

# “Teaching From My Wounds: Letting Vulnerability Lead the Way”

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I woke up anxious. Again. It wasn't even the first day of the semester; we had been at this for a few weeks now. Hell, I had been at this for the better part of a decade. Yet here I was again, stomach in my throat, muscles tense, mind racing, thoughts chaotic and incoherent. I felt exposed and unmoored, jittery and sluggish at the same time.

My morning classes passed without incident, as did my first afternoon class. And then, as I walked into the last class of the day, a third-year theology seminar, the butterflies went into overdrive and the pit in my stomach seemed to grow three sizes, just as they had been doing for the previous two weeks. Were we sitting in a semicircle or in groups that day? I don't remember. I don't remember if we began with small group discussion or if I had planned to lecture a little bit first. I don't even remember what we were discussing that day—was it from *Intersectional Theology*<sup>1</sup> or *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*?<sup>2</sup> In the moment I definitely didn't remember that nineteen of the twenty students in the class always arrived brimming with enthusiasm, ready to courageously discuss systems of power and how these systems have affected our theology—ready to really mean the question, “Who is my neighbor?” and interrogate themselves about where their understanding of neighborliness had been limited by various categories of identity. I wasn't able to focus on the fact that, for the most part, we were learning and searching and growing together, just beyond the reach of our collective comfort zone, and totally eating it all up.

What I do remember is that in that moment I was showing up tense, braced for that one particular student's rejection of our conversation, his bucking against the message in these books that I and so many students in the class found life-giving, his unwillingness to consider the possibility that his perspective was conditional, provisional, and perhaps could use some revision. I was anticipating his defensiveness and finding myself withering in the face of the imagined specter of it. I was already rehearsing how I would adjust my lesson to be less inflammatory, less provocative—in other words, I was planning ways to contort and shrink myself, and by extension to contort, shrink, and do rhetorical violence to these theologians whose work I respected so much.

What was happening to me? I had taught difficult, defensive students plenty of times before. Over the years I have found ways to balance, I think at least *somewhat* gracefully, the need to push and challenge them, on the one hand, with the need not to shut the metaphorical door in their faces, on the other. Why was my heart pounding about a conversation that hadn't even happened yet?

It was time to nip this in the bud. I made an appointment with my therapist. “I love teaching!” I exclaimed to her, exasperated with myself. “Where is this anxiety coming from?”

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I was born and raised in the American Deep South, in the Southern Baptist church. It took me a while to realize it, but the embedded theology<sup>3</sup> that formed me was a comfortable sweater that had been wrapped around me since birth. I had absorbed the belief that asking questions (at least, questions without predetermined, church-approved answers) about God or the Bible was tantamount to heresy, and I felt safe and cozy in the easy answers and the clear and simple categorization of both people and ideas that this theology afforded me. As I grew up, went off to college, and developed close relationships with people whose backgrounds differed drastically from my own, however, the questions began to pile up. Eventually I learned to welcome those questions, to be less afraid of the ways they made me change—even learned to long for those experiences of destabilization that disrupted my familiar view of the world. Once I started tugging on the fibers of that sweater it unraveled completely—and I realized it had never fit all that well in the first place. Now, I am naturally drawn to students who reflect that longing, that openness to the unraveling, that sense of needing something other than the itchy, ill-fitting garment that has been handed to them. I confess I have a harder time connecting with the ones who seem committed to their certainties.

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There's a reason all those parables in the Gospels about wheat and tares and seeds falling into good or bad soil really work, rhetorically speaking. Jesus apparently knew something about the patience required to watch things grow, once you've done all you could to create the conditions for it—the letting

go, trusting the process, the fact that you are not the sun and have no control over photosynthesis. Sometimes the roots take hold, and sometimes they don't.

What I mean is that my job isn't really to talk anyone into anything, as much as the part of me that still has a hangover from my proselytizing Evangelical days might be inclined to do so. I am just the caretaker and steward of our shared space. I buzz around the room, trying to pollinate the curiosity of those who are open and ready and feeling brave in their inquisitiveness, but not forcing openness on anyone who isn't ready for it.

The English word “vulnerable” comes from the Latin *vulnerare*: to wound. We are most vulnerable in those places where we are or have been most susceptible to injury. It sounds like a weakness, but it can be a superpower. My wounds come with me into the classroom, though I think (I hope) for the most part they are healed-over scars by now. Some of my wounds match the ones my students bear, but my job is to tend to them all and not just the students who have been marked in ways familiar to me: I also must tend to—must cultivate the flourishing of—the ones who remind me powerfully of those who wounded me. And, at the same time, I'm sure that to some of my students I look and sound like someone who has wounded them—a Sunday school teacher, a mother. For some, maybe my whiteness understandably has their guard up. For others, my very *womanness* is cause for suspicion bordering on disrespect, dismissiveness.

