltzer-Kelly et al. (2011), and the commentaries that follow them, explore some of the issues that underlie safe classroom spaces and what may happen in their absence. While not explicitly working from a ministry frame of reference, the themes that are examined - the unintentional alienation of students, (dis-)connections between school and life, competition, relationships, etc. - are precisely those that Nouwen (1971) calls us to examine. The authors start from an autobiographical view, putting into action many of the things that Palmer (2007) points out and finding (sometimes) both peace and healing. Seltzer-Kelly et al. and several of the commentaries explicitly address student-teacher relationships and the larger system in which students and teachers find themselves.

Mercy

A view of teaching as ministering requires teachers to be more than just a peacemaker or healer for our students, however: Teachers must be intentional and systemic about their approach. Seymour Sarason (1993) complained about the traditional Hollywood depiction of heroic teachers in films such as *Dead Poets Society*, *Stand and Deliver*,

or *Mr. Holland's Opus*. Seymour's complaint is that these films show how a great teacher can benefit some students *while leaving the educational system unchanged*. As Uri Triesman (2011) said: "It is not right that your success should depend upon the accident of my presence." These calls remind us that ministry is not only about individual relationships, but also about the need or systemic change.

In cases of violence, this type of system change, in the words of Jon Sobrino (1994), requires us to take the crucified people from the cross. We must see teaching, like all ministering, as having an individual relationship component as well as a system component. Teachers must not only help the students they happen to encounter; teachers must also help to change "the system" so that fewer students are subjected to the subtle violence of the classroom.

And Beyond

Teachers live in a world of "not yet". Rarely do teachers see the ultimate result of their work. Instead, teachers see snapshots of their students, who they are today or at the end of the year, or at graduation. This is because, like ministers, teachers work in the lives of their students, and those lives are messy and usually extend far beyond any assignment, course or school. As such, there is no real conclusion to be had in the present examination, no tidy summary of what has been said, only more questions and further reflection.

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