

SESSION

4

Welcome

SESSION 4: WELCOME

Extract from *Catching Fire*

One of the most compelling features of the early Christian communities was their sense of mutuality and genuine welcome to all. Hospitality and generosity go hand in hand, and certainly these early communities had a long and deep tradition of welcome in the Jewish scriptures. 'Welcoming the stranger' was rewarded beyond measure in the great stories of the Hebrew scriptures, such as Abraham and Sara. In the gospels, Jesus' open welcome to all, including society's strangers – the tax collectors and sinners, women and the sick – challenged the very structure of society.

It is noteworthy that the great spiritual documents in Western civilization all give priority to this most fundamental of things – welcome. It is acknowledgement that the practice of respectful attentiveness in these small moments of human encounter develops a habit of gratitude and grace that is a hallmark of the Holy, and the pathway to God.

Today, the practice of welcome is still very challenging for us, because still it is the call to be attentive to the daily encounters we have with other staff, with parents and with children, and at the same time in the wider world to reach out to the marginalized, the sick, the outcast and the hurting.

1. The teacher's calling: "Facing Ourselves Together," by Gloria Durka

... when you come to think about it, you find that one of the two lands of order, the conscious and the unconscious order, only one is real. It's the order in the deep hidden places the true order in the depths....the "still centre."

(Sylvia Ashton-Warner)

The call to teach is embedded in mystery. The more we engage with our student as persons, the more we affirm our own incompleteness. We become more aware of spaces still to be explored, desires still to be uncovered, and possibilities still to be opened. For many of us, our sense of incompleteness is heightened by *how we handle our time and our vulnerability*.

Time. Soon after we first answer our calling to be teachers, we are confronted with the dilemma of how to spend our time. Some of us have learned to hoard time as miser hoards money. There just never seems to be enough time to do what needs to be done. We are faced with making priorities for ourselves: family responsibilities, personal needs, and demands of friendship, professional tasks. Some of us feel the pressure to carefully account for every moment. Is it all right to splurge now and then to spend an afternoon with friends? To take time out to play with our own children? To try out some new recipes? To read a novel or see a play? Those who are time hoarders will recognize these dilemmas. Always lurking in the backs of our minds is the concern about keeping up with our fields of teaching. We may feel forever behind with trying to keep up with professional reading or attending workshops and seminars, and therefore think of ourselves as failing in our duty. There is just so much to do.

Vulnerability. No matter what age group we teach, we are always "on," always exposed to others. We are scrutinized and judged daily by all the students we teach. This can be very draining. We can grow weary of performing, entertaining, stimulating and filling up others' emptiness. We can tire of trying to stimulate, encourage, comfort and discipline our students. But if we open our hearts to the wisdom of experience, we can have fewer

such days. We can come to realize that students must learn and achieve for themselves, not to please their teachers. There will always be those who do not meet our standards, and it takes quite a bit of humility to admit this. Our concern for our students does not excuse us from the obligation to exercise our authority, evaluate student progress and attend to the standards set by the broader community, as well as nurture students in an atmosphere of warmth and understanding. By so doing, teachers rediscover the value of care. We reach back to our own experiences of caring and being cared for, as Nel Noddings writes, we embrace the ideal of nurture through “dialogue, practice and confirmation.” How does this process look?

Dialogue is difficult because it requires rethinking our notion of authority. It does not mean that we surrender it. The teacher cannot pretend to be the same as the student. The teacher is the one who is responsible for designing the environment to make teaching and learning possible. Dialogue requires a conversation between the content or curriculum and the students’ needs. It means allowing their problems and questions to deepen within them and then helping them to express them even if it means that some tension might result. We should not forget that tension can be creative.

Practice implies a climate of hospitality in which genuine conversations can take place. Henri Nouwen complained that the classroom is often an inhospitable place, and he calls for the “creation of a space where students can enter into a fearless communication with each other and allow their respective life experiences to be their primary and most valuable source of growth and maturation.” Students are allowed to ask questions and to think creatively about the content. Perhaps some of us can recall how it felt when we asked a question that was ignored, or when we were told to put our hand down when we were poised to ask a question. While we as teachers have objectives and goals, the students have needs that must be addressed. The burden is on us to prepare our material as well as possible, deliver it as efficiently and creatively as possible, yet be willing to adjust our methods and materials to the unique setting in which we are teaching. We cannot teach the same way year after year. Recall the joke in the question, “Do you have twenty years of experience, or one year of experience repeated twenty times?” Our practice of teaching requires fresh style.

Confirmation is what results from an environment of hospitality in which dialogue is practised. It is cyclic. The stronger and more confident students become, the braver they are to take risks and try things for which they had never had the courage. They can tap their own resources. It is interesting that as the students are confirmed, so are we as teachers. When our students listen to us attentively, give us verbal and nonverbal support or a word of thanks, we are made bolder and we try harder. The song from *The King and I* says it well:

It’s a very old saying

But it’s a true and honest thought

That if you are a teacher

By your students you’ll be taught.

Oscar Hammerstein, “Getting to Know You” (paraphrased)

2. The Real Expression of our Faith by Joan Chittester, and including Scripture passages

The real expression of our faith belief is how we live as community.

Only when our senses are sharpened, to hear and respond to the cries of those hurting and struggling and to see and respond to the plight of the broken, can we claim to be on the same path as the compassionate Christ. (J. Chittister).

Rejoice with others when they rejoice, and be sad with those in sorrow. Give the same consideration to all others alike. As much as possible, and to the utmost of your ability, be at peace with everyone.

Romans 12:15,16a, 18

When we fail to care, it can't be hidden for very long.

When we're not genuine, it's transparent.

(J. Chittister).

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Ephesians 4:2

Make time each day to avoid transparency.

Make time each day to listen and to be with the people whom God has placed you with.

Make time each day to be the face of the compassionate Christ.

(J. Chittister).

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.

1 Peter 3:8