At the root of all of this is fear. As Parker Palmer reminds us, “If I want to teach well in the face of my students' fears, I need to see clearly and steadily the fear that is in their hearts.”<sup>4</sup>



Just like Palmer and his “Student from Hell,” with my student described above, I initially “read that student not in the light of his condition but in the shadow of my own.”<sup>5</sup> Palmer exhorts us to remember that “we cannot see the fear in our students until we see the fear in ourselves.”<sup>6</sup> What was I afraid of? Of being wrong—no amount of education has ever been able to displace the self-doubt that plagues me like a low-grade fever. Of saying something that would make the student shut down—then I would truly be a failure of a teacher. Of pushing him away—or of being rejected and pushed away myself?

With Palmer, I can honestly say, “There I was, face to face with a forlorn young man in his early twenties who had no apparent power over me—and I was so afraid of him that I lost my bearings, my capacity to teach, my sense of self and self-worth.”<sup>7</sup> Palmer says that we will never actually shake this fearfulness; there will never come a day when we can “walk into any classroom without feeling afraid.”<sup>8</sup> Somehow, that feels like a relief to me. The goal here is not to eliminate the fear. This would be an impossible task. Instead, he reminds us, “I need not teach from a fearful place: I can teach from curiosity or hope or empathy or honesty, places that are as real within me as are my fears.”<sup>9</sup>

The student described above struck a nerve in me, I think, because I have finally begun to learn the power of being vulnerable

in the classroom, of being nakedly excited about sharing certain beloved texts and topics with my students. And just when I felt like I was starting to learn how to be brave in this way, the student’s pushback felt personal. It wasn’t. But it pressed on an old bruise and took me back to a time when I felt silenced and shamed.

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I am twenty-two years old. The world of academic theology has found me in a moment when I am ready but ill-equipped to hold my upbringing under a microscope and dissect it. I am almost finished with my first year in a master’s program in theological studies. I have taken classes on feminist theology and philosophy, Eastern Orthodox theology, and hermeneutics, and my internal world has been flipped upside down. I am delighted and terrified. My favorite professors have been the ones who say aloud the things I only ever dare to think in the silence of my own heart. They are unafraid to ask, “What if?” They have begun to teach me not to be afraid of things I don’t understand, and to confront the fact that I don’t understand most things. High on the thrill of new knowledge, new questions to ask, new directions for my curiosity, I venture a few stream-of-consciousness thoughts in a note on Facebook and publish it. *Who is God, and how do we think we come to know this God? What if we’re wrong? What if*

*there is so much more to truth than the limited way we have been taught to imagine it?* The note is honest and vulnerable and guileless and brave in a way I will not allow myself to be for many years afterward.

Because.

A few days later, a former youth pastor and mentor, someone who at one time really made me feel like I belonged, writes a blog post of his own. He never names me explicitly, but he quotes my note at length and writes condescendingly, patronizingly, about how lamentable it is that our young people go off to school and become brainwashed, lose their way, get doubts planted in their heads, are led astray. The tone is very “bless your heart, little girl” and seems to diminish and dismiss all the things that have recently made me come alive.

I delete my note. I feel ashamed, exposed, betrayed, and, for some unnamable reason, guilty. I stop writing after that.

Oh, I still write my master’s thesis, and then my doctoral dissertation, and over the next few years I bang out a small smattering of short scholarly pieces. But I most certainly stop writing like *that*. I’ve learned my lesson. I bury my actual questions, my actual voice, under thick layers of scholar-speak, detached and invulnerable, so that even if someone critiques my writing they’re not actually piercing my academia-thickened skin.

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I don’t know how she did it, but before I knew it my therapist had me mentally sitting across a table from that youth pastor, a man who had not been a part of my life for almost two decades. My anxiety was not about that lone, lost student, we discovered together. My anxiety was born of wounds inflicted years before, and of words I never got the chance (or the courage) to say. So I said them, to that ghost from the past sitting across an imagined table from me. “You made me doubt myself. You made me mistrust my own curiosity, my own questions. You made me feel guilty for not having blind faith. And now my life is dedicated to the exact opposite of that, and I am better for it. But I lost my voice for a long time, because of you.”

I realized that I had conflated my “student from hell” and others like him with those authority figures in my life who tried to discourage me from seeking new ways of thinking about things—the ones I allowed to make me feel guilty for asking questions. They are not the same. Students cling to certainty because certainty is comforting, reliable, secure. They are not shutting down my questions but protecting themselves from their own.

The next week I walked into that classroom, anxiety-free, and taught my ass off. But the experience has lingered, and I’m still trying to learn from it.

What do we do when we are supposed to be the adult in the classroom, yet a student interaction triggers something we experienced as our younger selves? The self-protective impulse takes over, defensiveness sets in, and then...how do we respond?

