

MIDWIFERY, SCAFFOLDING, AND HOSPITALITY: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS  
ON THE VALUE OF METAPHOR FOR THE MINISTRY OF TEACHING

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The great theologian and writer Frederick Buechner has famously defined the “calling” of a person as “the place where [their] deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”<sup>1</sup> For me, teaching is that place. I find a certain deep gladness in teaching I have yet to find anywhere else, perhaps in part because of what I have come to believe to be true about the nature of my identity as a teacher in a classroom of learners.

Fittingly, much of what I have come to believe about faithful teaching was hammered out in the completion of a course assignment. In January 2014 I enrolled in a doctoral-level seminar at Asbury Theological Seminary taught by Dr. Ellen Marmon entitled “Instructional Theory and Development.” One of the major assignments for the course was a paper in which we were gently forced to articulate some of our core convictions about the classroom experience. It was in the completing of this assignment that I began to consider the real value that a controlling metaphor or image can have for how I perceive and execute my own work as a teacher.

In his masterful book *The Courage to Teach* Parker J. Palmer shares about an exercise he sometimes asks teachers to participate in when he leads a faculty workshop. Palmer writes:

In faculty workshops, depending on the readiness of the group, I sometimes ask people to fill in the blank: “When I am teaching at my best, I am like a \_\_\_\_\_.” I ask people to do this quickly, accepting the image that arises within them, resisting the temptation to censor or edit it.

The point of the exercise is to allow one’s unconscious to surface a metaphor, no matter how silly or strange, that contains an insight that the rational mind would never allow. Not all groups have enough access to their imagination or are sufficiently at home with themselves to take this kind of risk. But when people are willing to feel a bit foolish among colleagues, the payoff is self-understanding can be considerable.<sup>2</sup>

I have found that last line to be true. For me, allowing three metaphors in particular to surface to the forefront of my thinking has resulted in a considerable payoff for my own philosophy of teaching and learning, at least in terms of how I understand my role as a teacher. My purpose in this essay is to highlight each of these three images in an effort to draw attention to the value that controlling metaphors can have for educators as they carry out the work of teaching. While I engage with a few dialogue partners in the footnotes, I should be clear that this essay is not intended as a major research article

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 119.

<sup>2</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*, 10th anniversary ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 152.

aimed at addressing a specific problem or advancing a stated thesis with respect to these metaphors or to any one particular educational theory. Instead, I write here as a practitioner, offering to fellow practitioners one approach to the work of teaching that I am finding helpful. When I am teaching at my best, I am like a midwife, a construction worker, and a host.

### *Midwifery*

I have learned that when I am teaching at my best, I am like a midwife. As I write that, I understand in part why Palmer suggests that a willingness to feel a bit foolish among colleagues might be necessary as they consider their guiding teaching metaphors. Midwifery may be a surprising metaphor for anyone to employ for teaching, but the surprise is surely intensified when the one employing the metaphor is a male. I, like most of the men I know, would probably never have given midwifery much thought were it not for two significant experiences in my life.

The first experience I remember having with midwifery came by way of an important book I read for my undergraduate degree at MidAmerica Nazarene University. Sensing a calling to student ministry, I settled on a major in Youth and Family Ministries and in the fall semester of 1999 enrolled in course required for my major entitled Youth Programming, taught by Dr. Mark Hayse. One of the assigned readings for this course was a book that has now become a classic in the field of student ministry entitled *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending in Youth Ministry*, co-authored by Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster. This work was seminal for my formation as a minister, chalked full of wise pastoral theology that far transcends the world of youth ministry. I will return to this book in a moment, but before I do I should introduce the other major life experience that has placed midwifery before me as a powerful teaching metaphor.

On March 12, 2011 I became a married man. Standing before 250 or so of our closest friends and family, I exchanged marriage vows with the most extraordinary woman I have ever or will ever know, Kendra Renae Crow. An unassuming Iowa farm girl, Kendra and I met in college where she was a four-year varsity volleyball star at MNU, a graduate with honors, and the recipient of the homecoming queen crown during her senior year. It would be many years later before we were married, but during those years between her graduation and our wedding Kendra served as a Peace Corps volunteer for two years in Guatemala, obtained another degree as a Registered Nurse, and then moved to the Philippines where she trained for two years to become a Certified Professional Midwife (CPM).

