

A Teachable Time

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I'd like to begin with stating the obvious.

Sensorimotor simulations of external situations are in fact widely implicated in human cognition.

Take mental imagery, for example:

Imagery, including not only the well-studied case of visual imagery but also those of auditory imagery (Reisberg, 1992) and kinesthetic imagery (Parsons et al., 1995), is an obvious example of mentally simulating external events...

Long-term memory, too, is tied in certain ways to our bodies' experiences with the world. The point is most obvious in the case of episodic memory. Whether or not one posits a separate episodic memory system, episodic memories are a class of memories defined by their content—they consist of records of spatiotemporally localized events, as experienced by the rememberer. Phenomenologically, recalling an episodic memory has a quality of "reliving," with all the attendant visual, kinesthetic, and spatial impressions. This is especially true when memories are fresh, before they have become crystallized by retelling into something more resembling semantic memories.ⁱ

What might a much-quoted essay by Margaret Wilson on embodied cognition have to do with this spatiotemporally localized event called "Matriculation"? It's one way to explain why we have you sign the book. We have visual, kinesthetic, spatial, embodied reasons. We call you by name, you rise, come forward, and write that name by hand in an old book, and by that act recreate a community of embodied learners. We, the rememberers, relive other episodic memories, other times of hearing a name, and seeing someone make their mark in Drew's book of life.

This is what we can call a teachable moment, a term that Robert Havighurst, scholar of Native American education, urban schools, and educating the gifted, made popular in his book, *Human Development and Education*. Havighurst explained,

A developmental task is a task which is learned at a specific point and which makes achievement of succeeding tasks possible. When the timing is right, the ability to learn a particular task will be possible. This is

referred to as a 'teachable moment.' It is important to keep in mind that unless the time is right, learning will not occur.ⁱⁱ

A teachable moment is also understood as a significant emotional or traumatic event, such as the time when Henry Lewis Gates tried to get into his own house and was arrested. As he said later, "I told the President that my entire career as an educator has been devoted to racial healing and improved race relations in this country. I am determined that this be a teaching moment."ⁱⁱⁱ

A teaching moment, an organic opportunity for insight. My time at Drew has been filled with organic opportunities, beginning with my first visit as a graduate student. Some of my colleagues have heard this story, but it may help to repeat it for those who have just begin their academic journey.

1985. The door to the Graduate Dean's office opens. I am welcomed. I perch on the edge of the high back chair, clutching a copy of the book that brought me from Almost Heaven, WV to a Garden State of mind. Liturgics of the Western Church edited, annotated, even translated in part by Bard Thompson, dean of the graduate school and founder of the doctoral program in Liturgical Studies. I try to project scholarly assurance from the depths of that high-back chair.

I have an acceptance letter at the bottom of my carpetbag, It's a study in rhetorical hospitality until the 8th sentence. In it I'm cautioned not to expect professional security as a result of graduate study.(Perhaps that bears repeating even now.) That won't be a problem. I'm looking for a Sabbath after 8 years of parish ministry and think a year of doctoral studies will be cheaper than a year of therapy. The problem is what I'm told *not* to bring to Drew: a pusillanimous spirit. "Those with a pusillanimous spirit will not fare well here in the Forest." How do you succeed at a school when you have to look up words used in their acceptance letter? Pusillanimous: I'll save you the Google search. It means to show a lack of courage or determination, it's an old-fashioned word for "mean spirited". The first teachers of Drew would agree. Don't bring that spirit here. They wanted, as the dedicatory sermon for the first class put it: "young lions."

I apparently pass muster, as I'm assigned an advisor and sent off in search of seminary hall. I carry another book like a talisman for this interview. Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home*. I know Nelle no longer walked these halls, but I hope that her influence still lingered as tangibly as her portrait and words of wisdom do today. This teachable moment is an experience of pastoral care. Nelson Thayer, professor of religion and psychology, makes room in his office, serves me green tea, and listens carefully. Near the end of the interview, he shares a story about Nelle's going away speech, and tells me to take his class called *Interlude and Interplay* in the fall. Since I have no idea what this class is about, or its connection to liturgical studies, I ask what book I should read to get started. No pusillanimous spirit, here. Paul Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy*, he says. I dutifully write that down, and then he adds, "In French, of course. It's a graduate program, after all." It takes me an entire summer to get through three chapters, but when I show up for the first class with my blood, sweat, and tear stained book, I discover I've

got the only French text in the class. A word of advice. If you think the assignment is impossible, check with your instructor. It may be a case of humor, not hermeneutics.

