

Attentiveness

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Like many JCFL readers, I teach and profess my discipline at a Christian college. One of the joys of employment at a religious college is that I get to, or am even urged to, think openly about how I bring my faith to bear upon my work. But in that opportunity lurks a danger too. When talking about the integration of faith and teaching—or even when thinking it through in silence—I find it all too easy to resort to the tried and true rhetoric of our faith tradition or to parade a string of pious phrases that resonate with colleagues and administrators. It seems rather easy, after a while, to get one’s theological presuppositions into acceptable order within a faith community, and to talk with sophistication about, say, scriptural themes like creation, fall, and redemption. But having identified and articulated essential foundational doctrine, how do I then go on actually to teach Christianly? I’m convinced that there’s no easy answer to that question. In fact, the more I teach the more I become aware of the distance to travel in moving from presuppositions to a pedagogy concretely (in)formed by the Christian way.

Recently, I’ve grown quite fond of a word that helps me bridge the gap between my deepest convictions and my work in the classroom. That word is attentiveness.

The semantic range of “attentiveness” appeals to me. As a substantive, *attentiveness* derives from the adjective *attentive*, which in turn comes from the verb *to attend*. In a rough-and-ready way, I see three senses embedded within this cluster of words derived from *attend*: namely, the senses of presence, connection, and receptivity. Keeping these three senses in mind, I’m content to say that “attentiveness” nicely encapsulates my teaching aims. In essence, I try to be attentive to my students and to teach them to be attentive.

The sense of presence is obvious in the primary definition of *attend*, which Webster says is “to be present at or to accompany.” Attendance can, of course, imply physical *and* mental presence. While, in the physical sense, it seems ridiculously obvious to say that as a teacher I *attend* my classes, the act

of “showing up” mentally every time is more challenging than one bargains for. For example, since I am the only one teaching one of our “less-commonly-taught languages” (Dutch) I get to meet with the same group of students over 200 times before they’ve finished their four-semester requirement. With such frequency, the dangers of over-familiarity and monotonous routine can loom large. So I need to be sure to attend my own class—strange as that may sound. What I mean is that showing up physically and mentally is an important modeling of consistency, perseverance, patience, and determination as the students and I move together through the paces of language learning. The possibilities for sustained positive influence on students and for bonding with them are large with such an arrangement.

Such sustained presence with students in the classroom sometimes calls me to be specially present outside of the classroom as well. Being a sustained presence in students’ weekly schedules fosters trust with some students who, for various reasons, will seek out certain teachers for a word of comfort or understanding regarding difficulties in their “personal” lives. These sorts of interactions provide opportunity for compassion, empathy, prayer, and referral to persons on campus professionally devoted to helping those in need. With each year I become, it seems, increasingly aware of such student needs, and I’ve come to embrace the reality that part of my work involves time in prayer for individual students.

Beyond being physically and mentally present, attending to someone or something calls for concrete connection. The image of this action is beautifully captured in the Latin root of the word. *Attend* comes from the Latin *ad* : to, plus *tendere* : to stretch. I like that image of stretching toward the learners sitting in the classroom. The image helps me imagine the healthy classroom I seek to establish because it connotes in the first place some of the necessary distance between the learner and myself. There is distance in knowledge and experience, and also in the nature of relationship between teacher and learner. But this distance is one that can be bridged through effort—stretching in fact—on my part. I like, too, that stretching resists an image of hierarchy. Sure, I have something to offer my students, and it requires effort on my part to deliver, but it’s not as if I’m stooping down to lowly subjects. In fact, the direction of my stretching always varies. I might have to reach and stretch up, out, or possibly down. But the angle isn’t what is relevant here. Rather, it’s the reaching and the connecting. Part of such pedagogical stretching involves the willingness to be flexible in courses. It means slowing down or speeding up the pace of the course, if necessary. It might mean creating additional exercises

for students who struggle. I recognize that some of my more structure-loving, hyper-organized students have not always appreciated my willingness to change the course mid-stream for the sake of some students. But such is my stubborn inclination, and it's due, I believe, to my attentiveness to the varying ability levels in a given class.

In addition to the notions of presence and connecting, attentiveness also implies receptivity. Being attentive requires a posture and disposition where one is able to receive something from another. The dictionary defines the concept in this sense as "to listen to or to heed." This posture of attentiveness balances nicely the stretching image implied in attending to someone's needs. Attending to students is, in some sense, the approach of the servant. One serves students by paying attention to their intellectual hunger and their spiritual needs, and also by heeding sometimes unspoken cries of frustration. It implies, furthermore, caring for students as not only minds in the making but also as whole persons in the making.

