

Deep Hospitality

There is a question on the LSTC course evaluation form that the students fill out at the end of each semester: *Did the professor respect the views of those in the class?* The answer is on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the highest. I am very pleased when I get 9 or 10 in that category. Most students give that assessment. Yet even a 9 bothers me somewhat. But when it goes below that, I am concerned. Occasionally I will get a 3 or 4 from someone, and I know something has gone terribly wrong. I look to see if others have given low marks on their evaluations for the same course—to see if there is a pattern of responses. If there was only one person who gave a low mark, I try to think what I might have said to someone that led them to feel disrespected. And I consider that this person may have discerned a general problem in communication in the class as a whole of which I and other students were unaware. Evaluations are generally anonymous (signing it is a choice). I would love to be able to ask the person and learn from them, so I might avoid the problem in the future. And I wish there had been a space below the question on the form that invited further comment.

The question of hospitality toward each other is so important in New Testament classes, as in most religion classes, because we are dealing with things that are of ultimate value to people. We are dealing with their self-conception as a person, their experience of God, their longing for a just world, the values they have committed their lives to, as well as the hope they have for the future—for themselves, for their families, for friends, for their world. Furthermore, the New Testament is dealing with the expectation of the end of the world and with persecution of Christians. In this context, everything the authors deal with has become sharpened and acute. As such, the writings deal with life and death matters, and they do it in remarkably healthy and promising ways. If the students in my classes are not dealing with those issues, then it is important for them to know that many of the folks in the parishes they serve will be in that situation. So in New Testament classes, we are talking about things that matter. And, if the class experience is not to be simply perfunctory or just a head trip, then it is important that we learn how to talk about these critical issues with each other.

The question, then, is about the hospitality we give to one another in the classroom. I say “to one another” because it is my task to see that respect pervades the whole learning process, not just my own actions and attitudes. I say “hospitality” because it is fundamentally a matter of how we value and respect others, how we receive each other, and how we talk about groups or individuals who are not even with us. My colleague, Linda Thomas has provided us with a set of guidelines for respectful discussion that lays out the features of communal hospitality in the classroom.

“Guidelines for Civility in the Classroom”

- a. *Respect the personhood of others, while engaging their ideas.*
- b. *Carefully represent the views of those with whom we are in disagreement.*
- c. *Be careful in defining terms, avoiding needless use of inflammatory words.*
- d. *Be careful in the use of generalizations; where appropriate offer specific evidence.*
- e. *Seek to understand the experiences out of which others have arrived at their view. Hear the stories of others, as we share our own.*
- f. *Exercise care that expressions of personal offense at the differing opinion of others not be used as means of inhibiting dialogue.*
- g. *Be a patient listener before formulating responses.*

h. Be open to change in our own position and patient with the process of change in the thinking and behavior of others.

i. Make use of facilitators and mediators where communication can be served by it.

Always remember that people are defined, ultimately, by their relationship with God—not by the flaws we discover or think we discover in their views and actions.

This is an excellent set of guidelines. The main principle stated in a negative way is this: Do no harm. That is, do nothing and say nothing that is hurtful to another individual or group, even when you strongly disagree with them. Stated in a positive way, the main principle is: Receive the ideas and values of other individuals and groups, even and especially those who disagree with you, with the respect with which you would want to be received.

Often we are insensitive to those with whom we agree. It is too easy to treat with disrespect others whose ideas we do not like or believe to be harmful, especially when they are not part of our group and when they are not represented in the class. I can illustrate this best by sharing an example from one of my classes in which we were abysmal failures at respecting other people. I became aware of this problem only at the last class and later after the class was over. When I read the evaluations, I came across some comments that troubled me. On the evaluation form, the student was registering her experience of being put down and marginalized. Fortunately, the student had signed her name on the evaluation and I was able to follow up with her. She was a Roman Catholic lay woman who was taking a degree program at a sister institution in Hyde Park, the Catholic Theological Union. She had signed up for an LSTC class as part of her program. So I e-mailed her the following note. I have changed her name to protect her privacy.

Tricia

Thank you again for all you contributed to the class and to my own growth this last semester. I am very pleased that you took the class and that you found it to be meaningful. I also heard your suggestion that, in future, I give all the assignments ahead of time for people who need to work ahead. I apologize that I did not do that this semester.

Also, I noted your personal comments to me in the last class and your comments about the experience with other students at LSTC on your evaluation. I have no doubt you are accurate in your experience of being put down and marginalized—discriminated against. It would, however, be very helpful to me if you would be willing to give me some specific examples of comments or intangible kinds of behavior that made you feel this way. I am eager for this not to happen again, and I want to know the nature of it so I can head it off. If you do not want to share I will understand. At the same time, I will treat any information you give me in confidence.