Classrooms have always been contested spaces. Today they are contested in new ways. State governments across the nation are placing limits on what kinds of topics can be pursued in school settings, from kindergartens all the way up through universities.<sup>10</sup> Those of us who teach in private institutions, unbound by many of these legal restrictions, may of course encounter resistance when we bring up subjects that are taboo in other settings, but those who are bound by those restrictions face much worse than mere pushback from students, parents, and boards of trustees: the threat of legal action or loss of livelihood. We live in a complicated and frightening time for asking deep and dangerous questions, which happen to be the heartbeat of higher education. It is only natural that a self-protective impulse would take over when dissent crops up in the classroom under such circumstances.

The religion classroom can seem especially contested, because everyone has skin in the game, even if they would like to pretend they do not. This includes the professor. No matter how detached and academic one tries to make it, these classes are still on some level about deeply held beliefs. To treat them with any degree of honesty necessarily entails entertaining some degree of tension. As Parker Palmer has always known, to teach with any semblance of honesty requires a great deal of courage, and this is especially true today.

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A year and a half after that epiphany in therapy, I taught another, similar student. This one was even more resistant. He did not wish to learn from me and basically said as much in his first written assignment. He thought the conversation guidelines I laid out for our class—about disagreeing respectfully, about critiquing ideas rather than people, etc.—were ridiculous and that we should not have to be nice to each other, that the Bible is the Word of God and that I should just tell people The Truth™ whether they like it or not, and if I didn’t then he would. The disrespect was palpable, both in his writing and in his silent, sullen posture in the classroom.

But this time I felt no anxiety when I walked into the room. I know he was just scared. I know he had been told (probably by people like my former youth pastor) to have his defenses up, that I would try to brainwash him, that I would turn him into a Democrat or force him to become gender-fluid, or to hate America, or whatever the fearmongering adults in his life had warned him about.

And I know the power of being more myself instead of less. That youth pastor does not have any power over me anymore. So I tried all semester—not to win him over like an overeager evangelist, nor to avoid topics or methods that would surely feed his



anger and disrespect. I didn't contort myself or my material the way I had been tempted to do before. Instead, I tried to teach to the scared part of him, to gently encourage him when he ventured an answer that tentatively pushed the boundaries of his embedded theology, to challenge him in ways that acknowledged his intelligence and his faith but invited him to consider something new. In other words, I turned to compassion and curiosity, and I hope he felt the tacit invitation to try to do the same. I told stories in class about times when I had been challenged and had my theology shaken. I talked openly about changing my mind. I let him and his classmates see pieces of who I had once been and of who I was becoming. I didn't nail it every time, and there are certainly things I would do differently, things I *will* do differently when the opportunity inevitably presents itself again. But it felt wonderful to let vulnerability lead the way.

What I think I've learned from the experience is this: My students can trigger old wounds in me, because in many ways they are

me, twenty years ago. They are mirrors of my own old uncertainties and defenses, scared and excited at the same time, both terrified and exhilarated by the prospect of upending everything they've ever known to be true. That younger me is still in me, and sometimes she comes out of my mouth when I feel cornered by a question or challenged in an uncomfortable way. In those moments I have to remind myself that I am older and more secure and more knowledgeable now, and we are just having a conversation, trying to figure some things out together.

I am both twenty-two-year-old little Beth Ritter, posing tentative but audacious theological questions on the newly minted Facebook and being publicly shamed by a former youth pastor for my lack of faith, and Dr. Beth Ritter-Conn, all grown up with a PhD, trying to tune out that scared, shaming voice, talking over it as loudly as I can to encourage each little individual "me" in the room not to be afraid of where their curiosity might lead them.



### About the Author

**Beth Ritter-Conn** is Assistant Professor of Religion at Belmont University. Her research addresses theological dimensions of hospitality, food, and embodiment. She enjoys running, yoga, knitting, and anything that gathers friends and strangers around a table. She lives in Nashville with her husband Jordan, their son Noah, and their cat Georgia.

### Notes & Bibliography

- 1 Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018).
- 2 James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).
- 3 Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 15-18. When one begins to engage in deliberative theology, one examines their embedded theology and "questions what had been taken for granted" (18).
- 4 Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (Hoboken: Jossey-Bass, 20th Anniversary Edition, 2017), 46.
- 5 Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 46.
- 6 Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 47.
- 7 Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 48.
- 8 Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 58.
- 9 Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 58.
- 10 A brief sampling includes the "Don't Say Gay" bill in Florida (<https://apnews.com/article/desantis-florida-dont-say-gay-ban-684ed25a-303f83208a89c556543183cb>), which prevents teachers from discussing gender identity or sexual orientation in schools all the way through twelfth grade; attempts (with varying degrees of success) by many state legislatures to pass laws restricting discussion of anything that smacks of critical race theory (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/02/14/critical-race-theory-teachers-fear-laws/>); and an alarming rise in banned books in school districts across the country (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/20/books/book-bans-united-states-free-speech.html>).