

The people I love the best  
 Jump into work head first  
 Without dallying in the shallows  
 And swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.

...

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart, I  
 Who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,  
 Who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,  
 Who do what has to be done, again and again.

Marge Piercy, *"To Be of Use"*

*It's 4<sup>th</sup> block, the last period of the day just before the winter holiday, and I had been warned by Linda ahead of time that they were a 'difficult' group to get settled -- first year American literature students, mostly African-American, some of them identified as in need of remedial help with reading. They saunter in at the last bell; "Okay, folks; you need to take a seat." "Aww, Miz B," one girl groaned, "I forgot my purse in the cafeteria!" "Go quick. Now, for those of you who are observant, we have a guest in the back of the room." Linda smiled wryly. "She's gathering information on excellent students. Ms. Blier," sweeping her arm with a flourish, "THIS is fourth period literature." There was more affection than sarcasm in her voice.*

*For the next 90 minutes, Linda moved steadily, unflappably, through the room, guiding the students firmly as they labored through an oral reading of Twain's story, "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." They chose peers to read, stumbled over words, and tried again, ("Tha's ebonics!" laughed one boy, after an unsuccessful attempt to read a word), went off task, refocused; they knew the dance. She softly touched one dozing student; "You okay?" As they begin quiet work, one whines, "I don't understand this!" Linda moves around to answer her questions, leaning to her level, giving eye contact. The firm, gentle rhythm of the class lasts until the final bell; the end of the day. She wishes each one well as they leave.*

Observation with Linda, Dec. 2000

What is it about some teachers that compels others to turn to them for example and mentoring? And what is it that enables these exemplary teachers to persist – in Piercy's words, to 'harness themselves' and 'do what has to be done, again and again?'

These questions have stayed with me since my earliest days as a high school teacher, struggling to learn the basics of my discipline and craft without any formal training in education behind me. I survived those first difficult years and grew to love the work -- carried, comforted, and challenged by a handful of remarkable peers. I sought these senior women colleagues out for conversation and support because they were 'exemplary' -- embodied examples of what I too hoped to become as a teacher. I began graduate work primarily in search of a context in which to reflect more deeply on this experience of mentoring, in which they were teaching me how to be a teacher as surely as they were teaching their students English or religion or biology. First encounters with the liberative education theory of Freire and feminist and Latin American theologies of liberation helped this quest find language and intellectual form. Doctoral work introduced me to the methods of qualitative research that enabled me to reenter the high school context with the discipline and skill to explore these questions more fully. As I asked these questions of my research subjects, my own mentors were not far from mind: What made these teachers so remarkable? And what enabled them to do what they did, at the level at which they did it, over time?

### **The Project**

These questions translated into a series of interviews and observations with a group of seven public high school teachers from the same school, all identified by their colleagues and administrators as having exemplary qualities and having been teaching for at least five years.<sup>1</sup> Using research and analysis methods combining the techniques of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot) and narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly), I conducted two to three semi-structured depth interviews with each teacher and observed a series of their classes over the course of the academic year. When appropriate, I also attended extracurricular activities supervised by the teachers.

The research with these teachers elicited two primary insights – first, that what marks them as exemplary is a quality of *integrity*, a wholistic way of engaging the ongoing influences that form and re-form their identities, actions, and ways of relating and making meaning in the world. Second, the key to their persistence appears to rest in what educational philosopher Maxine Greene calls the capacity of the ‘reshaping imagination,’ that which opens one up to the new and the strange – the ‘other’ – and makes empathy, transcendence, and democratic community possible. The ‘reshaping imagination’ enables them to do their work, consistently and well, in a context marked by change and diversity on one hand and the homogenizing pressures of testing and standards on the other – while still honoring the the particularity of their students and colleagues as well as the vision of the common good towards which Greene says all teachers strive.

This essay attends to the second of these insights, the function of imagination in exemplary teachers’ work and its role in their persistence. The purpose is twofold: first, to attend to the voices of these teachers and to Greene’s work on imagination to illumine what makes their work possible over time; and two, to extend these insights into the work and nurture of religious educators. While the research was conducted with public school teachers, their professional landscape is similar to that of religious educators, expected to educate for a particular vision in a world characterized by multivalence, change, and competing world views. Greene’s hopes for education and understanding of the reshaping imagination’s promise and function might well provide the possibility for all educators who wish to engage their work in creative and long-term ways – work that resists blurring or fetishizing difference on the one hand while moving toward a vision of community and the common good on the other.

### **The Research Site**

Central High School is the only public high school in a small southeastern city and is often eclipsed by its neighbor, a large, burgeoning, and popular metropolis and business center. Despite the larger city’s tendency to sprawl and consume local towns and counties, Ellwood City has managed to keep its distinct identity and small-town feel. Historically, the town has hosted a racially and socioeconomically diverse population,

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<sup>1</sup> One of the challenges I faced in choosing research subjects was the fact that the research site had recently experienced a significant turnover in teaching staff; 15 senior teachers, some of whom were identified as exemplary and whose presence continued to charge the school. All had been on staff for 20 years or more had retired within the past three years. They began teaching at the school at about the same time and chose to move on together as well. As a result, several of the research subjects were relatively new but were consistently identified as having both exemplary qualities and the potential for ‘staying power.’

demonstrated in its housing – homes owned by the working poor, housing projects, middle-class bungalows, estates. While small, individual neighborhoods (and thus neighborhood elementary schools) are typically segregated by race, Ellwood has thus far escaped much of the racial tension one might expect in a southern town; when asked why, some of the longstanding local residents credited the ‘liberal politics’ and ‘open-minded attitudes’ of residents.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the integration of the town’s black and white high schools in the mid-1960’s happened largely without incident. (It is interesting to note that Central, the school resulting from the integration, has both the site and the name of the all-white predecessor.)

