



ASSUMPTION COLLEGE

WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS | ROME, ITALY

Digital Commons @
Assumption College

Theology Department Faculty Works

Theology Department

2019

Making Reading Relevant: Critical Thinking as Contemplative Practice

Kathleen M. Fisher

Assumption College, kmfisher@assumption.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/theology-faculty>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fisher, Kathleen M. "Making Reading Relevant: Critical Thinking as Contemplative Practice." *Spotlight on Teaching: Contemplative Studies and the Religious Studies Classroom* (June 2019): 11-14. <http://rsn.aarweb.org/spotlight-on/teaching/contemplative-pedagogy/making-reading-relevant-critical-thinking>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theology Department at Digital Commons @ Assumption College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology Department Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Assumption College. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@assumption.edu.

Making Reading Relevant: Critical Thinking as Contemplative Practice

Kathleen M. Fisher, Assumption College

“I don’t understand why we have to read these old stories,” the student said. By old, he meant the book of Genesis. He went on: “They don’t make a whole lot of sense and besides, science has proven they’re wrong.” My students regularly struggle with biblical stories, reading them as factually true or false; to them, “myth” means “false.” Such a literalist reading is quite understandable – the Bible is a confounding set of texts! In the past I would try to explain the concepts of metaphors and analogies, or give an overview of the Babylonian Exile as the context for composing the Book of Genesis. I would provide information that I felt sure would reveal the purpose of the text. But my approach was intellectually incomplete; I needed to engage their minds more broadly to teach them about myths.

Thanks to an AAR/Luce Seminar on Theologies of Religious Pluralism and Comparative Theology, I learned the ancient practice of the dialogic study of the Talmud. In a traditional study pairing called a *havruta*, readers enter into dialogue with the text and with each other, constructing meaning by identifying multiple interpretations. It is a model of analytical thought and communal debate that some have argued is at the heart of Jewish identity. Since I use this method most often with biblical texts I call it “Torah Study.”

Slowing Down

Torah Study requires slow, careful line-by-line reading, stopping regularly to paraphrase, question, discuss, and puzzle over specific words, phrases, and verses. The goal is not to make it through the entire reading—that may indicate you’ve gone too fast—but to study its words and images with a finely tuned attention and uncover the story’s many layers. Torah Study embraces the ambiguities and gaps common in biblical texts to show that multiple, even conflicting, interpretations can coexist.

In the course “Faith and Reason,” I teach Genesis 1 and 2 through Torah Study. In pairs with step-by-step written instructions, students take turns reading one of the chapters aloud, noticing how the passage sounds compared to silent reading. They pause every two or three lines and restate the verses in their own words. They look up unfamiliar words (cell phones make good dictionaries!), ask questions, and suggest answers. Periodically they stop to make a few notes on the passage which frequently starts to reveal the text’s ambiguities and mysteries. I encourage students to offer interpretations that might fill in these gaps and to welcome disagreement rather than seek consensus. As I listened in on a recent

Torah Study, I heard students familiar with the story identifying details they simply hadn't noticed before. The first-time readers were raising new questions that challenged conventional or clichéd exegesis.

After about twenty minutes of paired conversation, I opened class discussion, asking "What was it like to read in this way?" Students jumped straight into the stories describing specific details discovered in the first halves of their passages; to my surprise, no one had gotten to the end. As for the reading itself, many found the mention of the four rivers in Genesis 2:10–14 especially perplexing. Students began offering their knowledge of Mesopotamian geography and culture which led to imaginative and reasonable interpretations of why the storytellers included these details. That led others to notice a contrast with the water images in Genesis 1. Finally, we ended up deliberating why God made the Garden at all. Was this to please the Creator or the creation? As they talked, I could see students working several options as if building a jigsaw puzzle; but unlike puzzle pieces, they could suggest several plausible ways to fit them together.

A few classes later, one student remarked with some delight, "The story made so much more sense when I *heard* it." Now he prepares for most of his classes by doing the readings aloud. Another student wanted to talk further about who most benefited from the Garden. She hadn't ever thought about this question until reading the passage with someone else and it had "troubled" her view of God.

The Problem of Irrelevance

My purpose in using this close-reading method with students is to change their relationship with books, to teach them, using Ann Burlein's beautiful phrase, "to drink deeply" from them.¹

I love books. They carry me into someone else's world to take better perspective of my own.

My students don't love books so much. For many, a book is just a minefield waiting to trip them up with incomprehensible words and arcane facts. Books are boring, they tell me, and reading is usually a painful slog through too many pages of inconsequential ideas. Books don't carry them away to other worlds, so as to comfort or enlighten them.