What my wife has done in a literal sense for well over 100 mothers in the Philippines, Michigan, and now Kentucky is the metaphor that Dean and Foster use to describe the faithful practice of Christian teaching and nurture. Playing off of the midwifery metaphor, the authors present four “catechetical stages of labor” in Christian education:

(1) “pack your bag” (2) “name the pain” (3) “break water” and (4) “be ready for the catch.”<sup>3</sup>

The first catechetical stage of labor, “pack your bag,” recalls how a good midwife is well prepared with a packed bag, ready to head out the door at a moment’s notice when a mother-to-be calls. Even as I type this sentence Kendra is prepared with a bag packed, awaiting the moment when one of her clients—an expectant mother approaching her forty-first week of pregnancy—calls to notify her that she has moved into active labor. In relation to teaching, this bag-packing stage is all about being adequately equipped to help students learn. For me this includes all my years of formal education and experience, as well as doing my best to keep current with important new developments in my academic discipline along with advances in the research on student learning styles and pedagogical practices.

Secondly, just as a good midwife “names the pain” for her client and assists her in persevering through it, good teaching for me involves monitoring any potential stress and discomfort associated with new learning for my students and helping them to navigate it. This practice was well modeled for me by my Beginning Greek teacher at MidAmerica, Dr. Jim Edlin. Recognizing that I was struggling to grasp the basics of the language, Dr. Edlin very gently and discreetly drew me aside in the lobby after one particularly challenging class session and simply said, “Ryan, I can tell you are struggling with this. Is there any way I can help you?” Dr. Edlin did not specifically tell me what was wrong, nor did he simply bail me out by just giving me the answers, but he was attuned to a struggling student and compassionate enough to offer whatever help he appropriately could give. With Dr. Edlin’s sensitive monitoring of my learning stress and assistance in navigating it I survived Beginning Greek.

The third catechetical labor stage referred to by Dean and Foster is the water-breaking stage. As a good midwife must at times engage in the decisive act of breaking water for the mother in order to move the birth along, good teaching for me involves challenging students in ways that proved decisive for their learning. Such challenges might include asking them pointed questions, giving challenging assignments, encouraging bright students to apply for graduate school, or intentionally mentoring promising students.

Finally, the fourth catechetical stage of labor highlighted by Dean and Foster is the “be ready for the catch” stage. As a good midwife is always ready to catch the baby after the mother’s final push, faithful teaching for me includes such things as being available to students outside of the classroom when their learning begins to crown, celebrating the arrival of learning with joy, and helping students settle in a bit more with the subject by pointing them to additional reading, future classes, and other teachers who might help them as they continue to make themselves more “at home” in the discipline they have just been exposed to.

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<sup>3</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending in Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 163-71.

### *Scaffolding*

In a guest lecture for the “Instructional Theory and Development” course referred to earlier in this article, Dr. Chris A. Kiesling highlighted the metaphor of scaffolding as a useful way of helping teachers meet students on whatever level students occupy in the learning process.<sup>4</sup> Scaffolding, like good teaching, is not easy to describe in words but most of us know what it looks like when we see it. In essence, in the realm of building construction and repair, scaffolding is the practice of creating a temporary structure used to support people and materials in the construction or repair of physical structures. Once the construction or repair of one level of a structure is complete, scaffolding materials, usually wood planks connected by metal poles, can be used to progress on to another level of building construction or repair.

The *Glossary of Education Reform* applies this metaphor of scaffolding to educational contexts using the following definition:

In education, scaffolding refers to a variety of instructional techniques used to move students progressively toward stronger understanding and, ultimately, greater independence in the learning process. The term itself offers the relevant descriptive metaphor: teachers provide successive levels of temporary support that help students reach higher levels of comprehension and skill acquisition that they would not be able to achieve without assistance.<sup>5</sup>

The major benefit of this metaphor is that it reminds teachers of a reality that all teachers are intuitively aware of but may only occasionally be sensitive to: the reality that students will come to the classroom with varying educational experiences. Some students, like some structures, require more scaffolding than others in order for proper learning to take place. I understand part of my role as the resident “foreman” to be that of providing some of that scaffolding for students. On a practical level, scaffolding could include such things as directing struggling students toward tutors, creating group assignments that might encourage and inspire students on lower learning levels to engage with the material with the same energy and effort as those in the group who occupy a higher learning level, and employing teaching methods that account for the variety of learning styles represented among the students in the classroom.<sup>6</sup>

### *Hospitality*

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<sup>4</sup> Chris A. Kiesling, “Scaffolding” (guest lecture presented at the course CD901 Instructional Theory and Development, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore KY, 29 January 2014).