Over the past decade, however, concurrent with its neighbor’s growth, Ellwood City has become increasingly gentrified and suffered considerable adjustment pains, including tensions from skyrocketing property taxes and the homogenizing of its population. Despite the changing demographics, however, Central has retained a fairly consistent 1:1 ratio of African-American to white students (there are few representatives of other ethnic groups), although the growing economic divide is evident in the racial composition of the school, with the white students increasingly wealthier than the African-American students and typically populating the more academically advanced classes.

Central is a small high school by area public school standards, with fewer than a thousand students. Despite its size, however, it manages to offer the same range of academic and extracurricular programming typical of much larger schools. This means that the faculty and staff often carry the responsibilities of several activities, coaching multiple sports and managing activities in addition to regular teaching duties. The same multi-tasking extends to the principal, who, because of the school’s size, has fewer support personnel to handle administrative duties commensurate to a much larger school. The teaching and administrative staff as a whole are extraordinarily busy and committed, and they manage to preserve the school’s longstanding reputation for academic and programmatic strength.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, when parents are asked what they consider to be the most noteworthy strengths of Central High School, the two most frequent responses are the sense of community and the quality of the teachers.

### **The Research Subjects**

The research subjects for this study were chosen through a modified snowball sampling method. I asked a group of ‘first informants’ -- guidance counselors and paraprofessionals at the school -- to identify teachers whom they would describe as ‘having exemplary qualities.’ I did not define what I meant by the term exemplary,

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<sup>2</sup> One of the town’s tongue-in-cheek nicknames – used by both residents and outsiders – is “the People’s Republic of Ellwood.”

<sup>3</sup> Athletics are certainly not the primary strength of Central High School – at least not the sort of athletic programming stereotypically important to southeastern high schools. The same year that the wrestling team saw one of its team members, a scholar-athlete, win the state championship for his weight class, the football team remained winless. Just before the writing of this paper, Central celebrated the end of the football team’s 26 game losing streak. Nevertheless, the games are extremely well attended and a community event. When I asked a parent what the draw was, she replied matter-of-factly, “The band, of course!” The band is comprised of nearly a fifth of the student body. She added as an afterthought; “And we get to see each other, too.”

because I wanted to elicit from their responses not only a potential pool of subjects but also their presumptions around the word ‘exemplary.’ I also chose to use the phrase ‘having exemplary qualities’ rather than ‘who is an exemplary teacher’ in an attempt to free them up to speak about teachers in more nuanced ways, describing strengths as well as shortcomings. This enabled me to hear fuller descriptions of the potential subjects and elicit clearer responses concerning what constituted exemplariness. Furthermore, it saved the informants from the discomfort and inappropriateness of creating a hierarchy of teachers or a division between the ‘good’ ones and the ‘bad ones.’ By focusing their comments on characteristics rather than the teacher as a whole, they did not feel as though they were passing judgment or indirectly maligning other teachers by not mentioning them.

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer points out that good teachers differ greatly from each other, but bad teachers are all the same; quoting a student, he writes, “Their words float somewhere in front of their faces, like the balloon speech in cartoons.” (Palmer, 11) The subjects of this study confirmed the first of these insights, representing a variety of demographic characteristics, disciplinary interests, and teaching styles. Among the seven, there were two white women, two white men, two African-American women, and one African-American man. They ranged in age from late 20’s to early 60’s and taught in the math, science, and English departments. Their teaching styles included highly structured lectures, role-playing, hands-on experimentation, close adherence to textbooks and no textbook at all; some kept students on disciplined task for the entire ninety minutes, others allowed students to move freely around the room and speak without raising hands.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite the obvious differences, these teachers were consistently identified by colleagues as having exemplary characteristics.<sup>5</sup> What led to them to be identified as such?

First, it is important to note that the informants’ responses showed remarkable consistency in two regards – both in the individuals identified for the study and in the characteristics they named as demonstrative of ‘exemplariness.’ The list of teachers held up to the scrutiny of administrators and, eventually, of the teachers engaged in the study as well. What characteristics were most frequently named? While all these teachers were clearly skilled and knowledgeable, there was something qualitatively different about the character of their relationships with both students and peers and the way they engaged

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for brief descriptions of each of the research subjects

<sup>5</sup> The choice of these professionals as first informants resulted from my first attempt to solicit a list of research subjects, a spectacular failure as regards data collection but useful in providing helpful insight into my subjects. I initially distributed a questionnaire among the teachers, asking them to identify who among their colleagues they would consider ‘exemplary.’ Not only did I receive less than a 10% return on the questionnaire – those who did return them were quite frank in their resistance to naming colleagues. It was clear that they did not want to sit in judgment over their peers in any divisive way, confidentiality notwithstanding; being asked ‘who was better than others’ clearly implied a hierarchy, and their refusal revealed a clear defense of colleagues and collegiality.

