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Abstract

This paper spans the ten years of the author's career in education, focusing on her personal struggle with wanting to be seen as relevant, spectacular and powerful in the eyes of her students. These three temptations are a framework for her personal reflection, set forth by Henri J. M. Nouwen (1989) in *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. This paper chronicles the author's struggles as a first-year K-12 teacher and as a new professor. The author finally recognizes how she sees both her students and herself in a mirror dimly and that partnering with Christ is the way to best serve within the profession.

Teaching Through a Mirror Dimly: Partnering with Christ to Overcome Self

Gennie Harris

Summary: This paper spans the ten years of the author's career in education, focusing on her personal struggle with wanting to be seen as relevant, spectacular and powerful in the eyes of her students. These three temptations are a framework for her personal reflection, set forth by Henri J. M. Nouwen (1989) in *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. This paper chronicles the author's struggles as a first-year K-12 teacher and as a new professor. The author finally recognizes how she sees both her students and herself in a mirror dimly and that partnering with Christ is the way to best serve within the profession.

Introduction

This month marks my tenth year in the field of education. My experience is varied, from my first year in a family literacy program to subsequent years as a secondary Language Arts teacher and, finally, to my current position as Assistant Professor of Education in a graduate teacher education program. A common theme that runs through all of these experiences is my desire to walk with Christ and like Christ as I serve my students, as well as my awareness of my shortcomings in this regard.

I began considering personal weaknesses that I desired to improve early in my career, specifically my desire to be respected and to be recognized in my chosen field. As I later learned, these desires are not necessarily a sign of egomania. As Willard (1998) explains in *The Divine Conspiracy*, "the drive to significance is a simple extension of the creative impulse of God that gave us being" (p. 15). I believe it is the absence of Christ in these desires that leads to an unhealthy self-centeredness. Therefore, my drive for relevance, significance, and power kept me from the truth that "requires the knower to become interdependent with the known" (Palmer, 1993, p. 16). As Palmer suggests in *The Courage to Teach* (1998), "The work required to

'know thyself' is neither selfish nor narcissistic. Whatever self-knowledge we attain as teachers will serve our students and our scholarship well" (p. 3). This has proven to be true as I have spent time becoming more familiar with my "inner terrain" (Palmer, 1998, p.5), and my teaching and living have become more "sure-footed" as a result (Palmer, 1998, p. 5).

This paper details my growth from a first-year K-12 teacher (which was my second year in the profession) to my current role as Assistant Professor of Education. While the temptations have proven to be a constant in my life as a teacher, God provided me with a wonderful lesson this past semester that has helped me to relinquish these desires and to focus on loving God and my students. This paper will conclude with the particular challenges I faced and how I learned to love my students regardless of their feelings or lack of feelings towards me. I also discovered how to partner with Christ in my mission as a teacher educator.

First Memories

It is first period early in the school year. The young teacher faces a class of just ten students, five of whom had been expelled from the eighth grade the previous spring. A noisy peace settles upon the class as they begin dictating their stories to the teacher and instructional assistant. Jared, for no apparent reason, climbs out of his desk and jumps out of the open first-story window. Chaos ensues.

After lunch twenty-seven sophomores begin reading the next chapter of the class novel. In the eighty-degree heat, Jason's interruption is clearly welcome, and the class watches as he approaches the chalkboard. He looks the teacher in the eye and proceeds to run his fingernails down the length of the board. He, and all of his classmates, turns to the teacher for a response.

The day before Winter Vacation, Cassie approaches

the teacher's desk. She is the same girl who had previously and proudly informed the teacher that her class had run out four teachers in two years. "We've decided to keep you," she abruptly states. "What?" the harried teacher asks. "We like you and we've decided to keep you at our school. Merry Christmas!" The exhausted teacher feels like hugging her, hitting her and instead turns away and sinks into a chair.

First Year as a K-12 Teacher

I measure my years, as do many teachers, from September to September, and it has been nine autumns since I was that young teacher facing a group of high schoolers just five to seven years my junior. I am still amazed that I survived those arduous first months in a tight-knit rural community where I had to earn my welcome. However, I was prepared. I knew my content area well, I could put together engaging, relevant lessons, and, mercifully, my commitment to my students was so evident that I could win them over. No easy classroom management solutions existed for this group of students who had proven themselves accomplished at helping teachers consider early retirement, usually mid-year.

