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Bodied Knowledge: Theatre as a Pedagogical Tool for Religious Studies and Theology

Instruction cannot begin with God but must connect to people's experience. And one of the central experiences is that the self's seclusion is broken open.

—Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*

In November 2002, I presented a paper at the American Academy of Religion's National Meeting in Toronto in a session focused on pedagogy. I was the sixth speaker in a seven-person panel. For a panel of so many presenters, it was already a challenge! As I stepped up to the podium, I noticed people dosing off out in the audience. It was time to improvise. I crossed off the "stage" into the sea of chairs and invited the audience of seventy-five people to get on their feet. What? Use my body at an academic conference? That is exactly the point! Body knowledge, embodied knowledge, somatic learning. We did shake outs of our arms and legs, tension releasing movements with the neck and shoulders, stretches and yawns, and even backrubs for one another. What a joy it was to see people smiling, wiggling and giggling in delight, laughing and just enjoying themselves. The energy in the room had palpably changed. Then, I invited volunteers from the audience to create a series of sculptures, physical thematic pictures made using the bodies of several other people (explained below in the context of a class session). After initial hesitancy, adventuresome souls stepped forward. Together, they created with their bodies pictures/sculptures of "religion," "G-O-D," and "Pedagogy." I was struck by how playful the professors were! How energized and focused at the task! How well they worked with one another to let something new happen! If my twenty-minute presentation time had permitted, I would have begun a discussion after each of the sculpted images, particularly the final image of pedagogy, since it was the topic of the panel. How does your idea of "pedagogy" match with the sculpture? What title would you give the sculpture? How would you change the image to better communicate its theme? But the clock was ticking and the seventh panel member was still waiting to present his paper. So I "ascended" the podium again, to read a portion of my paper—"Theatre as Pedagogy in the Religious Studies Classroom." The audience was awake now. They were in their bodies. They could hear me.

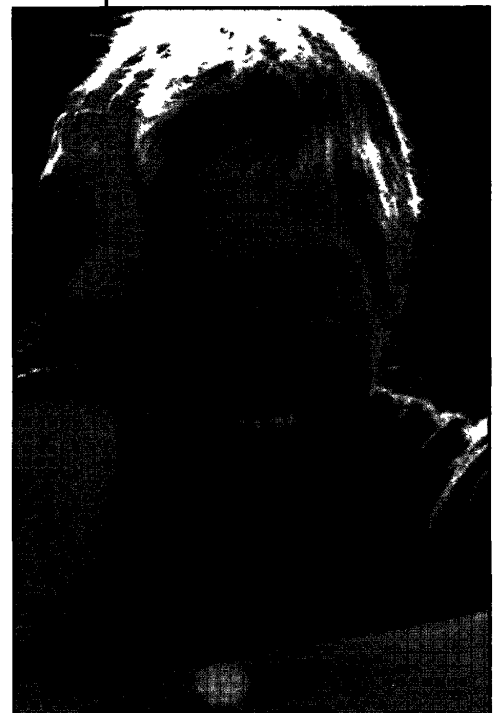
Theatre is all about bodies. Because I am a theatre artist as well as a religious studies professor, teaching works best for me when it is an experience of the mind and body. In the 1980s, when I first encountered feminist theology, I was inspired by its commitment to the primacy of women's bodily experiences. It is through this lens that I connect my theatre-making to teaching religion. During 2001, as a member of the Lilly and Luce Foundations "Teaching in the Global Village," I had the opportunity to share my approaches with many gifted teachers. From them I heard the need for new techniques for a theatre/bodied approach to teaching religious studies.

THE CLASSROOM AND OUR BODIES

As class begins, students know to expect something new. They come hoping for it, actually. This is an introductory course to religious studies. Our intent is to explore to what extent students can enter into the mystery and meaning held within religious experience through empathy and somatic experience. There are some thirty students present. We meet once a week for

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three hours. I find that my approach demands more than the eighty minutes twice-weekly approach of most courses. The room is large and carpeted—easier to move around, work on the floor, create environments.