Thanks, Tricia. I wish you the best of everything. I appreciated all your contributions. The care with which you did the final project was especially meaningful.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Dave

In order for you to appreciate all the dynamics of the situation, I have included her response to me in full.

Dear Dave,

Thank you for the two e-mails. I had been intending on sending you an e-mail expressing my gratitude and appreciation for your paper on oral performance criticism. I found the paper very enlightening--not only in relation to Mark, but the entire New Testament. Thank you for sharing the paper. I had read the paper after finals at CTU (one week after LSTC finals), and hoped to

send you an e-mail, but then the hectic-ness of school teaching (we went until Dec. 23rd) and music rehearsals for Christmas prohibited me. My Christmas was busy, exhausting, but quite wonderful. Again, thank you!

Now I can certainly understand the praise that the LSTC students gave you at the beginning of the class—taking a class with you as the professor is certainly a blessing, and a gem of wisdom. I hope that I adequately expressed my appreciation for you and the tremendous amount of knowledge I gained in [the class]. The comments regarding the other students were not a reflection on you, but given only to help future formation and to prevent a recurrence. I hesitated doing so, because I certainly did not want to hurt your feelings at all, and I hope and pray that I did not.

The first incident occurred on the very first day of class. This student had just met me, and remarked vehemently on the thickheadedness of the Roman Catholic Church in its stance on the ordination of women. Now, while I happen to disagree with Rome's current stance, I was somewhat surprised, and not sure how to react. When I first meet someone of another faith tradition, I do not remark on what I perceive as a negative aspect of that person's faith tradition. Pastorally, I would think to do so could be a bit off-putting. When I am engaged in any interfaith/inter-religious dialogue, I think it is important to establish a personal relationship with the person, and then respectfully question issues about their faith tradition, so it is clear that the other's faith tradition is honored, but an aspect is puzzling. Had that been the only incident, I would have written it off as my being sensitive.

The following week, leaving class four of were riding down in the elevator. One person asked the other two students where they were parked, where they live, about their commute, etc. I was not even spoken to--not even "good night." I guess because we were talking about people being treated as "unclean" during class, their total disregard of an outsider was hurtful.

For me the most egregious incident came when we were in small groups. We were to discuss the 'social location' that we bring when we read Scripture. A student at the table in front of mine said--loud enough for his table and mine to hear—"that now that he's not Catholic, he actually reads The Bible." The remark was hurtful and insulting enough, but what compounded it was that the student's entire table laughed, as well as two students at my table, with one student at my table chiming in "that's the truth." Essentially, about 1/3 of the class thought nothing about such a remark, and thought it was humorous. Their complicit cooperation in this prejudicial remark was equally disturbing. Dave, I am a Catholic who does read Scripture regularly, who treasures reading Scripture. The Word of God, as Heb 4:12 states is "alive" for me. Apparently, another student must have seen the shocked / stunned expression on my face, because the student who made the original remark apologized by explaining he "didn't mean anything by it." I have no doubt that if a Catholic was not in the class, the remark would have been laughed at, and that would have been the end of it. But the remark was a derogatory, discriminatory remark (I felt), aimed at putting down one group (Catholics) while exalting one's own group—which struck me as extremely counter-[the Gospel of] Mark. That aspect concerns me, because these students are future pastors who will be endowed with the privilege and responsibility of preaching and forming a congregation; I worry that prejudice or a prejudicial attitude might be spread to these good people's congregations.

In another small group session, a different LSTC student remarked that the religion of Islam is all based on fear and punishment. When I said that I would respectfully disagree with that student's point on Islam, I was told I was wrong, that this student even argues with professors

regarding Islam and that since 9/11, people have just been “nice” to Muslims--resulting in bad teaching about Islam. This was an incident where I knew to say anything further would fall on “deaf ears.” While I have taken a class on Islam, have Muslim friends, participated on an interfaith dialogue trip and various activities, if this student argues and still disagrees with everything a professor on Islam. . . I don't have the Islamic training of a scholar, I could only witness by my personal experience, which I tried to do. Again, it was the prejudice that concerned me—for that student's future congregation.

Another student in a different small group session remarked about the fundamentalist Christians and “their” beliefs, with references to “those” people. This same student also remarked about “those” superstitious Catholics who saw the Virgin Mary in the underpass, and who look for visions of Mary in cornflakes. And while I, personally, don't look for Mary in salt stains or cereal, there is probably a way to respect the faith of those who might without being contemptuous. Perhaps by respecting their search for God, we could journey together, while disengaging ourselves from superstitions, and other things that keep us from full union with God. (And I write this knowing that I can just as easily judge others!)

