

The Narrative Imagination

Theological Insights on Teaching

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*The authors present the “Narrative Imagination,” which they define as the act of teachers seeing within students a story not yet fulfilled. The teaching task, they suggest, lies in teachers engaging students’ stories in ways that acknowledge the teachers’ status without overpowering their students. The authors ask a central question: Recognizing that our work and lives are intermingled with the lives of our students, how might we engage students in ways that aid their learning and “inspirit” their futures? The article draws upon the work of theologian Caroline Simon’s *The Disciplined Heart*, which takes seriously the narrative possibilities of the “other” as a critically liberating engagement. Building upon the New Testament story of “The Good Samaritan,” Simon believes the Samaritan engaged the wounded man*

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along the road as a person whose story was not yet completed. This perspective, the authors believe, can inform how teachers may engage students. The narrative understanding of personhood acknowledges growth and potential, builds community, and helps teachers see their students as living possibilities.

Introduction

We believe Paulo Freire had it right. Throughout his teaching, especially in his book *Pedagogy of Hope*, he humbly laid out the work of a teacher within a community (i.e., a common unity) of learners. He believed, implicitly and explicitly, that relationships were central: relationships between people, between people and knowledge, and between knowledge and politics. He believed teachers occupied a status that should be both recognized and gifted toward an active, open sharing of literacy.

This essay highlights the power of the relationship between teacher and student and suggests that teachers should recognize their status (for to ignore status is either naive or dishonest) without using it to overwhelm their students. We ask the central question, How can we live well, given our positions of status as teachers? Recognizing that, as teachers, our work and our lives are intermingled with the lives of our students, how might we engage students in ways that edify their learning and living and “inspirit” their futures?

Our article draws upon theologian Caroline Simon’s book *The Disciplined Heart*,¹ which she calls a treatise about love. For her, love always assumes an *other*. This thoughtful book is especially

1. Caroline J. Simon, *The Disciplined Heart* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1997).

insightful for teachers because it calls us to take seriously the narrative possibilities of the other, without discounting the status, experience, and insight we have as teachers. She suggests that teaching is a critically liberating engagement that calls us to greater critical reflection and insight about our own actions and the creative possibilities of others' actions.

Simon outlines two human capacities that arise when we engage others. One is the capacity for *imagination*, seeing people both as they are and as they might become; the second is the capacity for *fiction-making*, seeing people as we wish they would be instead of as they are. Imagination is insight; fiction-making is ignorance. Imagination, for Simon, works to eradicate fiction-making through knowledge. Imagination sees others, regardless of who they are, as people with destinies that make claims on us and demand our respect and consideration. Imagination also includes seeing others as they, at their best and most hopeful, would want to be seen.

Seeing others as engaged in their own narratives and destinies that rightfully intersect with our narratives and destinies is a process that requires more than just renaming things, as William Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize novel *Ironweed*² highlights how people who were once "bums" become "street people." Foundational to Simon's work is the concept of friendship and how and what that concept might demand of those who take it seriously. Simon pushes the concept far past what Aristotle called *civic friendship*, because while Aristotle seemed to believe that civic friendship would by its nature create a flourishing polis, Simon argues that a demand is made upon us all when we realize that, through our

2. William Kennedy, *Ironweed* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984).

actions, we are sharing stories with others that engage possibilities for both of us.

We chose to share Simon's theological framework and will perhaps, more than one might be accustomed to in educational writing, draw upon concepts from theology and literature. This choice advances our goal of supporting deep narrative understanding as a way to better engage others in equitable and considered relationships. Both theology and literature call upon teachers to make sense of story.

Love of Neighbor

Theology, for example, allows us to unpack the seminal question that Jesus is asked in the parable of the Good Samaritan: "Who is my neighbor?" Indeed, both the genesis and lesson of the story is spun from that question and its answer. But Jesus never discussed differences between friends and neighbors; nor did he parse out relative responsibilities to friends as opposed to family members. There was no ranking of responsibilities. One was entreated to engage neighbors in loving ways, to really see them as stories with possibilities. Obviously, those who hurried past the wounded man did not share that insight and were acting from sound bodies and agendas that included places to go and things to do. They lacked the ability to imagine another's narrative.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum³ describes love as "generous," by which she means capable of creating generous and hopeful narratives of others' possibilities. For such story creating, one needs imagination. In fact, in Graham Greene's *The Power and the*

3. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Glory,⁴ hate is defined as a “failure of imagination.” Interestingly, in Greene’s novel, the opposite of hate is not love, but pity (perhaps the motivation of the Good Samaritan). Part of this generosity is the proactive, even aggressive, willingness to imagine what others might become.

