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TEACHERS AS HOPE GENERATORS: DISCOVERING PROFESSION-AS-VOCATION IN A TEACHER EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

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A couple of years ago I wrote a book in Dutch on spirituality and the professional life of the teacher (Roebben 2011). For the German translation I asked my former colleague, the practical theologian Norbert Mette, to write an endorsement. He came up with a full foreword to the book, in which he praised the risky style of my writing (Mette 2016). The book, Mette noted, should be seen as an invitation for readers to step away from the “normal,” generally accepted educational concepts and tools and to engage in another language game, the poetic one, which comes much closer to the story of the original vocation of the teacher. This insight touched on, and deeply affirmed, the reasons I wrote that book, reasons that were to my astonishment at that moment not yet clear to me. Mette was right about my intuition: in the book I wanted to address the person-within-the-teacher, the source of energy that makes the teacher “come alive”¹ and drives him/her in generating hope in the daily encounter with young people.

This semester I was reading the manuscript of the same book with master’s degree students in the Dortmund department of teacher education. And for the first time I became aware of the full impact of the book. A deeper spiritual reflection was leading us in the course work. I realized suddenly and with gradually increasing intensity what it meant to teach a course on teaching as a reflective teacher myself. What made me “come alive”? What was my source of inspiration and vocation? What drove me in my daily work with these particular students, becoming teachers themselves? The act of *phronèsis*, the hermeneutic work of understanding, so typical in an academic context, was shifting into an act of *poèsis*, a performative dis-covering of my own profession as a teacher educator (Walton 2014). I was no longer presenting an “out there” map of the teaching profession as a foreign

¹The *Leitmotiv* for my book comes from Howard Thurman (1899–1981): “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive. And do it, because the world needs people who have *come alive*” (emphasis added).

city to be explored like a tourist; I was entering “in here,” into my teaching as the city in which I live, discovering its complexity, its sorrows and hopes, its avenues and dead ends. This exploration took place together with the students—we were leading each other in the journey.

SENSITIZING STORIES IN THE CLASSROOM

One specific way of performing the journey into reflective teaching was through the mutual exchange of “sensitizing stories”² of profession and vocation. Sensitizing stories are narratives that offer a glimpse of the deeper concerns and motives of the storyteller. In the second part of the article I will present some concrete didactical tools to enhance this process of exchange in the classroom. Looking back on my master’s class as a professor, and looking forward to the Religious Education Association (REA) 2016 conference in Pittsburgh on the same topic (“Generating Hope: The Future of the Teaching Profession in a Globalized World”), I will first define three sensitizing stories that shape my biography as a teacher.³ This biographical narrative remains unfinished, and will always remain open for further interpretation and additional stories. In the storytelling of the human being (and thus of the human teacher!) things are permanently ambivalent, disruptive, and cross-referential.

Hope—Deeply influential during my undergraduate years was the Christian theology of hope of Jürgen Moltmann. The distinction between *futurum* and *adventus*, between the optimistic and futuristic worldview of the seventies and the always surprising act of God’s transcendent coming in a radically different way, shaped my understanding of education. As teachers we can (and we must!) prepare the didactical space for young people and, in doing so, we can help them to create a solid future. But we can never fully enter the holy ground on which the ultimate and intimate encounter between the young person and his/her creator takes place. The vocation of the teacher therefore should be anchored in a habitus of hope and perspective. As a teacher

²After I created this concept, I discovered it was used before by Odo Marquard (1991, 98).

³A similar approach can be found in the *Festschrift* for Siebren Miedema, in which colleagues were invited to describe their professional and spiritual journey in the “making of”—the development and interpretation—of their own religious-educational theories (ter Avest 2012).

I should be “hoping in order to understand” (*spero ut intelligam*) the educational reality. In hoping that something unique can happen in the life of this specific young person, as a teacher I should use my “ordinary” professional competencies and prepare the ground for the “extraordinary” event to come.