Instead, I chose to use school professionals who had close experience with the effectiveness of the teachers but no fiduciary relationship with them. These professionals included the guidance counselors and the coordinator of the special education program for students at risk of not graduating. After compiling the list of potential teacher subjects, I reviewed the list with the principal at the time, a well-respected administrator known for her support of the teachers. She concurred with the list and suggested another teacher, promising but too new to be on the counselors’ radar screens. When several other teacher subjects identified her as well, I included her in the study.

the larger process of learning, above and beyond the teaching transaction. More specifically, these qualities included a deep and reciprocated respect for others, learning, and self, and an ability to reach across difference and into the particularity of students' lives, enabling them to teach across a spectrum of students and academic abilities. Some teachers could teach very well to upper level students or those most resembling themselves, but informants often placed this narrower arena of success in contrast to those who became the subjects of the study. Across the board, these teachers were also identified as having a positive disposition and contributing well to the healthy morale of the school. This is not to say that they were 'happy' all of the time – in fact, some were capable of being vociferous critics of things they perceived to be unjust – rather, they modeled something one informant identified as hope for others in the school, staff and students alike, a matter-of-fact presumption that success was possible and the work at hand was important.

These initial insights confirmed a generative suspicion I'd held since my early days of teaching and studies, that these teachers, like those whom I had sought for mentoring, had a qualitatively different way of engaging and constructing meaning out of their experiences. There are many competent, skilled practitioners in classrooms, but what enabled these individuals to be potential mentors had something to do with the way they 'leaned into life' and provided others with a model for doing so, particular to their unique skills, personalities, and commitments. As one informant put it, these teachers 'stood someplace different' when engaging their work and students. And as the data indicated, this distinctive 'place' enabled them to be singularly present to their students and the responsibilities at hand while leaning into and moving toward that which was not yet present – a skill set, a new narrative for students to live by, some envisioned notion of 'the Good.' Furthermore, these teachers had managed to establish reputations for these noteworthy characteristics, evident over time and promising to continue. What kept them going? The work of Maxine Greene on the function of the "reshaping imagination" is helpful in mapping clues to these exemplary teachers' ability to sustain themselves and the work they do, both in vision and practice.

### **The 'Reshaping Imagination'**

Philosopher of education Maxine Greene's work has been most significantly shaped by existentialist philosophy and the work of John Dewey. As a thinker, she weaves together social theory, literature, and philosophy in ways that make her work impossible to categorize; indeed, her intellectual passions incorporate teacher practices, educational reform, curriculum development, and most other topics in the field of education. Her vision for 'good education' is rooted in the existentialist notion of 'wide-awakeness,' contributing to the formation of a community based on both pluralism and cohesiveness. As such, Greene is vocal in her criticism of current discourses in education and educational reform, arguing that they are reductionistic, excessively emphasize 'schooling' and quantitative measures of students' accumulation of information, and are devoid of any aesthetic, narrative, or visionary character. Her writing over the years has turned towards exploring the function of the imagination in helping create a new social and educational vision, one that 'funds the meaning' of human existence for the sake of human liberation and community.

How does imagination function towards this end? For Greene, imagination is the art of the possible, and education is its object. For education to be truly ‘public,’ it must be grounded in envisioning what this liberation and community might be like. Borrowing from Dewey and philosopher Mary Warnock, Greene defines imagination as the “capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise,” the ability to summon up an ‘as-if’ world – necessary in the task of envisioning that which is not yet. As such, imagination is an epistemic capacity that enables one to make and discern meaning in the world, incorporating both the rational and reflective as well as the pre-rational and pre-reflective. It becomes the means through which we can assemble a coherent world in the midst of diversity, enabling us to “cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called ‘other’ over the years,” because it is what makes empathy possible.” (Greene, p.3) The ability to enter into humanizing relationship with the other requires the imaginative leap of the ‘as-if,’ leaving one’s own givenness to encounter the other’s situation. Adds Greene, “of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions.” (ibid.) The task of education, then, is the cultivation of spaces in which imagination and ‘wide-awakeness’ can unfold, as well as making accessible the tools – stories, skills, activities, relationships – which enable students to participate in this unfolding.

Yet, as Greene points out, imagination is not always benevolent; the creation of Auschwitz required an ‘as-if’ leap, envisioning a ‘perfect society,’ albeit a perverse and dehumanizing one. Education that uses and intends to cultivate imagination must be tempered with an ethical sensibility, one that envisions the possibility of community that affirms diversity and acts in transformative and humanizing ways – hence Greene’s use of the term ‘reshaping imagination.’ The imaginative ‘leap’ of empathy enables the teacher to encounter the ‘other’ – the text, the student, the colleague – in a way that enables both the honoring of difference and particularity and the creation of common bonds through the relationships built in the creation and telling of stories. She challenges educators to ask and explore questions that deal with meaningfulness and the “different ways of seeing and describing the landscapes people inhabit.” (139)

As such, Greene’s use of imagination clearly has an activist and ethical agenda; she asserts that teaching as a striving, a seeking, to discern and move towards a vision of the common good. Teaching, then, is not simply a matter of being a clerk, a technocrat, or a transmitter, but of moving beyond the “sad opaqueness of a private life centered about nothing but itself.” (4) And the common good envisioned must be more than either just a postmodern bricolage, whose primary authority and meaningfulness lie in the author and her/his interpretation, or a monolithic narrative, intended to reduce the multiplicity and distinctiveness present in the educational community.

### **Imagination and the Teacher-Subjects**

One of the most significant challenges of this study was to find ways to describe and unpack the exemplariness and longevity of these teachers in ways that honored the distinctive ‘landscapes’ they ‘inhabit’ without reducing exemplariness to some lowest common denominator or creating a ‘monolithic narrative.’ Yet as I indicated earlier, it is clear that these teachers share some quality, palpable to their colleagues, while remaining as different from each other as they could be, a quality present in their unique ways of

leaning into and living into and out of their remarkable lives. Greene's notion of the 'reshaping imagination' provides a helpful framework for describing their commonality, pointing both to how they function as teachers and what they intend to cultivate in their students through the media of their individual disciplines and styles.

