Educational Therapy

At Carthage College, I taught a course called “Introduction to the New Testament.” It was required of all students (along with one other religion class of their choice). Every student had to take this course to graduate, and most took it during their freshman year (at around age 18). The classes were large (35 to 50), and I taught two of them per semester. This course turned out to be a laboratory for every educational malady conceivable among students. It was also the crucible in which I first learned about teaching—because I had to learn how to teach in order to survive!

The experience of teaching this class convinced me that people often need educational therapy in order to be open to learning. I don’t necessarily mean pathologies here, although that was certainly occasionally the case. What I am referring to are obstacles or resistances to learning that come from painful learning experiences from the past, from inappropriate attitudes toward the subject matter, and from approaches to the subject that tend to frustrate learning. At first, I was discouraged and befuddled by these blocks or resistances to learning. I just wanted to get on with the business of teaching. But I soon realized I could not do that without addressing the resistances I was encountering.

In this required New Testament class, I believe I encountered pretty much every classic learning block that students may bring to any subject. I think it is likely that the same obstacles to learning could be found in many other subjects in a college curriculum. But they were magnified in New Testament because the subject was religion—scripture even! And I can fairly well quote verbatim what I heard over and over again from the students.

“I’ve had religion up to here from parochial school (with a gesture to the neck), so why do I have to take another religion class?

“I have no interest in religion. Why do I have to learn this?”

“I already know what the Bible says from church. So what can you teach me?”

“I do not believe in Christianity or any religion. You are forcing religion on me and I will not learn it.”

“You should never question the Bible. If I take this course, I will go to hell.”

“What is the point? This course will never help me get a job.”

“You are just trying to convert us all to be Lutherans.”

“You probably have to make us take this course in order to get money from the Lutheran church.”

I want to discuss a few of these in greater detail, but first I need to explain how I dealt with the considerable student resentment about the bare fact that the class was required in the first place. This in itself was a major block to learning and had to be dealt with openly. So, on the first day of class, I asked each student to introduce themselves (as a way to generate social relationships in the group), and I asked each person to give their name and then answer two questions: “Why you are taking this class” and “What might you hope to get out of the class?” The only expectation I had was that they be completely honest (which I hoped would also engender an atmosphere of trust).

When the first person answered the first question, they invariably said that they were “taking the class because it was required”—and this was followed by considerable laughter—after which I complimented the person for their honesty. And almost every person in every class answered the first question by saying that they were taking the course because “It’s required!” In dialogue with students during these introductions, I would joke with the students about what they

were saying. We had fun. At the end, I would ask the class as a whole to raise their hand if they were taking the class because it was required. There was something therapeutic about getting this block all out in the open and acknowledging it—because every student raised his or her hand! Then I would say, "Well, I want you to know why I am *teaching* this class (pause)—because it is required of me!" The students would invariably laugh. And then I would add, "Since we are all in this boat together, we might as well have some fun doing it."

The second question I asked—what do you hope to get out of the class—enabled me to flush out most of the obstacles listed above, because many students did not expect to get anything out of the course. Nevertheless, answering this second question tended to defuse the points they raised. And it enabled some students to get beyond the issue of requirement and to begin to reflect how they could take ownership for their learning and how they might actually get something positive out of the class—despite its requirement. And others in the class who began with a predominantly negative attitude would hear the positive things that some of the other students were hoping to get from the class.

At the end of this exercise, I would ask the class to brainstorm aloud together this final question: Why do you think Carthage College requires this class? This question tended to expose out all the suspicions that students had about the nefarious reasons the college was foisting religion upon unsuspecting eighteen year olds. And we would joke and laugh about this also—especially when the students were honest. And it gave me a chance to explain that we were not a "Christian college," but a "liberal arts college supported by the church" (big difference!!) and that we were hoping students and faculty together would be seeking the truth—wherever that might lead them. In light of that, I would tell them, the college considered knowing about religion to be part of a liberal arts education, especially knowing about the foundational documents that have had such a profound influence on our Western society as well as other societies. And I would explain that I am taking a liberal arts approach to the New Testament. So, already in the first class period, I had addressed many blocks and suggested some attitudes that might open some students to learning—an effort at educational therapy!

So, more specifically, what about some of these blocks? As the course went along, I made every effort to deal with them as they came up. For example, what about students who said they were so full of religion that they could not take in any more. In regard to this block, I tried to address their assumptions about teaching. I explained that they were imagining a container model of learning whereby the teacher opens the top of a person's head and pours learning into it, an additive approach to learning. But I had a different view of learning, namely that the new thing you learn often subverts everything else you have learned, and sometimes you even have to start over. In fact, I pointed out that those who have already had a lot of religion may be at a disadvantage, because they would have to *un*-learn so much before they could learn the new things they would encounter in this class!

