

# A Lesson in Magic

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Teaching is a strange alchemy. The gathering of disparate objects—a spoon, pressed leaves, a drop of blood, and words of incantation. They all conjure powers of sight or channel lives long dead. Maybe there is no science to it at all.

Maybe witchcraft is the better analogy. When I say, “I teach,” the images that float in our minds are spell books and star charts and the properties of the elements and the water and bone that sit suspended and infused in flesh and skin.

What is teaching if not playing in the gaps between spirits and trees and bird nests and breath and tendrils of hair, and the love and pain and grief and safety that wafts from them? What is teaching but looking for portals in ink on a page to discover the people we come from— memories and histories that cling to us, invisible and quiet, like static charged particles that fill me when I rub my socked feet along the carpet and snap into being when I touch my little brother.

I walk into a classroom and we are all just elements—water, electricity, carbon, energy pulsing in blood—until we combine just so, with just the right words, with the sun in just the right spot then—a spark, a bit of charcoal, light smoke—something to write with and light to see what we’ve written. We see each other’s faces different in flicker of flame. Something comes into being that was not there before. I become something I was not before.

But before I was a teacher, before I could speak of the spells that were woven over me, the miracles where mud was smeared over my eyes and then water washed over me and I opened again to see color and shapes that were once only sounds, I was a learner.

I could talk about learning and the time I sat in a college classroom full of white students with the white professor standing at the front (such a pleasant man). We were reading W.E.B. DuBois and we got to the line “To the real question, ‘How does it feel to be a problem...’” and knowing exactly what DuBois meant. The words were not mine—but the feeling, the experience, the reality was thread on a needle that poked through that used copy of *Souls of Black Folk* and pricked me, wound its way through me and tied me up and loosed me at the same time. I walked out of that class trailing threads of time and text and brown bodies, stitched

in little hatched patterns and tucked back in so you can’t see the seams.

I could talk about learning as flipping through hundreds of mini cards cut from 3x5 cards with words like “masticate” on one side and “to chew” on the other, stuffing myself on word after word, the pile of what I didn’t know getting smaller and smaller as I walked to and from the car in the shadow of the university chapel. Two more correct words than last time could mean 10 points more on my GRE. Ten points closer to the letters Ph.D, the symbols of transformation into one who can teach, cast, perform.

Growing up I loved playing soccer. It was my whole life. But I wasn’t great. Or even good. My footwork was clumsy and my kicks didn’t snap. After a few sprints my lungs would seize up and I’d have to sit by the coach with an inhaler cradled in my palms. Puff. Inhale. Hold. When my lungs didn’t sting anymore I would go back in. I’d sprint. My lungs would seize. Sideline. Puff. Inhale. Repeat. To this day I still don’t know what it was about that game that lured me into such constant embarrassments and such dangerous reminders of what my body seemed incapable of doing.

Finally my mother, tired of too many (expensive) trips to the ER, insisted I play goalie. “Mom, only the really bad kids play goalie.” I said.

“It’s that or baseball. They don’t run in baseball.” She said.

So at the next week’s practice I went with the goalkeepers. Mr. Reyes gave me a crash course on the basics. Knees slightly bent. Feet shoulder length apart. Arms hanging slightly bent. Shuffle across, don’t cross your feet. With each instruction he’d pose then have me mirror him.

To dive you step out, and drop that knee deep, then drive your other knee where you want to be, then explode from the bent leg... The first shot flew by me. Where were my knees supposed to go? My feet tangled on the second.

oh. So that’s why you’re supposed to shuffle.

On the third shot I didn’t quite realize what was happening. I didn’t think to shuffle or bend my knee or explode. There wasn’t an order or a neat progression. I saw the ball leave that kid’s foot and I was flying, like all the seizing of my lungs had been gathered up like a river behind a dam and then the little door cracked open spewing water into a dry river bed.

Shuffle, shuffle, explode.

Got the fourth with a finger tip. Swallowed up the fifth like it was in slow motion. The sixth was going upper 90, but I was a tree frog, I was a cat defying all the laws of gravity to slip the ball wide.