What does the functioning of this imagination look like in their day to day practices as teachers? The study revealed five embodied 'markers' indicating the working presence of a reshaping imagination in their professional lives<sup>6</sup> -- empathy, wonder, play, resistance, and hope. These markers are indicators of a lively capacity to be rooted in the present while operating out of and inviting students to encounter something that transcends the givenness of the present situation – imagining the 'as-if.' The reader will notice clear overlap in these markers, and the ways in which some are evident in the stories that indicate the presence of another. I suggest thinking of them as either different movements comprising the same musical composition, and thus often reiterative of each other, or different embodied angles from which to examine the same reality – the presence of the reshaping imagination. And I argue that it is this reshaping imagination – the ability to be both a present and transcendent presence in the classroom – that is key to their self-understanding as teachers, their reasons and methods for doing what they do, and their ability to persist in what they do over time.

As is necessary with any study like this one, I caution that these insights are provisional. These markers are not intended to be a 'checklist' of exemplariness – in other words, if you do these, then you'll be excellent, and it is not the intention of the researcher to create a universalizing narrative, a clear violation of the subjects' distinctiveness which contributed so significantly to these insights. Rather, this was an inductive study and the insights are intended for use in the same spirit, pointing both toward a way of attending to teachers and what surfaced when this researcher did.

### Imagination enabling Empathy

Reflectiveness, even logical thinking, remain important; but the point of cognitive development is not to gain an increasingly complete grasp of abstract principles. It is to interpret from as many vantage points as possible lived experience, the ways there are of being in the world.

Maxine Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom*, p.120

*Q: What do you think your role with them is?*

*A: I love them. They're just great. They're like my kids and I always tell them that. I'm like, "Remember, I love you guys." I always tell them I love them, like my kids or my little brothers or sisters. What do I think my role is? I think my role is to make sure that they understand that there are a million ways to be human, to be alive, and it's okay, what they're feeling isn't unusual, you know?*

*Bill 1 : 1<sup>7</sup>*

I was struck consistently by the profound care and respect the teacher-subjects have for their students and by their capacity to be present to them, in their particularity, in

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<sup>6</sup> I have written elsewhere that the common insistence in these teachers for 'integrity' – an integration of the various dimensions and relationships of their lives – demonstrates the presence of the same reshaping imagination in their personal lives as well.

<sup>7</sup> The notation for transcript quotes is included for the researcher's ease in locating quotations and is as follows: Pseudonym, Interview Number : Page Number; e.g. Bill 1:1 is Bill, interview 1, page 1.

the midst of busy, regimented days and messy, unpredictable lives. This was first evident in their capacity to teach effectively both AP and basic classes in the same day (a significant challenge to anyone who has taught). As I spent time with them, however, it became clear that these teachers intentionally engaged all aspects of their teaching activities – curricular choices, methods, discipline, tutoring, casual conversation – from a basis of deep care for the personhood of the individual student. It was their reliance on this locus rather than on a routine or structure that facilitated the flexibility necessary for this quality of presence

Traditionally, the goal of education has been to cultivate self-directed, responsible, autonomous individuals able to make their own way in the world. That is clearly part of the educational agenda of these teachers; said Ann, whose students are largely African-American and in basic level classes,

“I just love trying to reach them, I love trying to teach them. And there are times when I take what I call a motivation moment and I just get on my students, because sometimes they’re just not concerned about themselves. So to them I’m fussing at them or lecturing them but I’m talking them about being real with yourself about how life is; you’ve got to be responsible for yourself. You need to have set some goals because most of my students have no goals. They live from day to day.” (Ann1:11)

Is this exclusively individualistic teaching what Ann intends? Not at all; it is clear that for her, teaching is a ‘reaching,’ not a transaction; the connections she intends, as with her fellow teacher-subjects, include respectful engagement with themselves and each other for the sake of learning how to make sense out of their worlds and, when necessary, create alternatives. As such, each teacher either demonstrated or articulated a deep commitment to teaching their students how to build relationships of care with each other across difference – political, racial, socioeconomic, academic ability – and to become aware of their own capacities to make a unique contribution to those webs of relationship.

The topical motivations for this differed from teacher to teacher. For some of them, like Stewart, a Seventh Day Adventist, insistence on mutual respect and interrelationship was articulated primarily from religious conviction; this meant not losing his cool with his students and helping them find more pacifist ways of dealing with their own angry turns. For others, like scientist and secular humanist Bill, it came from being aware of the given and beautiful diversity of the world and the need to work within that reality. And for Ann, it came from a history of successfully moving beyond poverty and abuse to become the first college graduate in her family and learning about her own capacity to contribute meaningfully to others’ advancement.

Below the pragmatic or dogmatic acceptance of these principles, though, was the belief that the cultivation of empathy was necessary for giving a sense of meaningfulness to lived experience. Furthermore, this meaningfulness can happen only when one is able to place one’s life in a larger context and experience connection; as Kelly noted, reflecting on her personal interest in a teen mom’s baby, “they have to feel that you’re interested in their well-being before they decide that they’ll achieve. I picked up on that right away.” Thus, empathy – the ability to enter into the experience of the ‘other’ through relationship, literature, scientific inquiry, collaborative work, or any other means



– is, as Greene points out, necessary for the construction of a common world founded on common good. For Greene, ‘common’ is neither abstract nor monolithic, but a living, changing “context of solidarity, a context of shared human stories within a changing human community,” (Greene, 62) founded on respect, justice, and intersubjective flourishing. This empathy also enabled the teachers to see beyond the superficial (and sometimes unsavory) reality of the situation or behavior in front of them to see a necessary participant in the construction of this common good.