We push the desks aside and take off our shoes because we are on the “holy ground” of creativity. We immediately begin with exercises that energize the body, which allows all of us to concentrate more fully. These exercises include walking to music/rhythms, walking in slow motion, and games that test listening and visual awareness. I remind the students that there are many ways of “knowing.” We are beginning with our bodies.

As a professor melding disparate disciplines, it has been my experience that when the arts are utilized within courses in the humanities and social sciences, students learn on both cognitive and experiential levels. Pedagogically, the arts are not only tools for communicating in the global arena, they are also models for cooperation, community building, and somatic learning. Thus, I bring to my theatre-related courses my training in social issues and theology, a perspective that makes theatre an ethical and social enterprise. In religious studies programs, on the other hand, I use a blend of teaching modes that include seminar-style student learning and dramatic enactment. Courses I have taught, such as *An Introduction to World Religions*, *Biblical Drama*, *Mysticism*, *Feminist Theologies*, and *Millennial Thinking* have all utilized theatre as an embodied technique for learning.

The class is now awake and ready to work together. As a way of modeling a subsequent exercise, I ask volunteers to create body sculptures. Students form improvised “photographs/sculptures” of one-word themes: earth, sky, family, mother, father, religion, and finally the word “God.” As they join the exercise one at a time, I direct students to link physically to form the sculpture. To depict earth, some students are flat on the ground; another sits on their prostrate bodies holding a student representing a child. Others spread their limbs as trees connecting earth, sky and forest. This exercise demands that students rely on one another physically to form an idea. At the end of all the sculptures, we begin to unpack the images. What do you find compelling about them? What felt untrue to you? Were any images similar to another? Why? They are often surprised by the similarity between the “father” and “God” sculptures—controlling, commanding, suspicious and frequently angry. This exercise stirs up student responses. It’s important to acknowledge all impressions of the sculptures. Students see that multiple interpretations are possible for a simple image.

So far, these exercises have introduced students to the use of their bodies as a “way of knowing,” which assumes the importance of bodily experience and that they can communicate in a classroom without words.

Following from this, we create an exercise that is a variant on the one above, but allows everyone in the class to “make their experience visible” and become witnesses to their own stories. I divide the class into groups of 4 or 5 (six total groups). Each person in each group molds her peers like clay to create a “photograph” of her grandparents’ notion of religion; she then remolds her peers to show her parents’ notion and then her own. There are lively discussions after each picture has been created. What was that image about? What was your mother doing in that image—I wasn’t clear about it, what was going on? Afterwards, each group will select one person’s image to share with the entire class. Once the images are shown to the whole group, I direct the discussion to the purpose of the class: what is religious experience? Did you see it depicted in any of these “pictures?” And off we go.

EMBODYING A TEXT

A week later in our class, after reading *Being Peace*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, I introduce *vipassana*, or mindfulness meditation, as an aspect of religious experience. Students have been instructed to memorize a *gatha* written by Thich Nhat Hanh. “Gathas” are small poems that, when repeated with everyday actions, usher in an awareness of the present moment and our connectedness to other human beings.

Serving Food

In this food,
I see clearly the presence
of the entire universe
supporting my existence.

Brushing Teeth

Brushing my teeth and rinsing my mouth,
I vow to speak purely and lovingly.
When my mouth is fragrant with right speech,
a flower blooms in the garden of my heart.

(Hanh, 1990)

In a mysticism course I taught using this method, a woman student had chosen the *gatha* for washing feet and offered to share it with us in class. "Peace and joy in each toe—my own peace and joy." She sat on the floor, took her shoes off, and began to heartily rub the toes of her feet. Breathing steadily, fully engaged with the sight of her toes, she repeated her *gatha* over and over again. She began to cry, still focusing on her toes. And slowly she began to laugh. All the while, the words of the *gatha* floated like water lilies over her sea of emotions. Afterwards she told us that her feet, particularly her toes, had been broken, sprained, and cut many times in her life. During the *gatha*'s repetition, she experienced the history of her toes. Specificity and universality were held in that present moment.

Another student had chosen a *gatha*, again written by Thich Nhat Hanh, regarding how to view one's hand to feel the convergence of past and future in the present moment.