<sup>5</sup> “Scaffolding,” *Glossary of Education Reform*, <http://edglossary.org/scaffolding>

<sup>6</sup> A small sampling of the many works on student learning styles includes David A. Kolb, *Learning Style Inventory* (Boston: McBer and Company, 1976); Bernice McCarthy, *The 4MAT System* (Barrington, IL: EXCEL, 1980); Marlene LeFever, *Learning Styles: Reaching Everyone God Gave You to Teach* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1995).

The classic Walt Disney movie *Beauty and the Beast* features one of the most delightful and recognizable songs ever written, the song *Be Our Guest*. In the film the song is performed by Lumiere (the man turned into a candelabra), Mrs. Potts (the head housekeeper turned into a teacup), and the rest of the castle's staff of enchanted servants for the main character Belle as a way of making her feel welcome in her new and scary home. *Be Our Guest* is a song about hospitality, about welcoming the stranger, and about alleviating fear.<sup>7</sup>

The metaphor of hospitality assumes that the teacher is like a host. The idea of creating a hospitable classroom environment in which students are welcomed as guests to a place where they are able to “put our service to the test” is appealing to me for at least two reasons. First, a hospitable classroom environment helps to alleviate some of the fear that so often accompanies the classroom experience for students. Second, a hospitable classroom environment reminds students that their presence and contribution is valued and that they have something to offer.

In his book *Reaching Out* the great spiritual writer Henri J. M. Nouwen offers an extended meditation on various forms of hospitality within the parent-child relationship, the healer-client relationship, and the teacher-student relationship.<sup>8</sup> In his discussion of how “hospitality can be seen as a model for a creative interchange between people” in the relationships between teachers and students Nouwen writes:

Teaching...asks first of all the creation of a space where students and teachers can enter into a fearless communication with each other and allow their respective life experiences to be their primary and most valuable source of growth and maturation. It asks for a mutual trust in which those who teach and those who want to learn become present to each other, not as opponents, but as those who share in the same struggle and search for the same truth.<sup>9</sup>

Nouwen continues...

[T]eaching, from the point of view of a Christian spirituality, means the commitment to provide the fearless space where [important life] questions can come to consciousness and can be responded to, not by prefabricated answers, but by an articulate encouragement to enter them seriously and personally. When we look at teaching in terms of hospitality, we can say that the teacher is called upon to create for his students a free and fearless space where mental and emotional development can take place.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Menken and Howard Ashman, “Be Our Guest,” performed by Angela Lansbury, Jerry Orbach & The Chorus of *Beauty and the Beast*, *Beauty and the Beast: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, (© Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, Inc., 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image, 1986), 86-87.

<sup>9</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 85-86.

<sup>10</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 86-87.

This is a tall calling. How can teachers create spaces of mutual trust and fearless communication in the classroom? How can educators create educational environments in which teachers are not perceived as opponents, but as people on the same journey toward truth? How can teachers create space where healthy mental and emotional development can take place in the lives of the students they have been entrusted to educate?

There are probably numerous answers to these questions. On a very practical level, honoring hospitality as a metaphor for the classroom might include something as simple as bringing food to a class session. To reference once more the course in which this article was born, Dr. Ellen Marmon's Instructional Theory and Development seminar at Asbury Theological Seminary was a week long intensive course, from 8:30am to 5:30pm, Monday through Friday. Anyone who has participated in a course like this knows how grueling it can become with each passing day, even in the best of courses taught by the most engaging teachers. On at least one occasion in the seminar Dr. Marmon identified food as a great way to break down barriers and alleviate tension in the classroom. Her teaching on this was strongly reinforced for me by the mixed nuts, pretzels, and chocolates I was consuming at the very moment she communicated this point!

In addition to food, hospitality in the classroom could include rearranging the physical structure of the classroom from, for example, chairs arranged in rows to chair arranged in a circle. Hospitality for me also entails paying attention to such things as the verbal tone I use, the physical temperature in the room, how I employ technology in the classroom, providing substantive and timely feedback on assignments, and using teaching strategies that engage all learning types as opposed to honoring only the type I most naturally relate with.

### *Conclusion*

In this brief essay, I have reflected on the three metaphors of midwifery, scaffolding, and hospitality in an effort to highlight the value that controlling metaphors can have for teachers as they think about their work. When I am teaching at my best, I am like a midwife, a construction worker, and a host. Other metaphors will of course prove to be more useful to other teachers depending on their temperament and life experiences, but I continue to see real value in these three images as I think about that place where my deep gladness meets up with the world's deep hunger.