This would be especially true of the students who already "knew everything" about the Bible. When they discovered what we really do *not* know about the Bible—such as when Jesus was born or died, when the Gospels were written or who wrote them or where they were written and that some of the letters were pseudonymous and that scholars are unsure about the historicity of many of the stories about Jesus in the Gospels—you would have thought I was telling them for the first time that there was no Santa Claus or that God does not exist. Nevertheless, they had to deal in some way with the idea that there are uncertainties before they were ready to move on in the course. What happens is that students tend to attribute the problem of uncertainty to me (the teacher) as someone who must have an idiosyncratic view of these

matters. So I would suggest they check it out with someone they trusted, namely that they "consult with your pastor or priest." Invariably, after they had attended their home church on a weekend, they would return with the same story: "My pastor told me that she learned these things in seminary the way you are teaching them." (Why pastors do not share the uncertainties of the biblical writings with these students in confirmation classes or in youth groups is beyond me!).

The course was not meant to focus on uncertainties. They are just there. Nor was the course meant to tear down anyone's faith. But if you already "know everything for certain," the course does tend to pose a challenge. When I myself started learning the New Testament in seminary, I was not even sure Jesus had even existed as an historical figure and I did not believe in God! So everything I learned about the New Testament built up my picture of Jesus and in no way tore it down. It depends on where you start! I would share this with students. Nevertheless, there was another issue; namely this—the problem with those who "already know" is complicated when they have a picture of the scriptures as follows: "If you doubt one thing, where will it stop? Then we cannot be certain of *anything*" The conclusion to that syllogism is: "So do not question anything."

The fear, of course, is relativism. How do I address relativism? I discovered a simple description from learning theory that depicts the stages many students go through in dealing with uncertainty, and I would present this to them. Students often start out with a dualistic viewpoint, which says that things are either right or wrong, either true or false, either correct or incorrect. When students move into the treacherous waters of relativism, they first encounter areas of uncertainty (such as the uncertainties cited above) in which, if we only knew more, we would be able to get the correct and true information. These uncertainties are hard enough, especially if it is clear that we will probably never get the information we need in order to get a "correct" answer.

But then arise those other issues where we simply cannot know for certain: Did Jesus really die for our sins? Does God exist? Is it right to go to war or not? And so on. When we get to these places, we are moving into rampant relativism. If we cannot use the Bible to tell us answers in an absolute way, then any opinion seems to be as good as any other opinion. So what's the use? This is when many students are ready to go back to their rooms, climb in bed, turn the electric blanket up to 10, and stay there until the crisis seems to pass over. This is also the point where many students emotionally want to return to the safety of "true or false," close their ears, and be secure in their certainty. And if this was there choice, I respected it.

I explain all this to the students and then I go on to explain that, No, rampant relativism is not the only option. It is not true that any opinion is as good as any other opinion. There is evidence and there are arguments and you can weigh these and you can indeed come to decisions about matters of great importance. The advanced stage toward maturity is this: "commitment within relativism." This is a place where we have staked our claim to things we believe to be true, based on our experiences and our considered evaluation of the issues. There is no "absolute certainty." Hence, we must be open to evidence and arguments that may change our mind. But there is "certitude," enough certitude to lead us to live and die for some of these beliefs and values. Well, maybe these various observations helped to bring some students through the crisis and maybe not—but some form of educational therapy or pastoral care was needed to help them see what was at stake and to enable them to retain their sanity through the loss of innocence about certainty.

Here's another block. What about those students who came afraid to ask questions for fear that their mortal soul was in jeopardy? At first I was reluctant to challenge these students. But then I came up with an idea that I hoped would not put them on the spot. Here, I felt that it was necessary to address their view of scripture. Many people think that there is only one way to think of these books as scripture, namely, that God dictated these words and every word is true and every word is to be followed. And if that is not the case, then these writings cannot be viewed as scripture. So I would hand out a sheet showing six different ways that different denominations think about scripture and the words they use with different meanings. For example, scripture as "revelation" can mean the revelation as "words of God," but it can also mean that the human words of the Bible "reveal not God's words but God's self." Or scripture as "the Word" can refer to "the words of a book" but it can also mean that the "Word" is really Jesus (the "word made flesh")—about whom the human words of scripture bear witness. Inspiration can refer to "a kind of dictation by God" or it can refer to "the active presence of God" in those humans who wrote scripture or, indeed, the active presence of God in those of us who read scripture. I observe that many people find these writings inspirational even when they do not believe them as scripture. And I point out that if we think of these books as divine rather than human testimonies, we risk verbal idolatry—making an idol or an absolute out of the words of scripture.