Who's hand is this?
Who's hand is this that has never died?
Who's hand is this that will yet be born?
Who's hand is this?

But in the enactment, the student forgot to look at her hand when she recited the words. In her nervousness, she also did not allow herself to breathe. I suggested she begin again this time gazing at both hands, breathing and giving voice to the text from what she was actually seeing in her hands. When she repeated the exercise, she used her breath, sight, hand and the text. She was fully engaged, through her body, in the present moment. This time, the student and the text came alive!

In the introductory class, students work in groups in front of the class for the first sessions. With the *gatha* exercise, students present their own *gathas* as individuals in front of the class. The exercise introduces the power of using theater in an academic setting. First, simply being able to memorize a *gatha* is a new challenge. Second, using one's body to express and communicate opens up new levels of understanding of the text and its concepts. Third, students are encouraged to witness their own shyness or resistance as an act of being in the present moment, and fourth, through concentration and experience, students, for a moment, can enter into Hanh's world of "meaning." Following the enactment of the *gathas*, the class engages in a discussion of everyday mindfulness and how it connects to Hanh's ideas of interdependence with the past, present and future.

EMBODYING TEXT AND CHARACTER:

I have worked in the theatre for some twenty years as a theatre director, playwright and teacher. In the course of teaching acting, I began to notice the power in the act of memorization. Words of another hold a piece of that person's identity. Playwright and actress Anna Deavere Smith says it this way: "If you say a word often enough, it becomes you." By memorizing another's words, a meeting of self and other takes place. An actor invites someone else's words into their being and allows her body to discover movement from the words. With constant repetition, the actor both creates and surrenders to her character. The paradox is that the actor is wholly present to herself as well as inhabited by the energies and psyche of another. Grotowski has referred to this as a kind of possession. Perhaps this is too strong a word. There is a fusion, but not obliteration.

Anna Deavere Smith interviewed people involved in the Crown Heights and Los Angeles riots. Two plays were developed using those interviews, "Fires in the Mirror" and "Twilight." I use her approach to language with my students to help them enter into religious experience.

Some people use language as a mask. And some people want to create designed language that appears to reveal them but does not. In our day and age, language is

often a camouflage or cover or even confessional. We rely so much on mass communication. And mass communication controls what gets to us as well. We are very far from the personal, from the one to one conversations—the human touch. Language is a dance between you and the other, it is not meant to camouflage and cover (Smith, 2001).

In my introductory course, at the beginning of the second week together, I invite three students to interview people in their communities. I ask them to listen and observe, to listen carefully to the language of the other. How a person expresses himself in word and gesture is a signature. When thoughts are spoken from the heart, the words and feeling under the words offer the listener an essence of that person. My students are asked to listen not only to form and content but to the spirit contained in the words.

In a recent class, a female student “became” a local shaman she had interviewed. The student memorized the words and enacted the physicality of the shaman. The shaman had answered the question, “what is shamanism?” A second student enacted a local Presbyterian minister who had responded to the question, “what is religion?” A third student embodied a local yoga teacher who had answered the question, “what is spirituality?”

The student who interviewed the shaman reflected afterward:

Speaking with Cathy was by far the most rewarding academic experience I have had at college. I have never had to act out the part of another living human being in a classroom setting before, and I think that enhanced everything that I learned from Cathy. When I listened to her speak, I not only listened to her words, but her body language and just the subtle nuances of who she was on an introductory level. I thoroughly enjoyed the entire process and I feel that this element of the class should be introduced to other classes as well.

From the student who interviewed the Presbyterian minister.

Interviewing Reverend Mike was an experience that I can carry for the rest of my life, and I am glad that I had the opportunity to conduct this interview with such a great guy.

Each student had encountered an essence of the person they had interviewed. The people they interviewed spoke sincerely, from their hearts. They transmitted feeling. The students received it. Each took the words, the physicality, and the undefineable inside themselves. Each then re-presented that person to us in the classroom. In re-presenting the other, the student had to transmit an essence that lives under and in the words. The student found Rev. Mike to be a no-nonsense pastor who didn't mince words and occasionally even swore to get his point across. The student discovered a place in himself that understood and felt Rev. Mike. Through this empathy, feeling with, he was able to enact Rev. Mike's essence. The class was astonished and riveted by such a plain talking minister. They responded to the student “becoming” Rev. Mike. They received it, felt it. They empathized.