Love (or, if one is more comfortable with a different phrase, *morality in action*) always seems to entail a tension between the actual and the possible. To love (to act morally as a teacher toward) others is to esteem them; but if we are to come to really love others, we must also fully see them—including the reasons they perhaps should not be esteemed. We all have faults and failings; and love does not so much demand that these be ignored as looked beyond. Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 113” calls love “blind” because it makes the lover misperceive the flaws in the beloved. However, good theology, literature, and wise teaching call us to be honest in assessing the now without being closed to the future.

As teachers, we can come to essentialize others as “students” in ways that build barriers and maintain distance. Teachers must practice patience by meeting those who come as they are at the time of their coming. The moral discipline to accept others, without blame or calls for penance, is the beginning of narrative engagement. Thoughtless compensatory activities only push us farther apart. Having expectations for each other, on the other hand, is a radical engagement of both courage and discipline.

As teachers, we must dare to engage others and ourselves honestly. Holding each other to insightful and moral action is the only way to reconcile the divisiveness brought on by a poverty of consideration. Only in disciplined engagement can we live heroically,

4. Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (New York: Penguin Books, 1962).

which, to us, means living within the tension of critical insight and undiminished hope. As Charles Dickens⁵ asserts in *David Copperfield*, one can never become the hero even of one’s own life when the heart is undisciplined. Undisciplined hearts are prone to fictions of fantasy and whimsy, which often become self-interested projections that confuse love with what Simon calls its counterfeits: infatuation, manipulation, and sentiment. With such counterfeits in play, love and knowledge cannot negotiate a hopeful future.

In discussing the Good Samaritan, Simone Weil⁶ notes that heroic insight rests in disallowing the anonymous body wounded beside the road to stay anonymous. To Weil, creative attention calls us to imagine what does not yet exist and to allow this imagined future to stake claims on our own moral actions. The Samaritan’s love in action sees the other as a human creature with a destiny, as an unfulfilled story of possibilities. He knows immediately that this wounded person is, as Jesus notes, his neighbor for whom he is responsible; and he acts with charity and imagination.

Narrative Encounters

Seeing someone’s possible destiny is the fulfillment of a narrative story, and narrative is exceedingly important in helping students work toward destinies and futures. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas⁷ notes that narratives are neither accidental nor incidental to Christian theology. Theologically speaking, there is no truer way to human insight than through story. For morality to be acted out,

5. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (New York: Random House, 2000).

6. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

7. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1983).

one's intentions must include seeing one's own destiny and story intertwined with the destinies and stories of others. Without imaginative insight, the other remains anonymous. Thus, eradicating anonymity must be central to the actions of those who choose to live morally within the world and, by doing so, to engage the other in ways that their actions push ignorance into the ditch where it might die in place of the victim the Good Samaritan rescued. In simple language, teachers need to know their students. As C. S. Lewis asks rhetorically in his novel *Till We Have Faces*, "How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?"⁸

A narrative understanding of personhood acknowledges growth and possibility. We come to understand that people inhabit histories that unfold over time. Such narratives allow for the existence of something that is now only potential. For teachers, it is important to remember that the etymology of the word "education" is from the Latin *e-ducere*, meaning to "draw forth." Narratives also acknowledge that we all live our own stories among and with others' stories and that our purposes and plans must take others' narratives into account. Each of us has a differing account of the possibilities of others' stories and, if we are to reconcile these stories, we are called to break down walls that keep us from knowing each other better. Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" challenges us to ask why humans purposely build walls to separate themselves from the actions of nature and life that naturally work to erode these walls. As Frost implies, people must work to maintain these walls, because "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." Perhaps the first moral act of teachers is to break down the walls between themselves and their students.

8. C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1956), 294.

Destiny and Community

Knowing others is the key to entering their narratives. It is presumptuous to make or act upon claims about someone else without envisioning their possibilities. Human connections allow for all manner of intermingled possibilities; in fact, only those who know us closely can offer more critical insight into our own destinies than we ourselves have. Love, in all its active moral forms, makes possible the insight of possibilities—such insight is itself a gift of grace that allows the shared molding of destiny.