I thought I was a broken jar who loved to carry water.

Mr. Reyes showed me I could fly.

If learning is transfiguration, teaching feels like magic spilling out of my fingers.

My oldest son had been living on his own for a few months and decided to visit us on a Friday. We were sitting around the table in the kitchen, just listening to what his new life looked like and I asked what he had been eating.

“Rice with butter and soy sauce and tuna,” he said.

“What about vegetables?” I asked.

“Oh, don’t worry. I throw some of that bagged spinach on top and mix it all up.”

“Wait, plain? What do you do to it?” He looked at me, not quite sure what I was asking.

“Do you sauté it in butter? Steam it?” He stared at me.

“Okay, let’s try a little something,” I said pulling the cast iron pan from the drawer under the stove.

“Turn on the burner. Get the pan hot. Throw on some butter. See it sizzle? Now, throw on the spinach. Stir it until it shrinks. Taste it. When it’s tender, add the tuna and some soy sauce, maybe a little more butter. Then put it all on some rice.”

The plate sat on the table and we each took a forkful. I tried it. He tried it.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Honestly, I don’t taste much of a difference,” he said.

I hope he will.

Before I knew I should teach I had always wanted to be a soccer coach. Maybe it was because of the freedom I discovered that one day on the practice field. But instead of coaching soccer or cooking or drawing, I found myself a Christian and a person who had a knack of explaining things to people. To teach words, to teach the shuffle-shuffle-crouch-explode, that was another thing. To teach how a word changed over time or a history that hadn’t been told, to help students make their pile of what they did not know a little smaller. That seems like lesser magic. Like rituals that if done with enough repetition slowly form branches into wands.

But I found myself teaching the ephemeral, the unseen, a thing characterized more by what we do not know than what we do know. What is it to teach THEOLOGY? What is it to teach the Study of God? To teach something so ephemeral as alpha and omega, and the improbabilities of an incarnation, of one who creates all that is, much less the Trinity?

It’s like trying to teach my kids about their grandmother who’s long since passed away. My oldest has faint memories of her, of what it felt like for her to envelop him. He remembers the yard and the house on Canterfield Way. But not much beyond that. My second son has no such echoes. We found out we were pregnant with him a few months after we heard she got the diagnosis of stage four colon cancer. She said she was going to hang on to see him born. And she did. She held him and cried and cried and laughed and laughed. And three months later she passed.

“Grandmother” is just a concept for my third son, like “God” or “Hope” or “Mars.” A word that points to something but exists in the world only in the forms of squiggly lines that become letters that become words. The words speak because we filled them with meaning, but he’s been asking why they are and whether they are and what about those other letters and gods and signs in the world.

How do I teach them about their grandmother? I tell them all stories, sure.

Maybe I need to tell them the history of grandmothers?  
Or give them the etymology of the word?

Or describe to them the deformations of familial structures that marginalized extended family kinship networks?

Or do I show them the genealogy?

The name “Webster” on the Mayflower’s registry?  
A picture of the house on Long Island?

Or do I begin with the back surgeries or the men she loved and only seemed to hurt her.

Or do I try to describe her laughing, and the crying, and the laughing?

Or try to scrape together the tastes and sounds and feel of just how hard she loved, even in a world that barely loved her?

But to them they’re all just words, aren’t they? A person who’s become an idea. A body that’s become a memory. How do you show them that the idea, the memory, the love, the freedom is still alive? Maybe there isn’t a science for those kinds of miracles. Maybe it really is all magic and conjuring and scraping brown bits from the bottom of pans and crouching deep to find we are flying. And maybe, along the way, we find we are all the bits and pieces, conjuring and being conjured into some mysterious new—learning and teaching and learning again.



### About the Author

**Brian Bantum** is the Neil F. and Ila A. Professor of Theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. He is a contributing editor to *The Christian Century* and has published three books: *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity*, and *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World* and most recently, *Choosing Us: Marriage and Mutual Flourishing in a World of Difference* co-authored with his spouse, Rev. Gail Song Bantum.