A teachable moment/an embodied cognition: I remain at Drew, drawn in by the teaching, and I pay for the privilege by working as a chaplain in a truck stop on Route 80 and then as a part-time university chaplain at Drew. Those were exactly not the good old days or the good community that our present chaplain has helped to create. The then president set my agenda as chaplain, and first on his list was a tough assignment: pray at the opening of the Friday afternoon college faculty meetings. That was his idea, not mine, and definitely not theirs. Some CLA faculty took the trouble of telling me that they would stand outside the hallway until the praying was over, partly as a matter of academic freedom, and partly because my predecessor prayed long fervent prayers. Added to the difficulties is that the Hall of Sciences is shaped like an amphitheater, the seats curve, the floors slope down, so “*sensorimotor simulations of external situations*” (lions, again) were very strong. It was an assignment, so I opened my ears, listened hard, and crafted my first official Drew prayer on Sept 1, 1987:

*Holy One, bless those who dare to make a living professing truth.
Preserve us from the ancient accusation that those who can't do, teach.
May justice and compassion be our lessons each day, and for sanity and
truth's sake, deliver us from the tyranny of trifles. Amen.*

When it was all said and done, it was a teachable time. I learned an important truth by being with our colleagues in Brothers College. No matter the school, no matter the subject, here in the Forest, we believe that teaching is a holy human art. Holy with an *H* or Wholly with a *W*. Human. Art. This is the one creed we all believe: teaching is a holy, wholly, holy human art.

The place, this space, this ritual is filled to overflowing with teachable times. At our best we, you, me, all are teachers if we're willing to be taught. We are professors of the hope that is within us. Embodied cognition: to have our hearts/ears/lives opened so that we may know how to console the weary with a word.

And the names, do we remember them? The names of those who opened their ears in this Forest? George Kelsey, Martin Luther King's teacher of Christian ethics, Mildred Eakin, Christian educator and tireless advocate against anti-semitism, Carl Michaelson, the first Drew theologian to explore the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity. His early tragic death broke the hearts of this institution in the late 60s. There are only a few pictures of those teachers in our halls, but the stories go on. Keep your ears open.

Speaking of keeping ears open I first got a call, then a letter, and then e-mail from one of own colleagues and teachers, Dave Graybeal, now 92, give or take a month. He kept calling until I got the message and got on a plane for an Appalachian conference in Tennessee last week. It was not a convenient time; it was a teachable moment. Remember the definition: “When the timing is right, the ability to learn a particular task will be possible”. I arrive in Morristown, TN, the community that Dave paid attention to

and wrote about for over 60 years. I brought back a draft of the new book he's writing, by the way. The first sentence is: "The way to begin is to allow yourself to be awed by existence."

He and Shirley met me at the airport, and to make sure I'd spot him, he wore that old baby blue sweater that he loves, probably because it matches his eyes, or the sky. Shirley's sewn patches on the sleeves to cover the elbow holes. I think she's keeping it together so he can wear it for the angels.

Speaking of angels, and teachers of Drew, you might be interested in this account of giving lectures at the last minute. It's an account of John Miley, Drew's systematic theology professor (1873-95).

The few remaining students who heard Miley's last lecture will still tell you about it, and will insist on its complete appropriateness. He died the next day, which is perhaps the chief reason for the lingering memory of that last session. He had lectured on "The Angels of God:"--and shortly he heard the sound of their coming, and was not afraid. The modern theologian would probably prefer to close his career, if he could have the choice, with a theme upon which he could speak with more certainty; but given Miley's time and place and the accepted view of the universe, and it is easy to understand why his students should have regarded that last lecture as at once a climax, a premonition, and an assurance.^{iv}

It was also interesting to note in this text that Stanley Romaine Hopper, the first dean of the Graduate School, started as an instructor of Homiletics and Christian Criticism of Life. Perhaps we'll have better luck finding a new homiletics professor if we updated that title to *Homiletics: Christian Affirmation of Life*.

Why should this matter? These nearly forgotten names and stories of the teacher of Drew? Because the scripture read and heard today is a living word. It is an affirmation of life. It is the sound of resurrection.