Truthfully, after awhile, I became accustomed to hearing remarks about “those people,” whether “those people” were Catholics, Muslims, Fundamentalists, and--one night--the poor and what “they” (inappropriately) choose to want for Christmas. (That discussion was I believe, the first time I had the courage to speak up in a plenary session, the numerous remarks about the poor and their erroneous judgment was too bothersome for me to remain silent.)

Dave, please understand that I only wrote the concerns about my classmates in the evaluations (both final, and half way through the semester) so that these attitudes can be addressed and prevented. It was not to malign anybody, or even because my feelings were hurt. I especially did not do so to hurt your feelings. It was difficult for me to do so; I only articulated the concerns because I believe I have an moral / ethical duty to do so—in the hopes to building up future pastors who will, in turn, help build the Reign of God.

I, too, hope you will teach [a similar class to this one]. That would be a class I would love to take! I hope you will keep us informed.

Again, Dave, I hope that my elaborating on these incidents is not hurtful to you. You were always and consistently gracious and a welcoming presence to me. Your greeting and welcoming me every week meant a great deal to me. Thank you for sharing so much of your knowledge and of yourself—your struggles (i.e. with Jairus' daughter pericope). You gave very generously of yourself to the class. I am grateful to have taken a course with you, and would eagerly do so again.

I wish you and your family all the best and many continued blessings from God.

Peace and joy,

Tricia

You can imagine how I felt receiving this report of her experiences. I had such compassion for her and such regret that this had occurred. How could this happen with a student in a class of mine and in a seminary where we cherish regard for one another? I do not think this is typical of our students and our classes. However, I must admit now that I don't know. If I had been unaware of it in my own class, I have most likely also been unaware of it elsewhere. Even if it is not typical, it must be addressed and stopped. How can I reflect on this?

First of all, the comments by students were crass stereotypes made about other groups that showed no respect for other traditions. The groups that were attacked seemed to run the

gamut from Catholics to Fundamentalists to Muslims. There is a tendency for people to define themselves over and against other groups. When that happens, the other groups become foils for the superiority of our own traditions. Then it is too easy to put them down as a way to lift ourselves up.

Second, students showed rank disregard for Tricia. Time after time she was subjected to disparaging remarks about Roman Catholics. And she had it absolutely right: if you disagree with another's traditions, first establish a relationship of openness and respect and then you can share your puzzlement or concern about certain aspects of that tradition.

Third, apart from Tricia, we were all implicated in it. The students who made the remarks were surely complicit. The students who laughed and joined in were complicit. The students who overheard the remarks without challenging them were implicated. I was responsible because I did not set clear guidelines or monitor the small groups adequately. And the seminary as a whole might have done a better job of setting explicit guidelines for conversations in all classes to be included in every syllabus.

Fourth, I want to point out that many of the disparaging remarks were made about people who were not part of our group as a class or as a seminary or as a denomination. I as a teacher need to model respectful talk. I have become acutely aware that if I disparage a group, say "fundamentalists," in my lectures, three things will happen. One: If there is a student in the room who shares a literalist approach to the Bible, they will be shut down. Two: If I heard a teacher talk that way about other people, I would wonder if he or she might not also talk about me and my views that way. Three: Such talk creates a climate of intolerance. It will lead others to do the same.

Finally, this is an opportunity to speak about the power dynamics of this kind of talk. As long as we are in a group comprised of like-minded people and on our own turf, we will tend to exert our power by talking about other groups. As long as the group is predominantly like-minded, then we may think we can get away with making comments that disrespect one or two people in the class. Here the issue is the thoughtfulness of hospitality to guests. The power dynamics can be reversed if we ask: How would I speak if I were the guest? If I were the only LSTC student in a class at the Catholic Theological Union, how would I speak? Or how would I talk about Muslims if there were Muslim students in this class to present matters from their point of view (and I did have a Muslim student one semester in my Paul class)? These seminary students preparing to preach can take note and apply this to their future ministries. Can they prepare sermons in such a way as to anticipate how people from very diverse social locations would respond were they present—Jews, poor people, those of same-sex gender orientation, rich people, people of another denomination, and so on? Do they prepare only to speak to the in-crowd or do they preach in such a way that they could preach in a very different venue—say a homeless shelter or a synagogue. Understanding the power dynamics for now in seminary and for later in ministry is crucial. The classroom atmosphere can become a teaching moment that may have vast implications for the future vocation of the students.

