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Cloud of Witnesses: Unexpected Models

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My father was a university chaplain in a nation under military rule. I was a child during this time and had no idea what he, my mother, and others experienced. Years later, we spoke about these years.

He recalled that on that university campus it was common knowledge that most classrooms and spaces had someone present who reported lectures and discussions to the military police. Invariably, students and faculty would disappear—sometimes permanently—if any of these reported conversations were viewed as subversive.

As a child in that country, I attended a Roman Catholic grade school focused on providing education for the children of national industrialists and expatriates. Unbeknownst to myself, my father had connected in a unique way with the nuns who taught and ran the school. These nuns, placing themselves at risk, had developed an “underground railway” that moved its “passengers” from our city across hundreds of miles to a neighboring border. It was extensive, sophisticated and very secret in a nation where many disappeared.

When Dad learned that any of his students were under suspicion or threat from the military police, he would arrange for them to be brought secretly to the nuns. Disguised in the habits and wimples typically reserved for the nuns, these students were transported to safety.

Intuitively, I believe that these nuns not only saved lives but were significant educators to these college students as they dressed, concealed, and drove them to safety.

Models as part of learning

James Mannoia gave words to my understanding of these nuns as educators. I knew they were not part of the familiar classroom educational model, but Mannoia helped me to understand that education is not limited to our traditional perspectives on learning. He observed that models (for our purposes, a model is an **example to imitate or emulate**; sometimes, a model provides a

pattern to copy) are critical to a person's education and maturation. He noted that throughout our lives we will experience *dissonance*—times when our worlds get shaken or rocked. Our previous responses and beliefs might not be adequate in these new situations. Sometimes, such times are distressing and disorienting, and sometimes they are just different. *Dissonance* is created by being exposed to a new experience, idea or relationship. It shakes and disturbs what is familiar and exposes us to an alternative way of viewing or interacting with the world.

We may not even know how to discern and respond to these unfamiliar experiences. Mannoia observed that for learning to take place, the individual must be in a *community* where they have the security and freedom to reflect and muse upon these new experiences. The person who has experienced dissonance must also be able to observe responses by others to these or similar circumstances. These *models* demonstrate, or have demonstrated, new or alternate ways of responding. Sometimes such models are found in history, novels, faith, communities, and even, sometimes, in entirely unexpected places. Models are most often men and women who have encountered something similar to what students are encountering, thus making them able to serve as an example of how to possibly respond and act in different contexts, ways, or circumstances. (For me, it was reading testimonies of **Holocaust survivors** or stories of those who **resisted the Nazis**.) As such, models may provide suggestions or hints about how we might respond with kindness, wisdom, thoroughness, and humility to circumstances we encounter.

The courageous nuns described above were unexpected. Their subtleness, their risks, and their surprising acts of kindness, justice, and rebellion were startling and unexpected. The actions and values these nuns modelled are the reasons I moved into student development.

Deeply connected models

Occasionally, a scripture writer encourages his readers to follow their example (1 Cor 4:16). My sense is that those we use as models did not particularly aspire to be examples. Nevertheless, scripture refers to models frequently. Paul named men and women he suggested as worthy to emulate (Rom 16:3), and both Testaments note individuals beneficial to consider as examples (Heb 11).

Jesus's genealogy is full of models (Matt 1:1ff; Luke 3:23f). If we take time to delve into the stories behind the names mentioned by the Gospel writers, we might be surprised. Jesus himself was a son (Mk 6:3), a brother (Matt 13:55), a teacher (Jn 3:2), and one whose country was occupied (Lk 2:1). Cultural and religious identity was important, but it seemed like Jesus' family history included those from outside of what might have been considered proper and pure

by the dominant culture of that time. Jesus had royalty, foreigners, deceivers, military, murderers, poets, and immigrants in his family history.

Family histories are complicated. Experiences of trauma, war, slavery, abuse, tragedy, or famine can define our families. Family history can be cringeworthy and challenging. At times it can even be inspiring. Our families are part of our personal stories. Choices that were made generations ago ripple into the present. I am the product of the prayers and decisions many made before me. Some of my family make me hold my breath and wince, and others reflect what I value and deeply intrigue me. Even so, they are all models; they demonstrate how to respond—and sometimes how not to respond—to life and its circumstances.

Unexpected models

Models provide words, images, and actions we did not or could not imagine on our own. Sometimes they affirm that our experience is not unique (What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Eccles 1:9).

There are unexpected models all around us.

I do not need to bring world-class athletes, celebrities, or politicians to the attention of my students. They know about these folks. It's the other stories of men and women responding to adversity, tragedy, triumph, success, and dissonance that can be significant for our students. Those models might be "below the radar" of our awareness, and are often unnoticed, dismissed, or quickly forgotten. They might be peers, neighbors, or family. These are models that help students understand that they are not the first to encounter a specific challenge or adversity. They are models which allow students to glimpse—or even hope—how they might respond well. I am convinced this is where student development intersects deeply with a transformative higher education.

In higher education, many unexpected models are observed by a cloud of witnesses (Heb 12:1). Students notice how they live, love, celebrate, and even grieve. It is a little unsettling—this sharing of life is a challenge, curse, blessing and privilege – sometimes all at the same time.

When my family lived on on-campus, students would ask if they could study in our home. I was always surprised. The tumult of life would happen around them – play, cooking, chattering,

laughing. Students spoke about it being comforting and familiar, not disruptive. These moments were not intentional, but were familiar. These incidents demonstrated how they might live life.

Being watched and observed is wearisome. But the impact on student lives is significant. Tragedies, anger, reconciliation, celebrations, achievements, conflict, and “boring family life” are part of what is observed and shared. These models help students discern that many of the hard things they encounter may have been experienced by others and provide ways of responding.

Students are learning in the classroom, but they are also learning in other ways. Those they observe and notice are part of their education. Whether we like it or not, those of us in higher education are modelling how to live well. I often have to remind myself that I am (we are) surrounded by that biblical “cloud of witnesses” who are watching and learning how to live as growing and maturing adults. Living our lives—extending kindness, maneuvering hard things, and extending grace—has an impact far beyond what we can often imagine. The modelling we provide has significance – may his will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matt 6:10). Do not despair and grow weary of doing good (Gal 6:9).