Narratives about destiny are no small matters. A destiny involves a range of possibilities that might or might not be worked into ripened fruit. These destinies are both goal-oriented and normative. To see people involved within their own narratives is to help them bear personal responsibility for their destiny as, in small and large ways, we teach them toward flourishing. The nature of teaching is reciprocal: As teachers, we impact our students and are also impacted. We become part of the unfolding story, a story that shapes our own destiny as much as it shapes the destinies of those we teach.

That all students can flourish was not always assumed. Aristotle, in Book Ten of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, suggests that slaves, women, and some Athenian free men lacked the higher capacities for flourishing.⁹ Other Greek thinkers were no more generous. Plato's myth of the metals in the *Republic* noted the existence of the "gold-souled people" and that the jobs of people with silver, bronze, or iron souls included ensuring that the philosophically capable could flourish. Thus, the polis enshrined privilege.

9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House Books, 1941).

We have long ago, at least in our rhetoric, discarded the belief that some people are less able to flourish than others. However, even assuming that all students are able to flourish, we still must reconcile the individual within the community. If, as teachers, we believe there exist intersecting stories and destinies, we are also called to envision community interactions. If the goal of the individual is to work out his or her individual destiny, how might the goals of community be achieved? One's personal meaning might cross paths and interests with the welfare of community life. The theological hope is that individuals are not sacrificed for the sake of the community, nor the community left at the mercy of individual whims. Destinies are both, then, the interest of the individual and of the community.

Alasdair MacIntyre¹⁰ points out that shaping a human narrative is a quest for a true self. This quest is not something already finalized—a solid thing to be discovered like a penny on the sidewalk. Instead, quests are shaped by questing. Such quests shape both the character and self-knowledge of those who quest. This understanding has been a part of theological thought throughout history, and it is also central to the work of teachers. Not only do we help shape our students' questing but our own questing is also shaped by our students.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*¹¹ and Martin Buber in *I and Thou*¹² contrast imagination with fiction-making. Imagination sees the other as a *Thou*; fiction-making sees the other as an *It*.

10. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1981).

11. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

12. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1937).

Thomas Aquinas¹³ reminds us of the theological virtue of hope that calls us to consider the possibility of things not yet present in ways that do not distort their emergence—a hope as crucial to the growth of an individual as it is to the coming of the Kingdom. Like Graham Greene, C. S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves*,¹⁴ notes that the antidote to such distortions is charity. For Lewis, charity (the love of neighbor demonstrated by the Good Samaritan) is the only act not subject to distortion.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his literary autobiography, suggests that philosophical imagination works together with self-intuition to help individuals understand potentials.¹⁵ Humans, he notes, know and feel how the *potential* works in them, as they understand how the *actual* works on them. Coleridge offers these key creative shapers: an emphasis on the role of imagination, a link between caring and insight, and an exploration of the relationships among the actual, the potential, and the ideal. He could not have explained the role of a teacher better. Teachers' imaginations create the synthesis that fuses and unifies such insights.

Narrative Imagination

Imagination, as described by Simon,¹⁶ is a personal faculty that can be learned and taught. Simon cites philosopher Mary Warnock,¹⁷ who notes this human power at work in everyday perceptions of the world, in our thoughts about both what is present and what is

13. Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on the Virtues*, trans. John A. Oesterle (Notre Dame, IN: University Press of Notre Dame, 1966).

14. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960).

15. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. John Shawcross (London: Oxford University Press, 1907).

16. Caroline J. Simon, *The Disciplined Heart* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

17. Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

absent. This human power enables teachers to see the world of their students, present or absent, as significant. It also allows teachers to share this vision with students, so that they might share it or reject it. Such imagination includes enriching and edifying intentions for others and works with the gift of insight. It is neither disinterested nor selfish, and it calls us to work proactively to re-create futures that have been mired in the hegemony of fiction-making. Sadly, in schools, some children accept the fiction that their worth is defined by their abilities to score well on exams.

The moral actions and dispositions of teaching called for here are complex, to say the least. Imagination is complex, because humans are complex. The moral actions and dispositions of imagination called for here enable teachers to perceive and to act toward others in edifying ways and to treat them as having realistic possibilities. Such moral actions and dispositions demand the knowledge and insights of narrative. After decades of operating from the assumption that insight comes best from the rigorous disciplines and methodologies of science, embracing the human in the “human sciences” might take some relearning. Imagination puts us in the messy domain of intersecting stories and destinies, which are narratives with intention. These narratives become stories of the unfolding of true possibilities.