Isaiah 50:4-5

*The Holy One has given me the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.*

*Morning by morning God wakens—
wakens my ear to hear as those who are taught.*

*The Holy One has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.*

You have in your hands another example of embodied cognition or what I also call prayer. The calligraphy is one of the words for teacher. I now read the words of the artist,

Dr. Yasuko Grosjean, emeriti faculty and associate dean of the Caspersen School. “In Japan the one who teaches is called sensei. This title has no exact English translation. It is somewhat like mentor, only much more. It is an honorific title which shows great respect, trust, and closeness of relationship.”^v

The sensei is not a professional seller of knowledge; rather the sensei is a model of knowledge, wisdom, and personality. From this basis the sensei educates, trains, and teaches the students. Regardless of how high the student rises in the world, respect is still given because the sensei led the student one step along the way.

After the student graduates and leaves the place of learning, the student refers to this sensei as onshi. *On* means debt. Thus this is a teacher to whom the student is indebted. The same respect, trust, and closeness of relationship continue throughout life, because the indebtedness to this sensei remains lifelong.^{vi}

These names for teacher, Sensei and Onshe, formed the second prayer I shared with the CLA faculty of Drew. Bard Thompson, my teacher, her teacher, died at the start of the fall semester, my third year at Drew. He graduated, in one sense of that word, left this place of learning. I asked her help in shaping a prayer to be shared, a word that might console the weary. She did this work of *Sensei*, *Onshe* with the help of her teacher, Daqi Dai, an international doctoral student. I made enough copies for the faculty, those who believe teaching is a holy human art. I explained what the words meant and placed the copies on the lab console. I offered the words for Teacher as a prayer for any one who wished to have them. It’s probably the only altar/alter call offered in the Hall of Science.

It was curious to see one of her words/prayers surface from Drew’s publication’s collection, minus name and story after all these years. On the cover of this 2012 fall brochure for our conference on International Christian Spirituality held in honor of one of our graduates, a beloved teacher, Dr. Pyang, is the word *Sensei*. Curious, perhaps, but not surprising when you remember that “A developmental task is a task which is learned at a specific point and which makes achievement of succeeding tasks possible. When the timing is right, the ability to learn a particular task will be possible.”^{vii}

If you sign the Matriculation book today you join a community that pledges to live with open ears, minds, hearts and doors. Our commonwealth is invested in these words: “Freely you have received, freely give.” Our oath, our vow, the creed that we do not sign, but we signify is to hear as those who are taught and we do not turn away from the task. You will need the courage of lions, so I offer you this prayer by Sidney Lovett, one of Graybeal’s mentors at Yale:

May there be nothing that you do not dare to doubt, nothing true that you are afraid to know, and nothing false that you ever wish to believe.^{viii}

The Holy One has given us the tongue of a teacher, that we may know how to sustain the weary with a word. And not just the weary. Who can forget the Sandyhook teacher who

gathered her children together like a mother hen, called each child by name, placed her hands around each face, and said she loved them. She promised them, *promised* them that they would be all right.

How is that trust possible? Ask the unnamed teacher, the singer of songs, the servant of the living God who promises: “Morning by morning I will open your ears so you will hear as one who is taught.” Morning by morning. One morning, some morning, this morning, one great gettin’ up morning, somebody’s calling your name and when you hear it, you will know, know embodied body and soul, that love is stronger than death. Somebody’s calling your name, and when you rise, you will say, “Teacher!”

ⁱ Wilson, Margaret, “Six views of embodied cognition”, *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 2002, 9 (4), 625-636, Theoretical and Review Articles, University of California, Santa Cruz, California

ⁱⁱ Havighurst, Robert James, *Human Development and Education*. Oxford, England, Longmans, Green, 1953, 7. See also: *Who Shall Be Educated?: The Challenge of Unequal Opportunities*, New York: Harper, 1944;

ⁱⁱⁱ Havighurst, Robert J.; and Neugarten, Bernice L. *American Indian and White Children: A Sociopsychological Investigation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955; Havighurst, Robert J.; and DeHann, Robert F. *Educating Gifted Children*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957; *To Live On This Earth: American Indian Education*. New York: Doubleday, 1972.

^{iv} *The Teachers of Drew, 1867-1942*, edited by James Richard Joy, Drew University, 1942, 89.

^v Personal notes from Yasuko Grosjean.

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} *The Teachers of Drew, 1867-1942*, 89.

^{viii} Schaper, Donna, "The university chaplains in word and deed," *Yale Alumni Magazine*. May/June 2005, 36.