How can we generate respect in students and how can we create an ethos in the classroom so that this kind of talk does not happen? As argued above, one step is to set guidelines and to go over them in the class. The second step is for me to model these guidelines. The third step is for all of us in the class respectfully to challenge each other when we perceive that the guidelines are not being met. This also can create a good opportunity to go over the guidelines again and to reinforce them.

But more than guidelines and modeling is the intangible ethos of openness we may be able to engender in the class. Then we can also engage in dialogue that fosters understanding and respect toward those with whom we disagree. So many of the things to be said reflect the merely the mechanics of conversation. But the hospitality we are talking about here is about so much more than that. It is about an intangible attitude of openness and reception toward other human beings.

A fundamental aspect of that openness is a profound desire to want to know what another person thinks—to ask questions, to be silent in the presence of another person, to listen intently, to explore another's world with imagination, to enter with empathy into the world of another, to hear the other into personhood, as Nelle Morton has said. This takes an un-self-centered act of letting go of oneself, of putting our responses on hold, of not trying to think of a retort or trying to come up with a creative answer or fix a problem.

Now class discussion is not therapy. And I do not think it wise for students to delve deeply into each other's personal lives. Nor do I mean to suggest that people are so fragile that we have to handle each other with kid gloves. Nor does it mean we cannot express strong feelings and entertain vigorous debate. Challenging people can be a matter of respect. But I do want them to listen to each other. It is a rare occurrence to find people who are genuinely interested in what others have to say and who want to understand what they think. It is quite uncommon to find people who will listen without judgment or advice. Still, this is what I would like to foster in my classes in ordinary conversation about the interpretation of the Bible—people who are deeply interested in probing what the Bible thinks and what others students think about that.

I have two suggestions for practicing the art of listening in the classroom. One is a procedure my wife and I learned in therapy. Let one person begin on a subject. Let them say all they want to say. The other person can listen and ask questions for clarity, but not for the purpose of challenging or making points. Then when the one person has finished speaking, it is up to the listener to summarize faithfully what that person has said. The listener then asks if they got it right, and the original speaker can correct or add. The original speaker can then add anything they would like to add, and again the listener is to summarize. At that point the roles are reversed, and they go through the same procedure. When this is complete, they begin to respond to what the other has said, pro or con. This may lead to some sharp differences, but we keep the process going. Both parties must be respected and heard. Again they take turns summarizing. Eventually some agreement is discovered or the conversation partners agree to disagree, but they have at least understood why the other person takes the position they take. At first, my wife Sandy and I did this in a rather ritualistic way, and it was stilted—but it worked. Now we do not follow a ritual procedure. Rather, we have developed the habit (most of the time!) of listening and summarizing and incorporating that into our overall conversations. That is what I like to see happen in discussions in class—both about matters over which we agree and in matters where we have foundational differences of opinion. Such mutual hospitality is to be much desired!

The second practice is this. Imagine you were interviewing someone, say for a talk show. They are the guest—the focus of attention—and you are the interviewer. You begin with some general questions. Then you may have questions suggested to you by what that person has said. This may lead to even more probing questions. You are engaged in drawing this person out. Maybe you have questions that lead them to think about things they have not yet formulated. You may challenge the person to explain certain things you do not understand or agree with. You

may change to a different subject and pursue another line of questioning. You may state your own opinion about something as part of the conversation, but then the focus moves back to the interviewee. After this process, the places are exchanged and the interview moves on to another person. When this is first done, the person being interviewed may feel as if they are being grilled. It is therefore important to agree that at any point, the person may respectfully decline to answer a question or pursue a line of thinking. Again, the idea is to get past a wooden use of this process and incorporate it into the ordinary discussions that take place in pairs or small groups or even with the class as a whole.

Both these practices can be done with pairs in conversation in the class or with a small group. However, the point is this. Each process treats the other person with hospitality of openness and genuine interest, identifying and honoring similarities and differences. Sometimes we discover the life experiences or influences that have led people to embrace their points of view. Sometimes we can see the positive dynamics of groups with whom we disagree or see positive outcomes of their beliefs and values. Hopefully, the conversation in one class period will lead people to continue the relationship or develop a friendship outside of class or in later class period. The key is that we have given each other a voice and treated others with respect. We have empowered them to speak because they know they will be heard and respected. This is fundamental goal of any educational experience, and it is a mutual outcome students can bring about for each other.