Through embodied empathy, the students who re-presented the shaman, minister and yoga teacher touched the religious experience of the people they interviewed. At the same time, through the process of enacting the other, they met new pieces of themselves.

Later in the course, we begin our study of Christianity with an attempt to enter into the religious experience of mystics. My study of mysticism has led me once again to the necessity of using the theatre in teaching. The women mystics of the Middle Ages spoke of God as a sensory experience. “Let Him kiss me with the kiss of His mouth!” cries Teresa of Avila (Rodriguez, 1980). Mechthild of Magdeburg expresses the anguish of desire when she says “God burning with His desire looks upon the soul as a stream in which to cool His ardor” (Brunn, 1989). Mysticism is not a mental encounter with the Divine. It is a full body moment.

In the coursework, students read and discuss the writings of several mystics and scholarly articles providing context and interpretation. They choose a text by a mystic that “speaks” to them. I ask each student to write a biography of the mystic in the first person. Like actors, they explore the intentions of a character they will enact. They memorize the text. I ask them to get inside the words, to discover what is not

being said and what is being said beneath the spoken words. They are also to create an everyday action that will accompany the spoken text. Words and physicalization. One student who had memorized a text by Mechthild of Magdeburg was having trouble choosing an action. I asked her to polish her shoes and to let the action affect the words. This action, possibly something that Mechthild might have done, engaged her body and demanded that she be in the present moment with her shoes and with Mechthild's words. The words emerge from the action. The student wrote me a note about her experience of enacting Mechthild and her poetry:

"The enactment of sacred texts changes us by giving us direct access to the mystical experience itself." Perhaps because this result has been more elusive, I have found it to be all the more transformative. What I am trying to convey are rare moments in which the sacred text ceases to be "the script" and becomes instead direct experience. In these moments, I am granted the exquisite privilege of sharing the mystic's insight, the intensity of his/her merging with the mystery.

CONCLUSION

I act as a pedagogical consultant to colleges and individual professors. At St. Lawrence University in the Religious Studies Department, Kelley Raab utilized several theatre methods in her course on "Christian Heroines." Afterwards, she said "I see this approach as a very feminist technique. Having mainly women in my course, I found these techniques gave women a voice and helped them feel comfortable in experiencing their opinions. They could act out a character, become emotionally involved in it, and really express themselves. These creative exercises balanced research and reading and helped to develop critical thinking skills as well." At the University of the Redlands, Fran Grace taught a course entitled "Religion and Hate." In it she used a mirror exercise she had experienced in a workshop I'd taught for professors. The exercise invites two participants to face one another and maintain eye contact as they "mirror" each other in non-verbal motions and gestures. Fran explains, "We were dealing with the role of religion in race conflicts. I invited the students to do the mirror exercise with someone in class they didn't know. A Black woman paired with a white man. He found it difficult to follow her when it was her turn to lead. They both said it was hard for them to look into the eyes of the other. Basically, they had great difficulty trusting and being in sync. Their honesty coming out of this exercise (which required their BODY to reveal what their mind would not in cognitive or discursive learning) led to a heated and meaningful class discussion about racial difference and fear."

Theatre is a tool, a journey, and a magnifying glass. Through it, students can reimagine their lives and their world.

Teaching students using the body, memorization, enactment, and characterization is an opportunity to witness to the richness and complexity of our lives. In the courses I've described, students study religious experience. Through using theatre as a pedagogical tool, the intellectual art of studying expands outward to include an experience of the self and other. In this way, we begin to touch the mystery and meaning of religion. This is bodied knowledge. ❖

NOTES

Portions of this article appeared first in "Acting Religious: Theatre as a Pedagogical Tool for Religious Studies," *Religious Studies News* (American Academy of Religion, March, 2002).

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