Glory—This highly theological concept helped me later in my career to understand the educational act appropriately. The Flemish theologian Edward Schillebeeckx (2005) taught me—elaborating on the idea of Irenaeus of Lyon “Gloria Dei vivens homo”—not only that the living and flourishing person can reveal God’s glory and existence, but also that God finds “glorious” pleasure in that same living and flourishing human being. Consequentially it is up to us, teacher and students alike, to re-create and re-write our stories, to grow in shared humanity, to change our lives in the direction of the common good and to make this world a better place, a place where glory is permeable and enlightens the face of every inhabitant of that world. Can the classroom become already such a place of “glorious” didactics?

Mercy—Parker Palmer has written the following remarkable definition of the teacher: “a person grounded in a profession of faith, faith in the nature of ultimate reality, in the matrix of mercy in which our lives are embedded” (2000, 65). There is no cultural content, no school subject, and no specific course element that can stand on its own and can be isolated from the learner. Knowledge is always relational. The teacher should be aware of this relationship between the subject and the learner and should confess his/her basic trust or “faith” (Paul Tillich) in the ultimate meaningfulness of reality and in the specific way reality is revealed reasonably to the community of learners and to each learner separately. Does the teacher leave space for this event? Is his/her teaching act merciful, healing, and “repairing” (Moore 2004, 187–215) or rather impatient, harsh, or even destroying the goodwill of the learner?

DIDACTICAL STEPS IN THE CLASSROOM

The deeper spiritual layers of the teaching profession cannot be dis-covered simply by telling stories, without didactical mediation. In the master’s seminar several tools were used to enhance the students’ hermeneutical understanding (*phronèsis*) and performative re-enactment (*poèsis*) of their profession-as-vocation. Just in order to catch a glimpse of the didactics behind the seminar three examples are presented briefly.

The students were confronted with the list of characteristics of good classroom organization by the German educationalist Hilbert Meyer (2009), provided earlier to them in a general education course. They were invited to explain to each other—two by two—where their own strengths and weaknesses lie, regarding such matters, to explore how their classroom organization related to the “moral heart of teaching” (Hansen 2001), to the deeper moral and spiritual dimensions they considered to be driving their educational work. A vivid dialogue with an exchange of sensitizing stories took place.

The movie *Dead Poets Society* did leave the students with a deep impression of the chances and boundaries of an intensive pedagogical relationship. The students were well aware of the “burning” passion of leadership necessary to be a good teacher, but also of the danger of “burn out.” Pedagogical ethos is not only about augmenting the motivation of the teacher to do “more” (more love, more passion, more dedication), it is also about making a well-informed discernment to do “less,” to step aside and not to feel inappropriately responsible. In their portfolios several students documented this tension.

Another intriguing discussion emerged when the students discussed the insights of the medieval mystical theologian Meister Eckhart for education (Roebben 2015, 155–158). According to Eckhart, the deepest core of the human being, the soul, cannot be grasped in education, in what a person has learned or imagined. A human person cannot and should not be identified with his or her education. This implies that the teacher needs to open up the learning space for personal storytelling and dealing with images, but he/she cannot decide whether or not a specific idea or representation will be successful in the learner’s mind. The teacher can make a case, but he/she cannot make a person. This strong statement of Eckhart was rather hard to swallow for most of the students, who had chosen the teaching profession as a way to become “change agents” in the lives of children and young people.

In conclusion, one could argue on the one hand that more connection between the spiritual formation of teachers and educational research (on motivation, feedback, organization of content, learning methods, etc.) is needed. On the other hand, more creative and performative tools should be adopted in teacher education in order to understand one’s profession-as-vocation. One thing is crystal clear: sensitizing stories are like mirrors of the soul of the teacher. The final words of this article come from the Australian practical theologian

Terry Veling (1998, 204), telling his intriguing story: “In my own teaching practice, I find myself constantly trying to read the class of which both myself and the students are members. I always come away from a class as if I have just come away from reading yet another intriguing chapter in an intriguing book. Every class is different, and I am continually surprised at the novel twists and turns, questions and responses, stories and reflections that emerge in a time of educational conversation. Each class bears all the marks of a complex and compelling text, one that I am constantly trying to read, feeling for the pulse and beat of the questions, issues, and themes that are circulating among us.” As the program chair of the next REA conference, I invite you to come to Pittsburgh to explore the theme of teachers as hope-generators, and bring your sensitizing stories with you in your backpack!

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