Jerome Bruner calls the idea that any given narrative contains several possibilities and interpretations “hermeneutic compossibility.”¹⁸ He further notes how theoretical frameworks also carry “doctrinal” interpretations about human insight. He contrasts rationalists with empiricists, for example, and suggests that each

theory carries a specialized “compelling insight” that defines right reasoning and necessary evidence. In his *The Culture of Education*, Bruner notes: “How one conceives of education . . . is a function of how one conceives of the culture and its aims, professed and otherwise.”¹⁹ Bruner suggests that narrative, by its active and engaging process, brings speaker and hearer together into a special understanding and is, thus, a way of acting upon the world by educating.

The space teachers and students inhabit daily is characterized by relationships. Lives are storied: Students have faces. As we consider our stories and the stories of others, we become aware that the way we tell these stories can converge with or diverge from the way others tell their stories. We are called, as Lewis notes, to find and to share the speech at the center of our souls²⁰—a speech that engages a variety of possibilities for authentic communication.

Martha Nussbaum, in *Love’s Knowledge*,²¹ lauds the value of narrative over other philosophical discourses that tend to lack particularity, emotion, plot, and do not allow for indeterminacy. As a result, these other discourses also lack the close relationships and courageous risks that are characteristic of interactions between participants and friends in narrative and between teachers and students. Rationality is impoverished, she implies, because it is less open to possibility. As Ricoeur notes, *reading* story becomes a place where the kind of reflection that encourages us to change our

19. Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), ix–x.

20. Jill Carattini, *Beauty in the Mess*, posted on May 19, 2012, and accessed from <http://www.rzim.org/a-slice-of-infinity/beauty-in-the-mess/> on December 12, 2012.

21. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

18. Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991): 1–21.

perceptions and actions can take place.²² Even the way we understand and adjudicate the value of narrative inquiry (for example, in qualitative research) encourages relationships between reader and teller. For example, the evaluative question that is central to qualitative research draws us necessarily toward sharing with others: “Does what I am reading here cohere with, challenge, extend, or inform my own understandings and lived experience?”

According to Simone Weil, two forces shape lives and gravity and grace. For her, gravity pushes natural human interactions toward selfishness and evil. Grace, on the other hand, is a supernatural intervention that suspends the action of gravity. As we move toward reconciliation and community, the gravitas of our impact on others demands that we act with disciplined grace if we are to see others’ stories and destinies intertwined with our own.

Conclusion

So, how to conclude this essay? What is its message for the constantly engaging actions of teaching? Although we have not always tied the work of building a narrative imagination with the actions of teaching, we cannot help but believe that teachers will see themselves within the types of engagement we have outlined. Furthermore, we believe that the narrative imagination is as valuable to teachers’ work with young students as it is with older students; its impact extends from kindergarten to graduate school.

We have encouraged teachers to engage the imagination in order to see what does not yet exist but might exist, both in others and themselves. We have encouraged teachers to work to know their students better by positioning their own narratives within

22. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

their students’ stories and destinies. This activity of becoming, we believe, shapes both teachers and students. Finally, we have suggested that teachers must see how their own narratives intersect and cohere with the narratives of others. In all this, we have suggested that undertaking an edifying imagination builds both relationships and community.

A number of hegemonies work to disrupt our vision. The first disruption of vision comes from the unquestioned and uncritical belief that our lives and work are centered within and understood through individualism. Individualism, as a cultural “gravity,” draws us all toward self-centeredness. The second disruption comes from the acceptance of narrow epistemologies whose “truths” come to trump other insights and thereby shape and limit our lives. These narrow epistemologies, as Bruner suggests, place limits upon our lives and our thinking. They distance us from each other.

Finally, the third disruption comes from embracing a narrow vision that conceals the possible actions of grace. When we engage in reifying discourses through blame or guilt, we put people in cells of impoverished spirits, where imagining or acting toward edifying community remains impossible. Given these disruptions, the work of narrative building is complex and the road bumpy. Engaging with others can generate fear and takes courage. Yet such engagement is the only way we can overcome our ignorance of others. In Simon’s terms, overcoming such ignorance requires a “disciplined heart” that acts out of a love of neighbor, in all its difficulties.

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