Working our way through this handout together, at the least, offers options to the students. The process enables them to see how various churches can consider these writings as scripture and *still* study them with a liberal arts approach. So they are still the scriptures of the church, but they are foundational documents of our faith rather than absolutes. And there are usually a number of students in the class for whom this view is already their own, and the sharing of this fact makes others comfortable with considering other options. This process enabled some students to loosen the white-knuckle grip they had on scripture and at least acknowledge the legitimacy of other approaches.

There was another related block to learning, namely, that it is a sin to doubt. How could I get students to open up to the liberal arts process of seeking truth by questioning, if they did not believe they should question? Again, it was important to offer some cognitive reframing and redefinition. If faith equals "belief in truth statements," then it is wrong to doubt the Bible or the creeds—because, in this scenario, doubt is the opposite of faith. However, if faith is "trust in the reality of God," then we should be putting our trust in the *reality of God* rather than in our *statements about God*. In fact, to put our trust in some absolute statements about God is verbal idolatry. To overcome verbal idolatry, we are called to doubt our statements about God (the Bible, creeds, and so on), so that we do not end up putting our faith in our statements rather than in the living God. In this scenario, we are able to question our human, limited beliefs about God so that we might experience God in fresh ways and so that we might come to a better understanding of God than we had before! Hence, in this reframing, doubt is integral and important for faith to be renewed and revived. As Coleridge wrote, "There is more faith in honest doubt than in all the creeds." With this explanation, students are often able to see that their questions are an act of faith—the trust that in their honest exploration they might encounter God in new ways. This experience is especially important for college students, who have a chance to raise questions about their early childhood images of God and perhaps to embrace some more mature understandings.

Well, then, what about the students who do not believe or who do not care? Interestingly enough, these were often the best students, because they were not afraid to question. They were

not afraid to say things that sounded sacrilegious to other students. These students did not have to unlearn a great deal to approach the texts with a liberal arts method. And they were not shocked to learn of the many uncertainties. In fact, it was sometimes the case that such students were relieved and intrigued that we were facing the difficulties in a straightforward way. And they often discovered that the religion they had rejected or disdained was not the one they were encountering in class. Still, there were people who were just strongly resistant. Here's an example.

My wife and I recently went to our grandson Anton's middle school (we raise two grandchildren). We were looking for the Real School office to find out where his conference would be when a woman (teacher) with an art apron on came by and we asked her where to go—so she escorted us there.

I said to her, "I believe I know you. You used to be a student at Carthage College, and you were in one of my classes. I'm Dave Rhoads."

She said, "Yes, and I'm Marna Glover. I know you. You changed my life!"

I was a bit stunned and said, "How was that?"

She said, "When I took your class I was very rigid about religion. I did not believe. I was stubborn about it and I was determined not to learn anything. It was a course that included the letters of Paul and I could not bring myself to study and I was failing. You took me aside and said, 'But this is a required course. You just have to pass.' Then you suggested to me, 'If you have trouble with religion, that's OK. So think of it as a history course. Learn it that way.' And so I did it that way. Don't you remember saying that to me?"

"Then," she went on, "several years after college, the Lord got hold of me and I had an experience like Paul did on the road to Damascus, just like I learned in the class. And when that happened, I remembered all about Paul's letters, and it all made sense."

I was thrilled for her and told her how wonderful it was that she had had such a religious experience.

Then she said, "Thank you so much for introducing yourself. I am so glad to see you. I tell people about you all the time."

Then we got to the office. We thanked her and parted.

I did remember her. She was a senior when she took the class, because she put it off as long as she could. And while I do not recall the conversation with her, I do recall what I would say to students who felt as she did. First, I respected them and told them so. I told them that I was not teaching the class to change them and that they had a right and a responsibility to think wherever their integrity might lead them. And I would say, "I am never going to ask you as a requirement for any grade to say what you believe or do not believe. Think of this as a history class or a literature class or a political science class. In political science, you learn about all kinds of political beliefs that you yourself don't embrace. So, you are responsible here for learning about a religion that you do not believe in. It has been very influential in our history, and here is a chance to learn about it." Actually, I would say a similar thing to people who were fundamentalists and who were not open to the liberal arts approach we were taking, "Keep your beliefs. If this is what you believe, then you should not abandon it. But learn the liberal arts approach so you can understand how some Christians believe in a different way."

The cognitive reframing offered a way to enable students to remove the mental and emotional blocks to personal participation in the class. It was a liberal arts class. I made no assumptions about where people began the class or where they might end up in terms of their religious faith and beliefs. However, learning is personal. Good education seeks to get the

students to engage the subject matter, to grapple with new and other ways of thinking, to imagine other worlds, to challenge and to be challenged. So I would say: "Engage it all personally, but treat it as a smorgasbord. Take what you find meaningful and leave the rest."