In studying the Bible, there is an additional dimension of hospitality that We must address. That is the respectful hospitality shown (or not shown) by the New Testament writings themselves. How can we say “Do no harm” when the Bible in places discriminates against Jews, subordinates women and slaves, condemns homosexuality, and advises people to submit to an oppressive government. This is an aspect of the Bible we must face honestly if the Bible is to be part of a respectful dialogue. I like to think that we are in dialogue with the Bible, eager to let it say what it has to say without twisting it or prettifying it up or making it say what we think it should say. We may want to give it the benefit of the doubt by putting it in the best light. But we also need to be aware that the Bible has power in our society. Our dialogue with the Bible recognizes its power—seeking to further its power for good and also standing against its capacity for oppression, discrimination, and marginalization. Fortunately much of the rest of the Bible stands in opposition to these things, and we can often use life-giving and liberating parts of the Bible to counter the destructive aspects of other parts.

Either way, the key principle is this: Never use the Bible to oppress. In that regard, Christians have a terrifying history of harm to so many groups and individuals. I never encountered it so starkly as in Neil Elliott’s book, *Liberating Paul*. The title is a double entendre meant to suggest that the author wanted to free Paul from those who would use Paul to do great harm. And he also wanted to show that Paul was actually in fact a liberating figure. His first chapter blew me away. He gives example after example of the way Paul’s letters have been used to devastating use against groups of people. He goes into great detail about the horrors perpetrated upon women in early American life, especially in relation to the Salem witch trials. He talks about the way Paul’s letters were employed by slave owners to justify the most brutal treatment of slaves in pre-Civil War America. Then he catalogues the atrocities upon Jews in the holocaust and the ways Christians and Paul’s letters were so fully implicated in that tragedy. Then he goes into detail about the ways in which the US government supported tyrants in Central America and not only approved but even trained Central American people to kill any who stood

in opposition, citing the Pauline mandate to “Obey the authorities as though from God” as justification for their actions. And he recounts the suppression of homosexuals as deviants who deserve nothing but shunning and death.

It took me a long time to get over that essay when I first read it. Even now, every time I read it, I am deeply chagrined. And I read it every semester with my class. It is one of the first readings I require. Students must state the thesis or main point of the reading and then enumerate the examples Elliott gives to support his point. The discussions about this assignment that follow are often among the best in the semester. People are open to doing some real soul-searching. Some are able to attest to the harm Paul has done in their lives and communities—a pastor advising a wife to stay in an abusive relationship or a grandmother of a black student refusing to read Paul to her grandchildren. Only as we are able face up to this potential harm from his letters can we be in genuine dialogue with Paul. To be sure, Elliott seeks to exonerate Paul himself from much of this harm. Paul did not write the letters with the household codes or the Pastoral Epistles. Some of the harmful passages in the genuine letters of Paul were probably added in by later scribes. Some of the genuine passages that are harmful have been misinterpreted and misused. When we see Paul only through the letters he did in fact write and apart from those he did not, we are able to see Paul as a genuinely liberating figure.

Nevertheless, those pseudonymous writings attributed to Paul but which he did not write are still in the Bible. And we have to deal with that. And we have deal openly and forthrightly with any negative things in Paul’s genuine letters that may be harmful. This honesty makes it easier for us in class to be hospitable to Paul. This honesty frees up the dialogue with the Bible to be a dialogue of mutuality and respect, without compromising our commitment to counter oppression. We can listen closely to the Bible and let it say what it says without prettying it up. We can say what we honestly want to say in critique of the Bible. The result of such a dialogue is that, usually, people who come into the class with a very negative view of Paul actually come to respect Paul and even to love him, problematic issues and all.

In his book on mission, *Bread for the Journey*, Tony Gittens (a professor at the Catholic Theological Union!) puts forth a view of mission in a framework of hospitality. He portrays the missionary as a guest, aware of being in another’s space, aware of needing to respect another’s culture, eager not to violate certain customs or habits, open to learning, and in the process, where appropriate, also open to sharing. We need such a view of hospitality in everyday life, in which each is eager to give hospitality and each is eager to receive hospitality respectfully as a guest of others. This is shared hospitality of the most respectful kind. And at the heart of such hospitality are relationships that are more even than a matter of respect. Theologically, they are a matter of reverence, reverence for other people as children of God, as Linda Thomas’ guidelines remind us. We have lost the sense of reverence in our culture. But we can recover it by experiencing again the awe and wonder of human life. Deeper than our agreements, deeper than our disagreements, beneath the need at times even to work against one another, there is a foundational regard for the life of other persons. This foundational reverence should undergird all human relationships, and it can serve as the basis for the most profound learning that can take place in any classroom.