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ACADEMY FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

## Called to Teach: Brief Essays on the Meaning of Teaching

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### Preparing Students for Today

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In Mary Rose O’Reilley’s wonderful little book, *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*, she tells the story of having a student die on her. Nothing like death to put things into perspective. The moral of the story (if O’Reilley’s stories have morals) was not the *carpe diem* associated with “the unexpected death of someone I knew snapped me out of complacency.” The student did not die suddenly and surprisingly, but gradually and with warning. When death meets us like Bob Dylan’s “slow train coming”—close enough to force a response but far away enough to choose that response—we see into a specific set of truths.

O’Reilley’s student, Eileen, was what used to be called “non-traditional.” She was a middle-aged professional pushed by her job to complete a degree to qualify for promotion. And she was required to take O’Reilley’s English class. At some point in the semester, the student learned of her medical condition, and it changed her educational experience. O’Reilley writes,

When she was diagnosed with an incurably advanced lung cancer, she told me, her main response had been to read her English texts over and over. Marketing and finance became less relevant. I was happy that she found John Cheever and Virginia Woolf important; but, for my part, I had to ask myself whether Eileen had gotten, in

English class, anything she needed to face the fundamental questions of her existence.<sup>1</sup>

The point, of course, is not that marketing and finance inherently lack what students need “to face the fundamental questions” of their existence. The point is that all education, with whatever course code it hides behind, has the opportunity and, one could argue, the duty to help students address their contingency, agency, and meaning. Unfortunately, it may take a looming death for us to admit this and change our behavior accordingly. O’Reilley continues,

That year I spent chatting with Eileen about her impending death made me think about what kind of writing I was asking students to do. We think a lot about preparing students for the next level, for their major field courses, for graduate school, for the job. Do we prepare them for *today*?<sup>2</sup>

Given the situation O’Reilley was dealing with at the time, I wonder why she did not say what she really wanted to say: that we teachers should be preparing students for *their deaths*. Perhaps, encompassing O’Reilley’s language, we could say that we should be preparing students for the *existential today*, which is the same thing as preparing them for death.

In American higher education, two things work against facing this truth honestly. First, we do not do well with death. As the Pulitzer Prize-winning cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker argued persuasively, all human activity is in one way or another a “denial of death,” an attempt to transcend mortality by linking ourselves to symbol-systems that extend us beyond the confines of our bodies and limitations of our lifespans. But because of historical trajectories, modern Western culture is bereft of myths that traditionally synthesized our yearning for immortality with the reality of death.<sup>3</sup> So we plug our ears, close our eyes, and sing into the abyss. On national television, former Vice President Joe Biden recently reassured Senator John McCain’s daughter, “If anybody can make it, your dad” can. We have trouble admitting that an 81-year-old with a glioblastoma (median survival: about fourteen months) is nearing death; who would dare bring college students—with their bright futures and whole lives ahead of them—face-to-face with this truth?

Second, we have been told—and we tell our constituents—that college education is about preparing for the future. As O’Reilley suggests, the higher education-industrial complex pretends to be good at seeing the future, even the far-off future, of our students’ graduate school or job prospects. How scandalous it would be to tell students and parents that we teachers are really just focused on getting

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Rose O’Reilley, *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1998), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973). See especially pp. 190-195.

students through the day, surely the shortest concept of “future” you can get away with. Worse yet that we are preparing them for death, the enemy of the future. Everyone seems to agree that university is preparing students for *life*—whether that be characterized by high-paying, self-fulfilling work in one’s chosen field or more broadly, as the recent AAC&U’s strategic plan puts it, “prepar[ing] them for work, life, and citizenship in national, local, and global contexts.”<sup>4</sup>

When I was training for ordained ministry, I participated in Clinical Pastoral Education—chaplaincy internship in a specialized, often healthcare, setting. In CPE, we discussed the importance of focusing on the present. Those who minister in congregations have months, years, maybe even generations, to serve the souls in their care; chaplains have *the moment*. Blink, and a patient has died. Take a few days before returning to a patient, and they have been discharged or moved to another wing of the hospital under another chaplain’s care. In such environments, one ought to learn the value of the present.

My own CPE experience was not so dramatic, as I served my clinical hours in a long-term care facility. Most of the residents were not in critical health, but the slow train was coming for them; closer (or so I thought) than it was for me. In many ways, my work was helping them prepare for death. What else can you do for a 102-year-old woman who can barely see or hear and matter-of-factly tells you she has nothing to live for? You engage in what Ira Byock, the expert on dying well, calls “the four things that matter most”: forgiving others, being forgiven, finding and expressing gratitude, and demonstrating love. It turns out that what prepares us for dying is not a bad way to live.

This approach to teaching does not devolve into frantic searches for the ever-elusive “relevance” of course material or gratuitous connections to students’ particular life situations. It is about shedding light on what has been, is now, and always will be within and around them. Until they die, that is.

Nor does this approach undermine the *longue durée* that stabilizes quality education. Many things take months, years, even generations to master. Careful building of foundational knowledge and skill, brick upon patient brick, necessarily reaches toward something in the future. The error comes in thinking that the future is what learning is for, rather than seeing the future as gracious space for learning to blossom and mature.

Most of us will assume that learning for death-preparation is more fitted to English, or philosophy, or religion, or perhaps history. But this assumption is false. Every teacher has a capacity for deep pedagogical imagination and an appreciation for the ways all human activity relates to death. Although Eileen wrote them off, marketing courses should ponder how advertising manipulates our

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<sup>4</sup> American Association of Colleges and Universities, “We ASPIRE: Advancing Student Performance through Integration, Research, and Excellence,” 2018-22 AAC&U Strategic Plan, 3.  
[https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/about/AACU\\_StrategicPlan\\_2018-22.pdf](https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/about/AACU_StrategicPlan_2018-22.pdf)

obsession with youth and expose it for the denial of death that it is. For better or worse, all subjects offer philosophies of death by default. Evolutionary biology teaches us, as one theologian recently put it, “that our real purpose is getting used to the necessity of our own deaths for the sake of life”—that is, the supposed perfection of the species at the expense of the individual.<sup>5</sup> Teachers are obligated to expose the veiled death-philosophies of the disciplines and engage them critically. Such honesty not only reminds us that science is not value-neutral but that transformational education by definition prepares students for death.

Since all humans experience death and all human experience touches on death, the recent calls for integration, interdisciplinarity, intercultural development, and holistic approaches in education can serve as an ally in this endeavor. With the rising costs of tuition and the public perception that college education should translate to professional success, we have embraced the notion that we should teach as though students’ lives depended on it. It is time we admitted that their deaths depend on it, too.

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<sup>5</sup> Steven Paulson, “Life without a Preacher: Darwin’s *Origin of Species*,” *Word & World* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 115-116.