

8-3-2017

Teaching Students About Finding Their Religious Justice Roots

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, D. (2017). Teaching Students About Finding Their Religious Justice Roots. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/phil_facpub/11

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Teaching Students About Finding Their Religious Justice Roots

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Teaching, Religion, Politics

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Johnson
2017

I owe a great deal of my pedagogical approach to Vincent and Rosemarie Harding. The way I teach has been profoundly impacted by watching and learning from these activist teaching elders in the Black-led freedom struggle. Have you ever had a teacher who was a good story teller? A teacher who was so good that he or she pulled you into the teaching moment and it made you feel as though you were living history? Have you had a teacher who was so authentic, so responsive, so tuned in that you felt like you could make change? The Hardings, and teachers like them, keep this at the center of their teaching relationships and community. Some other characteristics these kinds of master teachers have in common are: 1) Personal lives that are consistent with what they teach about social change and justice, 2) A belief that every person has someone in their ancestry that has been a social change agent, 3) The conviction that the stories of *ordinary* people can be used to inspire others, and 4) A belief that religion is a force for justice. Let me give an example of such a model.

A small crowd gathered at Pendill Hill retreat center to listen to Black-led freedom struggle elder Vincent Harding. Harding made his way to the front of the room. He sat down and looked over the crowd. He began to speak. In that moment the room grew quiet and even my restless three-year-old crawled off my lap, stood, and waited in anticipation. After a few warm smiles and opening remarks, in his own Harding way, he led us in a conversation. It was a truly dialogical experience. Harding invited the body of people gathered to share their own stories as he shared his own. During the remainder of the program, one could sense the ancestors among us. As the evening drew to a close, Harding shared a deeply moving piece on the last time he saw Martin Luther King Jr. He told us how he and three other men had been asked by Corretta King to stand nonviolent watch over King's body as it lay in state in Atlanta. Harding drew the midnight to morning shift. He reminded us that the only people coming to pay their respects at that time of the night were either coming from work or going to work. "Martin's people." These were not celebrities or dignitaries, but the people of the movement. He tearfully talked about a nurse and man who had been to the bar before coming. As the evening closed, Harding asked sister Sonia Sanchez to do a piece of spoken word. Sanchez moved the community with a 15-minute piece she created from hearing the stories of the people present.

Sadly, this would be the last time I would hear Vincent Harding talk in public. However, the evening reflected the pedagogy created by Rosemarie and Vincent Harding, that is, circles of people listening

and learning from one another. Both Vincent and Rosemarie Harding were awe-inspiring master teachers who made their students/participants understand they too were a part of movement-making and the Beloved Community. They were the kind of teachers that many of us seek to be to our students. It is these models that guide me in helping students to learn about their own justice roots.

Creating the space for students to listen and to reflect is important if we want to connect them to social justice movements. In religious studies, as well as in peace studies, one of the goals is to make students feel connected to what is taking place socially and politically. Students often come into religious studies classes looking for a place to explore the big questions about life and to learn what others think. Combining the idea of connecting students socially and politically with an opportunity to explore the big questions opens a space for students to find their religious justice roots.

Here are some exercises I use in my religious studies and peace studies classes to foster student's investment in social change while providing an opportunity to think about their religious justice roots:

- Students read Vincent Harding's "Do Not Grow Weary or Lose Heart" and Grace Lee Boggs' "In Person."^[i] Afterwards I give this prompt: Each of us finds inspiration for how we want to live our lives. Many of us have an understanding of what it means to stand up for what is right or just. Places of inspiration can be family (or family-like) legacies. Students may choose to write a paper about someone in their family that inspires them to be a just person. The student should clearly identify the person in their family (or someone they would consider like family) that inspires his or her life. What did they do? How did you learn about this person? How does the person relate to your sense of social justice and what is right? How does this relate to what the authors had to say in their articles?
- Students read Rosemarie Freeney Harding and Rachel E. Harding's book *Remnants A Memoir of Spirit, Activism, and Mothering* over the course of the semester.^[ii] About every two weeks there are small group discussions about the readings in class. Students are prompted to discuss their understanding of the readings, but they are also asked how the readings relate to religion, politics, community, family, and justice. The book is written in such a way that students quickly find things to which they can relate. The end of the semester assignment is a reflection on the connection between religion, family, community, and justice.

At the end of the semester, it is always my hope that students find their roots in social justice. For many, their roots are in religious communities and family. Once students have established their roots, they begin to grow into the movement for justice.

[i] Vincent Harding, "Do Not Grow Weary or Lose Heart," Veterans of Hope Project. <http://www.veteransofhope.org/do-not-grow-weary-or-lose-heart/>. Accessed 25 July 2017. Grace Lee Boggs, "In Person." *In These Times*. http://inthesetimes.com/inperson/4060/grace_lee_boggs. Accessed 25 July 2017.

[ii] Rosemarie Freeney Harding and Rachel E. Harding, *Remnants A Memoir of Spirit, Activism, and Mothering* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).