By February, I felt like I had conquered the basics of classroom teaching. Indeed, I had. Most students listened most of the time, most assignments were turned in, mostly good, most of the time, and I pretty much knew that most of my students were learning mostly what they needed to know. Honestly, I could think of no better way to end a tough year. However, seeds of discontent were growing inside in a way that surprised me. While I was learning the role of teacher, I was beginning to recognize weaknesses in who I was as a professional. Before February, reflection of this type was out of the question, but now I had time to take a closer look.

The Reflection Process Begins

That same February, I began my first graduate-level class: Ethics in Education. I appreciated the venue for discussing some of my ethical dilemmas with more seasoned teachers: How do I keep the basketball coach from hounding me but still require his player to turn in assignments? How can I gracefully handle calls from a co-worker who wishes to talk about other teachers?

As part of this course, I revisited a favorite text, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* by Henri J. M. Nouwen (1989) and wrote a reflection paper about my personal struggles in the teaching profession that first year. The text was my choice. I had read it as an undergraduate and recalled vaguely that it might apply to teaching. When I reread it, I was astounded by the depth of application that could be made to my teaching situation and to teaching in general. I used the framework set forth by Nouwen to highlight my personal struggles in wanting to be respected and to obtain recognition in my position. I also used Bible verses and parts of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community* (1954) as I reflected on who I was and who I was becoming as a professional, for good and otherwise. As an English teacher, I know that writing is a way of knowing (Ruddell, 2003, p. 38). This was true as I wrote this reflection paper: the more I wrote, the more I realized the deeper struggles I had in the profession, the ones that hid beneath the chaotic surface of daily school life.

Nouwen's Framework

Nouwen wrote *In the Name of Jesus* while preparing to give a speech about Christian leadership in the twenty-first century. A longtime priest, he had recently begun working at a home for mentally handicapped adults and had quickly learned that "their liking or disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with any of the many useful things I had done until then" (Nouwen, 1989, p. 27), such as publishing books and attaining academic degrees from respected institutions. This experience caused him to reflect about Christian leadership and how it should be.

Nouwen relies on the story of Christ's temptation in the desert as the primary framework for his book. Through each temptation outlined in Matthew 4:1-11, Nouwen details the temptations Christian leaders face: the need to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful. After explaining each temptation, he offers solutions. For my original reflection paper, I simply adopted his framework to my own experience.

My First-Year Reflection

Temptation One: The Need to be Relevant

According to the New Testament, Jesus was led into the desert where he was tempted by Satan. After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he faced his first temptation: to turn stones into bread. Nouwen suggests that Jesus may have been faced with more than just the desire to eat, which would be an understandable feeling at this point in time. He suggests that Jesus may have been faced with the thought that it was his calling to feed the hungry and thus make a difference in people's lives. Instead, Nouwen asserts, Christ remained faithful to his calling to God, saying "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4, NASB). Turning the stones into bread would have been relevant to the people of the time, but it was Jesus' calling to serve God, not people.

Thinking about the need to be relevant as a negative seemed strange at first, but I quickly recognized the pitfalls. As a first-year teacher, I was naturally eager to make a name for myself at my school and to earn respect and even a little job security in my new profession. Nouwen provides an excellent account of what I found myself doing in the name of trying to help my students and my school, writing

Living in a community with very wounded people, I came to see that I had lived most of my life as a tight-rope artist trying to walk on a high, thin cable from one tower to the other, always waiting for the applause when I had not fallen off and broken my leg. (Nouwen, 1989, p. 53)

I was, in a sense, a performer. I wanted to be efficient and effective and found myself annoyed at times when my important work of planning and evaluating was interrupted by students, of all people. My focus on my own performance led to a self-centeredness, rather than a focus on my students and their needs. I realize now that this is often the case with new teachers, but I did not wish for it to be the case for me. I learned that as teachers we "must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God [who] will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans by sending us people . . ." (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 99).

Another danger of focusing too much on being recognized by others was the fact that in teaching, as in the ministry, "there is little praise and much criticism"

(Nouwen, 1989, p. 32). Nouwen's text taught me that my focus in teaching should be on having a "heart that wants only to give love and receive love in response" (p. 24). This kind of heart offers hope and comfort, instead of the resentment and bitterness that come from not feeling appreciated. The paradox of teaching is the paradox of Christ's life: living by the calling to be "completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self" (Nouwen, p. 30). To be a great teacher, I learned I must humbly follow the example of Jesus Christ.