This idea of receptivity points toward even richer layers of the concept of attentiveness. The question arises as to how we can be attentive, as Christian teachers and learners, to the subject matter we are given to explore. Such a question has been considered by exemplary thinkers, and I am indebted to some of them for help in exploring some answers.

In a contribution to the recent book, *Bakhtin and Religion*, Alan Jacobs discusses the hermeneutics of love in Bakhtin's thought and identifies there the notion of "loving attentiveness." In Bakhtin's words, "[t]he valued manifoldness of Being as human (as correlated with the human being) can present itself only to a loving contemplation Lovelessness, indifference, will never be able to generate sufficient power to slow down and *linger intently* over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute" (Bakhtin, as quoted in Jacobs, p. 27). Training students to become attentive to language and to literature is my task as teacher. Attentiveness is one way of respectfully recognizing every inch of creation as claimed by the sovereign Lord. Attentiveness awakens curiosity and, in turn, makes room for awe. Attentiveness requires time and "lingering intently over an object." Attentiveness ultimately leads to gratitude and joy because these responses normally follow appreciation and awe. In my teaching I'm continuously at pains, implicitly or explicitly, to show my students that being attentive to the many aspects of a foreign language (to words, structure, sound, intonation, rhythm, etymology, etc.) is at the heart of learning the language.

Attentiveness goes hand in hand with other virtues: Sometimes it

requires them, sometimes it fosters them. Being attentive requires humility and patience. Mark Schwehn beautifully describes this reality in *Exiles from Eden* where he recounts his bringing students to see the humility that they must practice in order to understand a difficult passage in Augustine. “Much of what passes for laziness or the proverbial ‘lack of motivation’ among today’s students,” Schwehn writes, “really involves a lack of humility, stemming in part from a lack of piety or respect for that aspect of God’s ongoing creation that manifests itself in works of genius” (Schwehn, p. 48). Later Schwehn asserts that “[s]ome degree of humility is a precondition for learning” (p. 49). I, too, have discovered this with my students. It is remarkable what a class (instructor and students) can learn from, say, a poem if we humbly and patiently “submit” to the text. At times I’ve taken my students at what they perceive to be a painstakingly slow pace through a poem. In the language class you can do this over, say, three class periods. What students come to discover is that if you slow down, memorize it, linger over a poem—or even a phrase—and learn to ask yourself good questions about it, the poem can open itself up to you, and it will open up yourself in the process. And these insights come often in waves, not all at once. Such a thing happened recently when in second semester Dutch we studied a poem by J.W. Schulte Nordholt titled “Schaatsenrijden” (“Ice Skating”). The first verse goes like this:

Over cirkels winterlicht,
grote schijven goudcitroen,
glijd ik, god uit een gedicht,
op mijn witte vleugelschoen. (Schulte Nordholt, 1961, p.18)

Over circles winterlight,
glorious streaks of golden hue,
off I skate, god in a poem,
on my snow-white winged shoes. (Schulte Nordholt, 1994, p.46)

After students in small groups had read, memorized, and talked about the first stanza many times, I asked them to think about what the author was doing to bring form and content together. It was actually one of my weaker students who, using her own words, discovered the onomatopoeia. “The guttural “g” sounds like skates scraping the ice!” she exclaimed.

One need not be a Christian in order to be attentive, of course. But, as is modeled throughout Scripture and in the experience of the Christian life, the habit of attentiveness is certainly God’s way. God pays attention to his cre-

ation and to his creatures—he is present, he stretches out toward us, and he heeds our cries. This beautiful reality is epitomized in the incarnation: the word made flesh. Attentiveness always moves one toward the concrete and particular: from the word to flesh. Attentiveness defies disembodied abstraction. Attentiveness is necessary to get from concept to example, from the ideal to the real. Attentiveness is our tool to see our students as individual human beings rather than as an abstract, disembodied target audience. Paying attention enables us to make our lectures relevant, to create assignments that are meaningful, and even to head off problems in our courses—or at least to deal with them honestly.

We hear a lot about Attention Deficit Disorder these days. Western culture, in fact, seems to be terribly plagued by ADD. I wonder sometimes, though, whether our broken world isn't similarly suffering from an *Attentiveness* Deficit Disorder. Think of how many social, environmental, or familial problems could be avoided if we were only more—and more often—present where we ought to be? What if we attended better to the needy all around us who are crying for someone to reach out to them with a helping hand? What if we listened better and heeded life's most important callings? What if we honed our receptive skills rather than talking incessantly, spouting and pontificating all the time?

What I've been suggesting, in other words, is this: If we can somehow model attentiveness in our work; if we can attend to our students and teach them truly to be attentive to the material they're given to study, then we've helped them to embrace a way of life that leads toward understanding, healing, and wholeness.

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