### Imagination enabling Wonder

Perhaps we are *here* in order to say: house,  
bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window –  
at most: column, tower.... But to *say* them, you must understand,  
oh to say them *more* intensely than the Things themselves  
ever dreamed of existing.

Rainer Maria Rilke, “*The Ninth Elegy*”

*I've always enjoyed learning. I think that's another thing that my kids get from me. You know they keep abreast of what's new because I can't possibly go out and read all this stuff for my own. I have a student come to me and say, 'well, have you seen the new so and so?' I'm like, no, tell me about that. And they get excited because they can teach, they realize that everybody has something to learn from somebody.*

Kelly 1:12

As Hannah Arendt has repeatedly indicated, imagination sets the grounds for the questions we are able to ask. For these teacher-subjects, the task of teaching was not grounded so much in conveying information but in helping students learn how to observe and question the world around them, using the tools of the discipline at hand. They described themselves as works in progress, as not ‘there’ yet (some even questioned if there was a ‘there’ there!), as life-long learners (most were currently in or had recently been taking courses) – and expressed a deep desire to take their students along for the ride. Their capacity for wonder, for openness to the ‘more-ness’ of life, underscored and energized their daily work with the students. When asked what experiences in teaching fulfilled them most, they nearly all pointed to the ‘Aha!’ moments, those translucent, transcendent moments when connections are made and meaning(fulness) touched; said Jim, “I enjoy making the kids enjoy coming into the classroom. And then it’s really fulfilling to see that all of a sudden, I teach them something. And you know, sometimes they don’t know it, but it’s fun to see them learn and to see them get excited about something that’s actually pretty neat stuff.” (Jim 1:2) As a marker of the reshaping imagination, wonder presumes that the finite has the potential to mediate a glimpse of the infinite.

This delight with wonder and desire to cultivate it was also evident in their moments of frustration. Several of the teachers regularly taught classes populated by students who felt fated to the conditions of their lives. They struggled most with the difficulty in motivating them and overcoming student ‘boredom’ – passivity and disinterest. This was not simply because it made the task of instructing more difficult; it also because it shut down the possibility for them to recognize the potential ‘more-ness’ of their lives. Ann was most vocal about her frustrations with the poor level of student

motivation among her basic-level African-American students; for her, it was a sign of fatalism, hopelessness, and a lack of self-awareness. Furthermore, she genuinely believed that her students had personal potential, and a place in the world and were, quite simply, worth knowing; “I was saying to my Environmental Science kids that even an organism’s structure, everything, has a function, everything has its place. And you want them to understand that better.” (Ann 1:16) As the teachers tried to cultivate a sense of wonder in their students, what sometimes frustrated (as with Ann) but often resourced their passion and persistence in their work was their capacity to see their students as wonder-full as well. When I asked Cate what enabled her to sustain her remarkable energy level throughout the day, she replied, “I don’t know. But every time a new batch of kids come in, you get re-energized because they bring something new – and I think that’s true at the end of the day, because I’m teaching a different class than I am at the beginning of the day....” (Cate 1:11)

### Imagination enabling Play

Become like a child, [Jesus] said, if you want to mature as an adult. To play the ultimate game, don’t rely on will, belief, denial, or reason alone. Play. Play in a Godly way. Play with the Creator. Enter the existential game with imagination, wonder, and laughter if you want to become new without end.

Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play*, p.17

*Jim enters the room from the supply closet, wearing a tie-dye lab coat just a bit too long for him and smiles enigmatically at his AP chemistry students. On his lab desk are neat piles of celery, marshmallows, plastic balls, and rubber tubing. He pulls out a bucket of liquid nitrogen from behind the desk; it smokes like a prop from a horror movie. “Cooooool...” the kids gasp; someone asks what the smoke is. It’s water vapor. “This,” Jim says triumphantly, “is a super extra happy fun day!” The liquid nitrogen is –210 degrees (“Colder than my room is,” Jim comments). For the next hour, the students take turns dropping nearly anything they can find – the desktop items, snacks, paper – into the hissing bucket to see what happens. They snack on frozen marshmallows and orange slices and learn about states of matter and cryogenic technology. Jim is clearly having as much fun as they are.*

*Observation with Jim, Nov. 2000*

When Maxine Greene speaks of literacy, she is talking about a skill that enables one to transcend the given and enter into “field of possibles.” (Greene, 111) Yet the ability to ask critical questions and make strange the familiar – be it a text, a person, or a world view – is risky business. How do these teachers participate and invite others into this challenging work? In ways as distinctive as their styles, they invited their peers and students to play.

By ‘play,’ I do not mean to suggest that these teachers had ‘super extra happy fun’ all of the time. Even when lightened by fun, play has rigor and seriousness, requiring of its participants the capacity to be present and the work entailed in developing new competences and awarenesses. Some teachers engaged oral reading and role-playing to help students encounter new depths of meaning in the texts at hand; others engaged hands-on experimentation to give students the opportunity to ‘see what happens when...’, informing them that ‘unsuccessful’ experiments provided important data, too. Others enjoyed engaging in off-beat behaviors that jarred the presumptions of those around them.