Temptation Two: The Need to be Spectacular

After rejecting Satan's request to turn stones into bread, Jesus was asked to do something that many teachers would like to be able to do: to be spectacular. Satan said, "If you are the Son of God . . . throw yourself down [from the highest point of the temple]" (Matthew 4:6, NASB). Jesus, however, elected not to display his abilities and replied, "it is written: 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Matthew 4:7, NASB). Nouwen points out that "Jesus refused to be a stunt man. He did not come to walk on hot coals, swallow fire, or put his hand in the lion's mouth to demonstrate he had something worthwhile to say" (Nouwen, 1989, p. 55). He further asserts that church leaders are often individualistic (p. 55) and that "stardom and individual heroism, which are such obvious aspects of our competitive society, are not at all alien to the church" (p. 56). Nor, I would add, are they alien to the world of education. We want to do spectacular things when the real work of education lies in the day-to-day challenging work we do with our students.

I fell into the trap of wanting to be spectacular in my first year of teaching K-12 students. As I began to feel like I was really getting the hang of this teaching thing, I started taking a little too much pride in my abilities. As Bonhoeffer points out, when we start focusing on our own talents and skills and abilities, as we inevitably do, we become "proud and pretentious dreamers" and end up judging others (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 27). That year, I found myself judging one of my superiors, whom I perceived as incompetent. I was spectacular in my own eyes as I added a witty quip to staffroom conversations about this person, and I was overlooking my own shortcomings.

I was eventually convicted by the warning in the book

of James that “the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things” (3:5; NASB). I realized the danger of my boasting and jesting and that “Every member [of a community] serves the whole body either to its health or its destruction” (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 89). Despite my desire to be a positive person, I was becoming the opposite, and Bonhoeffer’s words clarified the point: “If my sinfulness appears to me to be in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognizing my sinfulness at all” (p. 96). I realized that with under a year of K-12 teaching under my belt, I still had plenty of weaknesses to focus on, rather than spending time dwelling on the inadequacies of others.

Temptation Three: The Need to be Powerful

The third temptation Jesus faced, and the third temptation outlined in Nouwen’s framework, was the need to feel powerful. Satan took Jesus to a very high mountain where all the kingdoms of the world could be seen and said, “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me” (Matthew 4:9, NASB). Jesus refused and recognized only the power of God, saying, “Go Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only’” (Matthew 4:10, NASB). Nouwen adds that “the temptation to consider power an apt instrument for the proclamation of the Gospel is the greatest [temptation] of all” (1989, p. 76), citing the inquisition and the crusades as two of many examples. He proposes that “maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love” (p. 77).

I found early in my career that it takes a great deal of love to get to the heart of students’ misbehavior, to find out why Jason ran his fingernails down the chalkboard or why Jared jumped out the window. I also found that it was much more effective. As I wrote in my original reflection, “Avoiding reactionary instincts leads to appropriate and loving interaction with students that promotes long-term change, rather than short-term control.” Nonetheless, power trips can be a temptation for teachers, especially to those who do not allow themselves to be vulnerable and open to students. As Nouwen explains, “When the members of a community . . . cannot truly know and love their shepherd, shepherding quickly becomes a subtle way of exercising power over others and begins to show authoritarian and dictatorial traits” (1989, p. 62). Again, we face a paradox. We have true authority only when we do not

lord our power over others. As Nouwen states, “The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which our world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross” (pp. 81-82). Realizing this early and trying to follow Christ’s example of servant leadership helped me avoid becoming a statistic at my little high school, the fifth teacher run out of town in three years. I quickly learned that teachers must be human and humble in order to effectively lead; my students’ resistance to me would have been the inevitable result of a power struggle.

Nine Years Later

I would like to say that I conquered these desires in my small rural school: the need to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful. However, I recognize that I have the same struggles in a graduate setting, but in different forms.

As a university professor, I still struggle with the need to be relevant. Once again I am close to the age of my students, and I am relatively new in my department. I want to prove myself and to do the best possible job of teaching my courses. I advise a group of students during their two years in our program, and I want this cohort to love me, to celebrate me, perhaps even try to emulate me. Once again, I find myself being a tight-rope walker, a performer, rather than the kind of selfless vulnerable leader Nouwen describes. I recognize the temptation and make an effort to stay focused on my calling, which is to teach not to perform.