This process has to do with *how* you do education, not *how you come out* at the end. I never believed that there was any room for preaching or for proselytizing in the liberal arts classroom. If the New Testament texts could not speak for themselves, could not hold up against questioning and scrutiny, then the chips would have to fall where they might. But I hated to lose someone's personal engagement. My strategies were not designed to manipulate or control, but to provide options/reframing for those who chose to embrace them. I always wanted to respect where the students were at any given time, and to remain engaged. Nevertheless, I would occasionally see students pull an invisible shade down between themselves and me. Their eyes would glaze over, and they would just not be engaged. And I would respect that, but I would do what I could to retain the relationship of involvement.

Finally, maybe the toughest nut to crack was the block that said: "This course can't get me a job or make me money." We had a large business department, and it was often the business students who made this statement. Students who were history majors or literature majors or even science majors or people in teacher preparation did not often ask this question. They probably did not expect to make much money anyhow! But it was an important issue, and it was on everyone's mind. There is no answer to this that will satisfy a purely utilitarian mind. Learning something for its own sake does not seem to crack the shell here. But I made it clear that many companies look for people who have a liberal arts education, companies that say they prefer sharp candidates, whom they themselves will train for the specific job. And clearly I taught the course as a liberal arts course (asking questions analyzing stories, interpreting letters, and re-constructing history). These were all useful analytical skills for any career, I would point out. I also engaged them in talking about values and ethics. And I told them that the course was preparing them not just for their *career vocation* but also for their *human vocation* (their larger purpose in life beyond making money!). I used case studies from life, and I even had them apply their exegetical skills to reading business memos. But in the end, my main concern was to give them a good stimulating experience of religion that might impact them now or might serve them at some point later in life—as it had with Marna Glover.

I wanted the New Testament to give them a good massage, shake them up, lead them to think about the poor, about mystical experiences, about dying for what you believe in, about having integrity, about loving people unconditionally, about critiquing the government, and much more. Whatever issues happened to be raised by the New Testament in its time were lively topics for discussion. And I did leave lots of time (most of the time) for discussion—pairs, small groups, large groups, with each other, with me, with guest speakers—throwing it all into the mix in order to see what might happen.

As I look back, I realize that it was somewhat numbing for me to teach two large classes of the same course each semester. I worked hard never to be bored. I planned the classes to have fun. I had to organize the assignments so that they were not so labor-intensive for me (so I could save my energy for the relationships in the classroom). And looking back, I can see how much I was challenged to learn how to teach. And I looked everywhere for help. The students were my main source. Students know best how they learn; so they ought to have some ideas how best to be taught. I talked regularly with the head of the education department, the psychology professors, a business professor, anybody and everybody who looked like they might have an idea that I could use or who could solve a problem I was facing.

But most of all, I learned that education involves also therapeutic addressing of the experiences, ideas, and attitudes that block the learning process. This helped me later when teaching at the seminary. There I have confronted a different set of problems. In seminary, there is no lack of motivation for the subject or concern about whether it would get them a job. The main problem is that they want to know immediately how they will be able to "use" what they learn when they become a pastor in a congregation. In so doing, they block the opportunity to grapple with the material for their own lives. I tell them: "If you are not changed now by the material you are reading, you will have no right later to lay it as a trip on other people in a parish!"

Like some students at college, they are also afraid to question, but for different reasons, because they have endorsement and approval essays to write to be accepted by their church candidacy committees—and they do not want to be in a crisis of faith when that happens! Many of them are second career students who are eager to get on with ministry. Others rue the artificial context of the classroom. Occasionally, there is an anti-intellectual attitude, as if pastoring is a soft profession and as if the professional preparation to be pastors is somehow different from the demands of a medical school or a law school. Sometimes there are blocks about memorization or performing in front of people. Addressing these blocks has involved different processes and strategies.

Concerning the various learning blocks I have encountered, I may not have dealt with them all that well. In my efforts to address blocks, I may well have created more blocks. Nevertheless, I feel confident about this: We ignore student blocks to learning at the peril of students and at our own peril. Wherever one may teach and whoever is doing the learning, there are always blocks to learning and these blocks need in some way to be addressed with some kind of "educational therapy" in order for students and teachers alike to attain their highest potential. Otherwise, we threaten to dis-engage the students from personal involvement in their learning and, in so doing, we risk turning teaching and learning into a meaningless charade of detached accumulation of knowledge that robs the classroom of excitement and joy. And who would want to do that?