Bill is apparently well known for this latter form of play. After one interview, he told me that he was sick and tired of hearing teachers grouse about work and students all

of the time and decided to do something about it. He walked into the nearly-full faculty mailroom one day, hanging his head, visibly depressed. Noticing his departure from his usually upbeat disposition, one teacher asked what was wrong. "It's Friday," he sighed. "Yeah?" Some of them responded excitedly. "We know! So what's the problem?" "I hate Fridays," he moaned. Huh? "Why?" "Cause the week is over – it's dead – it's done. I don't get to see the kids for a whole weekend." Huh??? One of the grumpier colleagues asked what his favorite day was. "Monday!" he said perking up. "Clean slate, new start, a whole week just full of possibilities!" Clearly Bill could have chosen any of a number of ways to jar his less cheerful colleagues into renegotiating their attitude towards work and students. The brilliance of his tactic was in providing an opportunity for them to laugh – and to see themselves anew, critically, in a non-threatening way. In other words, his parody created a safe space in which they could make strange the familiar and imagine the possibility of a new attitude – a lesson in wonder, hope, and critical self-reflection in one brief and humorous interchange.

Charles Foster, using the work of Johann Huizinga, points to four aspects of play that illumine its usefulness in helping open participants up to imaginative possibility. First, play is freedom and involves "engaging life with open hands – freely responding to the evens and circumstances in which we may find ourselves." (Foster, 94) Second, it requires that one step out of the present into the realm of possibility. Third, it is bound by a beginning and an end and has a limited duration, yet is never the same twice. Fourth, it is bound by rules that organize it and create a safe space in which it can unfold. Indeed, the play engaged by these teachers, bound by rules of respect and the specifics of the discipline, enabled their students (and, in the case of Bill, their colleagues) to play with structures, categories, chaos, and ideas, to test boundaries and the limits of their abilities, to discover possibilities. As Berryman indicates, "[play] gives us at any age room to make discoveries about a whole web of relationships – with self, others, nature, and God – to nourish us all our life." (Berryman, 12) As such, the stakes of play – and the work of the imagination – are high, intending no less than an encounter with transcendence and the development of human potential. But at the same time, the limits of the play-ful moment enable the participants to engage in it safely, tempered by the circumscribed boundaries required of play and the contingency of the play-ful moment.

### Imagination enabling Resistance

There were times when the Reverend King could have argued from a Constitutional point of view. Instead, while arguing for civil disobedience and "redemptive suffering," he appealed to imaginative or intuitive capacities in his audiences. Not only did he inspire them; he relied on their ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise.

Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom*, p. 102

*Q: Why let a student, especially somebody who's already demonstrated the capacity for poor choice, why let them have a choice? What's that going to do for them?*

*A: Many, many times, that's all they see at home. They see confrontations one after the other. One responds one way and they feel like they're justified in responding in the same way. They feel like force should meet force. And so I think it's important for them to understand that you can relate to other people and not let them dictate what you do. And I don't consciously think through this every time something*

*happens but I realize that it's important for students to know and understand that they can be in control of how they respond in every situation.*

*Stewart 2:6*

Of all the teachers I interviewed, Stewart was perhaps the most gentle in spirit and disposition. His voice is soft, which manages to capture student attention because they have to listen closely to hear him. He moves quietly and deliberately through his room as he does through his highly structured lessons, creating a rhythm easily intuited by the students who, by and large respect it – and him. He admitted that he had never disagreed explicitly with any school policy or raised an issue in a school meeting; I suspect his peers would describe him as one of the most accommodating and laid-back teachers around. Yet on a daily basis, Stewart models a powerful form of resistance in his classes, the capacity for peaceful, creative responses and new ways of living in the face of anger, aggression, and the abuses of power.

Other teachers have demonstrated more active forms of resistance. When Kelly's prior principal and superintendent did not respond to the evidence she produced indicating a colleague's sexual abuse of students, she brought the story to the local news station to ensure that action would be taken. Jim fought valiantly to have the 20-day sports ineligibility rule attached to in-school suspension modified. Why? "There's kids out there that all they have is sports." (Jim 2:12) He didn't mind that the students weren't able to compete; he was concerned with their exclusion from practice as well, strongly suspecting that his suspended wrestler was probably at home, alone, smoking dope.

Conscientization, or becoming 'wide awake' in the world as Greene suggests (borrowing from Freire), emerges from the insistence that the givenness of things isn't necessarily the only way they should be. Resistance, acting on this insistence, requires some vision then of how things are, how they should be (however inchoate), and the distance between the two. It requires that one see the familiar anew and push back against boundaries – a course of action funded by wonder and play.

It was clear that most of the teachers saw their teaching as a way of inculturating their students into the 'rules of the game' – that is, the sociocultural reality of the world they live in so that they could learn how to succeed in it, resist it, and change it. For each of them, their passion for teaching a particular discipline rested largely in their perception that it provided a medium for students to (re)author the narratives of their lives and thus the world. As such, teaching itself was an implicit act of resistance – intended to cultivate the imaginative capacity for resistance in their students.

Linda, for example, frequently teaches students who have significant behavioral and social problems both elsewhere in and outside of the school – yet in nearly 15 years of teaching, she has rarely had a discipline problem. She is adamant about not letting anything that goes on outside her classroom affect what happens inside; "So if a kid has attacked his brother [at home], if he's in here and he's behaving and he's doing what everybody is supposed to do, then that does not matter in here." (Linda 1:18) Clearly, she does not mean to suggest that it doesn't matter that he assaulted someone; her insistence on respect, discipline, and empowerment demonstrate that. Rather, the incident will not be part of the script of her engagement with that student, in that class. Why? Her class is a place where students learn, through this experience, the development of skills, and the engagement with texts, the possibility of authoring a new way of understanding themselves and other people. Later, when I asked her what value

she saw in teaching struggling African-American students the canon of Western literature, she responded, with the story Richard Wright tells in *Black Boy*. The social script of bigotry had already inscribed his possibilities in Mississippi; oppression, substance abuse, lynching. He left and began to read and realized that “the hardship, the desires, the hopes, the dreams, the experiences that we all have go beyond color. Even culture, because we can all learn from everybody else, and that’s what he found. And that’s what I found. That’s why I teach literature, I think.” (Linda 1:25)