Recently, as I have begun my doctoral work, I have struggled once again with the need to be spectacular. Of course, a doctorate is essential if I am to continue teaching at the university level, but I have had to keep in check my desire to “wow” people. I have found myself, before even completing my first year of coursework, picturing myself on graduation day with the coveted round beanie on my head, saying to people, “Oh, no, please . . . just call me Gennie when they try to call me, “Dr. Harris.” I have had to deeply examine my motives and pray for humility. Am I remaining faithful to my calling? Will what I do ultimately improve the lives of schoolchildren and the abilities of teachers? Am I just being a “proud and pretentious dreamer”? (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 27). My involvement in a doctoral program should not be a stunt but a service.

The need for power has been the least of my temptations, but I struggled with it this past year. Momentarily, I ignored my own advice about avoiding reactionary thinking when encountering a difficult situation with a student. This student accused me of lowering his grade because he and I hold differing political beliefs. He went on to criticize my teaching techniques. Immediately, I surprised myself by my reactionary thinking. I wanted to e-mail him back with a sharp reply that would clearly show him that I was the professor and he was not. I further thought that copying the e-mail to our program director would effectively complete the power play. I temporarily brooded on my anger, and as Willard warns, “Find a person who has embraced anger, and you find a person with a wounded ego” (1998, p. 149). Recognizing my angry response to my bruised ego, I instead took a few days to pray about the situation and to seek counsel from colleagues about how to best handle it. I proceeded to contact the student with polite answers about the reason for his lowered grade and indicated that I would take an honest look at his critique of my teaching, even though I felt the criticism was made in a spirit of vengefulness. In other words, I swallowed my pride, and he and I both grew as teachers in the ensuing conversations. I learned once again that to be a good shepherd, I must be vulnerable to those I am leading. I also learned that by working with this student in “genuine love” (Willard, p. 157), I was able to avoid limiting myself and my “adversary to the human system and its laws” (p. 157). In our graduate program, we have policies for students and faculty who wish to state concerns about one another. However, the likely result for my student and me would have been what Willard refers to as “bitter fruit” that would have “totally drained us” (p. 157).

My Latest Lesson

These common themes, the need to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful, have cropped up throughout my career. However, developing an awareness of these temptations early on has led me to be hyper-sensitive about them. This has allowed me to notice them right away when they occur, such as the case with the graduate student who questioned my abilities and motivation as a teacher. I was able to keep my anger in check and move on in a more humble manner.

However, just when I felt like I had conquered these old habits of thinking, I faced an extremely challeng-

ing group of graduate students. They were not challenging in an outward way. Rather, it seemed we just did not connect well. There has been a flat affect in the room and a lack of the “joy and hope” (Freire, 1998, p. 68) that usually characterizes my classes. I could identify with Palmer’s (1998) description of his own teaching, when he describes his personal gift as a teacher as “the ability to dance with my students, to co-create with them a context in which all of us can teach and learn” (p. 72). This is how I would describe my typical university classroom. Therefore, I share Palmer’s frustration, “when my students refuse to dance with me, my strength turns to weakness . . . I become silently resentful . . . I become closed and untrusting” (p. 72).

This fall, for reasons I cannot and may never be able to discover, my students refused to dance with me. It was devastating. “Teaching is so public, so personal, so dangerous” (Burke, 2002, p. 13). The harder I tried to initiate the dance, bringing in new and different curriculum ideas and approaches that might better suit their needs, the more I felt rejected. At this point, the truth that “as teachers, we need to attend to our inner lives” (Liston, 2002, p. 45) struck me clearly. I realized fully that, as one of my mentors regularly reminds me, “We teach from who we are.” It was finally time that I answer Palmer’s (1993) call “for a mode of knowing and educating that is prayerful through and through” (p. 11).

I quit scrambling. All of my efforts to please this group of students had fallen flat. It was time to abandon once and for all my desire to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful. Clearly, this group of students saw me as none of the three. What then? Would I quit the profession since I felt like such a failure, or would I remain true to my calling to teach even though I presently had no affirmations? As in Palmer’s experience, “The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life” (1998, p. 2). My inner life needed prayer.

First, I prayed that God would help me to love my students. Surely, I loved some of them as individuals, those few who took the time to stop by my office or to have a conversation with me after class. In other words, I loved the ones who were most lovable. However, I lacked love for the group as a whole, and our sense of community was severely lacking. I needed to be transformed through Christ and through him to

“recreate the organic community in which the world was first created” (Palmer, 1993, p. 8).