It is interesting to note that one of the exemplary teachers most consistently named by informants lasted just two years at the school, leaving to teach part time at a local community college. He was apparently brilliant and inspirational, able to teach remedial math and AP calculus students with equal élan. But the most frequent descriptor I heard attached to him was ‘maverick;’ he constantly ‘bucked the system,’ fomenting confrontation and voicing complaints as often as possible. He clearly resisted the ills of the institution and insisted on their transformation – finding out quickly that he had no tolerance for inhabiting that institution. What was missing? A few teachers pointed to his inability to be flexible – and the way his frustration outpaced any hope he had. Each of the teachers interviewed understood their presence within the institution as provisional as saw themselves as standing on the margins, even though many are perceived by peers as having power within that institution. While acknowledging this perception, however, they also hold it with a nuanced suspicion and recognize its limits and contingency. They teach in the school because they believe it is the best place for them to do what they are convinced they must do and support it insofar as it enables them to do it. They also recognize the educational and imaginative imperative to disrupt the status quo in order to facilitate the realization of their (and their students’) visions and dreams.

### Imagination enabling Hope

*Q: What do you think you’re educating your students for? What are you teaching them?*

*A: I would hope that I’m teaching them that you are important, that you are valuable, that no matter what life may bring you, whatever circumstance, maybe with your job, your family, whatever, that you can love yourself enough and be enough of a visionary that you can see beyond whatever and be able to go forward and be successful. That’s what I hope I’m teaching moreso than biology.*

*Ann 1:10*

Each of the capacities enabled thus far by imagination – empathy, wonder, play, and resistance – is predicated on the presumption that there is the capacity for things to be otherwise, that there is something transcendent and meaningful in the midst of – and perhaps despite – present reality. For each of these teachers, their daily encounters with students and the specifics of their discipline were employed in the task of enabling them to exercise their social and ethical imagination; to ‘name the world,’ as Freire says, both as it is and as they had the possibility of transforming it. Of all the markers indicating the presence of a reshaping imagination, then, I would argue that *hope* is the one which underscores most its ‘reshaping’ potential, facilitating the articulation of the “as-if” vision intended by this work and resources the movement toward it. If one needs to imagine a better world in order to move beyond the present, then hope is what feeds the persistence necessary in the grinding moments lacking play, wonder, connection, and other markers

of imagination with generally positive attributes. Able to look at messiness and trouble full in the face, hope is not to be confused with the selective editing of optimism. It can be evident in compromise, a willingness to relent for the sake of a 'bigger picture,' and in anger, when the dissonance between the way things are and how one imagines they should be just seems too great.

What, specifically, comprised this hope? For some of the teachers, this entailed working on issues of self-esteem, genuinely recognizing in their students something others did not see; for others, it was more explicitly academic, providing them with the analytical skills to observe their world and communicate their findings. Regardless of the methods, they all shared a basic vision of a world in which their students, in all their particularity, could participate creatively. As teachers, they saw their fundamental task as helping students claim their *authority* – their ability to author their life-narratives and the future. Kelly thought it was absolutely critical to teach students, particularly those identified as at-risk, the finer points of higher math. Moving beyond a functional explanation based on job-skills, she went on at length to describe the way in which it taught her that there was the possibility of order and beauty in the universe; what could be more important to her kids from the projects? Their hope, then, was for their students to recognize and realize not just their capacity for 'more-ness' – but also to see themselves as participating both in the community that transcended their individual selves and in the meaningfulness in which both community and individual were invited to participate.

### **Reshaping Imagination: Provisional Comments on the Work of Religious Education**

I had scheduled follow-up conversations with some of the teachers to clarify a few questions I had and bring closure to our research. As circumstance would have it, the meetings were set for Sept. 12, 13, and 14; when I saw them, they were weary and subdued. Each bore the mark of the week's horror and the heavy task of trying to negotiate their curricular duties with their students' need to make sense out of what had happened. It was clear that they, too, were struggling with their own process of how to understand and respond to it.

I asked them directly what the 11<sup>th</sup> had been like. School remained in session for the day, and many of them had to decide whether to proceed with the day's lessons or put books aside to talk through the events. All the classrooms have television sets, enabling them to have immediate access to the news if they so chose. Their decisions varied greatly, from watching the coverage with their students and walking them through conversation around it to making mention of the day's events at the beginning of the class and indicating their intention to conduct business as usual. I asked each of them why they chose the options they did. For example, Cate chose not to view the news with her students in 'regular' (basic) literature. She admitted that it was often hard to focus this group – but when I asked her if it had been primarily a disciplinary decision, her answer was a fast and vehement no. Rather, she wanted to teach them that they had the power to make life go on in the midst of the chaotic and unthinkable. They needed the skills and the experience to enable them to see the rhythm of life continue. On the other end of the spectrum, Kelly watched CNN coverage all day, even with the same demographic group

as Cate's class. She walked them through the news, negotiating their hard questions and charged conversation. Why? They needed information and the ability to analyze what was going on, she argued, and she knew she could help them engage this responsibly. As she pointed out, they'd be discussing it around the cafeteria table; at least in her room, they'd have a knowledgeable moderator. She saw the real danger of racist and violent response to the situation and wanted to contribute to another way of acting.