In prayer, I felt led to the end of the First Corinthians passage regarding love. I was particularly struck by the verse, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known” (13:12; NASB). I was reminded of my clear lack of ability to see the full picture of what was going on in that classroom, as well as the knowledge that “the subjects we teach are as large and complex as life, so our knowledge of them is always flawed and partial” (Palmer, 1998, p. 2). I recognized that I did not have a full picture of my students. I was not following bell hooks’ advice “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students [which] is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (1994, p. 13). In my self-consciousness I was making assumptions about my students and about what they thought about me. Fear of not being relevant, spectacular, and powerful was driving me to “make my on-stage performance slicker and smoother” (Palmer, 1998, p. 29), to no avail.

I came to understand through prayer and through this challenging situation that “There is a name for the endurance we must practice until a larger love arrives: it is called suffering” (Palmer, 1998, p. 85). I suffered for many weeks as I prayed, practiced active love for students in my work with them, and continued to receive no positive feedback. This may sound like a miserable scenario, but it has ended up being quite liberating. I have finally accepted my call to love my students regardless of the outcome, and I have become determined to love this group through their graduation of the program with no-strings-attached agape love. I have discovered in my everyday interactions with students how “Good teaching is an act of hospitality toward the young . . .” (Palmer, 1998, p. 50). Indeed, I have received nothing back from this group of students as a whole, but I continue to serve as their gracious host in the classroom and in the field of education.

I have adopted the attitude, finally, of my role as a teacher being a co-laborer in Christ. I realized, as did Willard, that “the most adequate description of prayer is simply, ‘Talking to God about what we are doing together.’ That immediately focuses the activity where we are but at the same time drives the egotism out of it”

(1998, p. 243). I have begun to truly see myself walking with God in every aspect of my life, especially teaching. I can visualize walking hand in hand with him, and I converse with him throughout the day regarding decisions to be made and conversations to be had with students. I feel his presence and peace as I interact with the students with whom I struggle. I have taken on as my own Paul’s words to the Philippians, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (4:6-7; NASB). My heart and mind feel guarded and protected. I have begun to follow Willard’s charge

Consider just your job, the work you do to make a living. This is one of the clearest ways possible of focusing upon apprenticeship to Jesus. To be a disciple of Jesus is, crucially, to be learning from Jesus how to do your job as Jesus himself would do it. New Testament language for this is to do it ‘in the name of’ Jesus. (p. 285)

Back to Nouwen

In this way, I was brought full circle to Nouwen’s work and my original paper as a first-year K-12 teacher. It took nine years for me to fully understand his and my own words about teaching. I was finally able to relinquish my “drive to significance” (Willard, 1998, p. 15) and my desire to use power to “start stepping on the toes of my unwilling dance partners, occasionally kicking their shins” (Palmer, 1998, p. 72). I gained scriptural and spiritual strength for my life which is “between the times, between the dim knowledge that distorts our lives and the truth that sees us whole” (Palmer, 1993, p. 16). Further, I have been removed from the “hall of mirrors in which the two [self and world] endlessly reflect and determine one another. Prayer takes us out—not out of self and world, but out of their closed, circular logic” (Palmer, 1993, p. 13).

Most importantly, because of its practical, everyday implications for my life, I learned the lesson that “Jesus’ enduring relevance is based on his historically proven ability to speak to, to heal and empower the individual human condition” (Willard, 1998, p. 13). It is not my relevance that matters as a teacher but his relevance, and in recognizing this, I am able to partner with him even as he speaks to, heals, and empowers

me. "He matters because of what he brought and what he still brings to ordinary human beings . . . In sharing our weakness he gives us strength and imparts through his companionship a life that has the quality of eternity" (Willard, p. 13). My head is in the clouds more now as a teacher. My thoughts are definitely more eternal. I feel his presence daily and through each interaction with students, even as, unexpectedly, I finally feel like I have begun to make a meaningful connection with my challenging group of students. I am thankful that Jesus takes me "as seriously as . . . [my] shredded dignity demands" (Willard, p. 15) and that he is willing to complete the work he began in me.

Therefore my journey ends, as does Nouwen's book, with an illustration of Jesus. I return to it years after my teaching career began as focus on my newly-refined vision of my calling. It is the image of the leader with outstretched hands, who chooses a life of downward mobility. "It is the image of the praying leader, the vulnerable leader, and the trusting leader. May that image fill your hearts with hope, courage, and confidence . . ." (1989, pp. 92-93) as you teach through a mirror dimly.

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