It was clear that each of the teachers I spoke with had the same basic desire – to give skills to the students to process, understand, and live meaningfully in the wake of the events' ghastly reality. For some, this meant creating a kind of implicit experience that pointed to an alternative; for others, it was conveying information and letting them talk. It was clear as well that their particular methods for doing so were appropriate and consistent with what I had come to know about their distinct personalities and styles.

I tell this story because my interpretive framework for this project (as well as the intended conclusion to this paper and most other things) has been thrown into new and urgent light by the events of September 11. As such, these concluding remarks are provisional and far more an exercise of being present to what has happened, what work we face, and what these remarkable educators have taught me than it is a list of recommendations or strategies. Indeed, perhaps that is what the recent (and ongoing) horror calls us to do right now – to sit with each other, as Job's friends initially did, in the ashes, as present as possible to the reality of the moment while resisting the temptation to impose a premature strategy or interpretation on it.

Nevertheless, as an educator – and more specifically, as a religious educator – I am left wondering as I sit, What are we to do? The responses of the teachers above easily raise a similar question: which response was most appropriate? Which did the students most need? The weeks since the events have had no shortage of helpful suggestions and strategies offered for those in both helping and educational work, and clearly there is some basic wisdom to be considered. But the most effective response is probably one to be induced from the particulars of the situation, including the stories at hand, the gifts of the teacher, the needs and abilities of the students, the vision for which the education is being done, and so on. The total ecology of a school environment, with all the diversity therein, clearly needs the authentic and multiple approaches represented by these teachers.

As religious educators, we are in the business of helping others lean meaningfully into life in the midst of the present's givenness, while living hopefully and constructively toward a future my tradition calls 'the Reign of God.' One of the particular challenges I see facing us is the fact that the construction of any community creates, by necessity, those who are outside it and with that, the risk of ideological reification. My four-year-old son has been quite taken with the sudden appearance of 'our flag' (as he calls it) everywhere and has come to understand that it is a display of solidarity in the wake of 'the day the bad things happened.' Given the ideological genesis of the ongoing horror, how do we claim belief while resisting the temptation to reiterate ideological attachment, be it through civic or church religion? Warns Greene, "We cannot ignore or set aside the inequities, the indecencies, and the pressures of ideology," especially, I would add, when we are convinced we are right. (Greene, 50)

The ‘reshaping imagination’ enlivening these remarkable teacher-subjects funds their ability to be both present and transcendent in their classrooms and among their students; it is what they intentionally cultivate in them as well, through the media of their disciplines and in the spaces of their classroom. Whether intuited or self-reflectively articulated, they see the wide-awakeness, possibility, and community made possible through the work of the imagination as the reason for teaching, and the embodied fruits of imagination at work sustain them. As a religious educator, I find that their stories inform what I would hope to happen out of my work as well.

In one of her (many) pointed critiques of common public educational practice, Greene writes, that “meanings that emerge from the transactions between schools and the existing socioeconomic order tend to have more to do with channeling than with opening opportunities, with constraining than with emancipating, with prescribing than with setting persons free.” (Greene, 51) I wonder how far a leap it is between her comments here and what we have observed happen of late in some of our civic and religious congregations. Yet these very traditions, both democratic/governmental and religious, have within them the practical, liturgical, and narrative resources to enable us to articulate and resource an alternative vision for human existence and inclusive community. In *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard points to this transformative power when she asks, “Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets.” (Dillard, 40) While we have seen the value of children playing with, say, liquid nitrogen, it is clear that Dillard points to one of the attending awarenesses of such play – that we come to know the power of that which we invoke and inhabit.

As religious educators, it is clearly our task to access these resources and fund the reshaping, imaginative work necessitated more than ever by these times. But it is also imperative to remember the fundamentally *inductive* work of the imagination and its practices described here – empathy, wonder, play, resistance and hope. And this research, inductively engaged, demonstrated to me anew the power of presence – both as observed with these teachers and as research technique.

What does this mean for the work of religious education, then? The following will disappoint anyone anticipating a series of suggestions or strategies, illumined by the research and data; my persistent concern with saying anything potentially interpreted as universalizing and the inductive nature of both this study and these teachers’ work make me tread with caution. Yet the work of these teachers is not unlike what we are called to do as well – using both the discipline at hand and the teaching/learning encounters to open up new possibility. Nevertheless, one of the deep ironies revealed here is that transcendence – and its transformative potential – require that one have the capacity to be present and allow the ‘Aha!’ moment to happen; while one can create conditions that will increase the likelihood of it happening, one cannot script it. Empathy, wonder, play, resistance, and hope are useful practices to engage to this end, but it is important to remember that they are *funded by* inasmuch as they *fund* the work of the imagination.

Furthermore, as I found in my attempts to have the teachers articulate their hopes and visions, for many of them the task was a struggle. This had something to do with the



fact that the vision was still in process, constantly being filled out and renegotiated, as Greene points out, with the inclusion of new stories and new insights. As religious educators, we too are in the business of working towards a vision whose 'not-yet' quality is both in its realization and its capacity to be articulated.

Perhaps we are called to begin, then, with a quality of presence not unlike Job's companions— a being with each other in the ashes of Ground Zero and attend with each other, "in contexts of caring and concern," to the stories and liturgies and practices which have the potential to resource our vision and response. The challenge is to do so in a way that "make[s] the ground palpable and visible to our students, to make possible the interplay of multiple voices, of 'not quite commensurable visions.'" (Greene, 198) And perhaps it is in attending to this practice of presence that we will come to know what we are called to do, in all its promise and complexity and power.

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