Certainly, it's hard to love a book if you struggle to read. Learning disabilities and myriad mental distractions can quickly take the joy right out of it. But what my students seem to dislike most is the feeling of irrelevance. More than once they've told me how they'll never use what they read for class, so they only like to read books that relate to their lives. The relevance of the ancient biblical stories for contemporary life is particularly mysterious, and not just for undergraduates.

¹ Ann Burlein, "Learning to Drink Deeply from Books: Using Experiential Assignments to Teach Concepts," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 14, no. 2 (April 2011): 137–55.

My students read under duress. So, what could I do to help them find books more inviting than irrelevant, more animating than aggravating? How could I change their relationship to reading so that it would bring more comfort than confusion, be more solace than slog?

Advocates of contemplative education are especially attuned to the problem of irrelevance and claim that it arises, in part, from the academy's preoccupation with critical thinking skills. They rightfully note that students are not just "brains on a stick;" they come to class with hearts and souls and life experiences, too. But, say critics, education increasingly attends only to the mind with little or no regard for the rest of the learner. Academic work then seems out of touch with the rest of life. When Barbara Walvoord examined introductory religion courses, for example, she noticed a great divide between students' desire to explore life's big questions and professors' intellectual expectations. The emphasis on critical thinking often alienated students from the subject matter by trying to separate thought from feeling, theory from experience.²

As a professor who lives largely and happily in her head, I felt a strong desire to defend the value of critical thinking and to rehabilitate the impression of knowledge as a distraction from wisdom. I, too, want to teach the "whole" student, mind, heart, and soul. But in my approach, critical analysis is a means, not an obstacle, to that end. The problem, in my view, is not in thinking too much; it's in thinking too narrowly. To put it another way, critical thinking is much more than mastering abstract concepts.

The truth is I think with and about my *whole* self—my experiences, ideas, sensations, and emotions. Thought is part of my inner life, taking me deeply into questions of meaning, and books have long been my travelling companions. When I read "critically," I develop the same faculties as the contemplative practices of meditation or mindfulness. I become focused and attentive to details and more open to multiple possibilities or theories.

When I ask students to do a Torah Study exercise, I invite them to enter the story with head and heart, analysis and reflection. Through attentive reading, they can stand in the shoes of other characters, making room for a different experience alongside their own. Their worlds get a little bigger. They do not accumulate "knowledge" as much as they learn how "to know." And rather than struggle alone to understand, they partner with others and together navigate the dark corners of a passage.

Contemplative Thinking

The more I use this reading pedagogy, the more I am persuaded that it blends the best intentions of critical thinking and contemplative practice. Requiring both cognitive skill and personal engagement, Torah Study gives students a direct experience of the passage in an analytical and dialogical way. Together they grapple with challenging vocabulary and syntax, unfamiliar images and references, and layers of meaning. My students' discussion of Genesis suggests that their experience of patient, critical,

² Barbara Walvoord, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2008).

communal reading made them more curious than anxious and deepened their interest in, if not their understanding of, the text.

But here I must also admit to some unease in appropriating a pedagogy originally meant for religious texts. Though not a devotional practice, like the prayerful reading of scripture called *lectio divina* (“Divine Reading”), this method is rooted in a specific faith community. This is, perhaps, not a major problem in a theology course because the content and experience are relevant to the discipline. But my colleagues in English or history, or at public institutions, would not be able to use this pedagogy without minimizing or stripping it of its religious context.

I use Torah Study to teach students the centrality of scripture in several religious traditions *and* to sharpen their reading skills. There is no reason for me to ignore its religious history and to do so would, in my view, be misleading and irresponsible. But I teach in a Catholic college, not a Jewish seminary. As a Christian scholar, I must acknowledge my status as an outsider to Judaism. I worry that using a Jewish approach to the Word of God to develop cognitive skills could be disrespectful or insensitive to the deepest issues of religious meaning and identity.

Nevertheless, I think this method of close reading does more good than harm to my students. In a modest way it responds to the need for relevance, marrying the benefits of critical analysis to the desire for meaning and self-knowledge. In Torah Study, communal reading makes stories personal and encourages students to share their questions and confusions with others. Critical thinking allows them to explore those questions more deeply and thoroughly and, ultimately, to decide what the stories mean for their lives. And this is why I hope they will come to love books.

Resources

Barbezat, Daniel P., and Bush, Mirabai, eds. *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*, San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2014.

Burlein, Ann. “Learning to Drink Deeply from Books: Using Experiential Assignments to Teach Concepts.” *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 14, no. 2 (April 2011): 137–55.

Jacobs, Alan. *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Lehman, Marjorie, “Reenacting Ancient Pedagogy in the Classroom.” *Spotlight on Theological Education, Religious Studies News* 2:1, 2008, iii.

Sable, David, “Reason in Service of the Heart: The Impacts of Contemplative Practices on Critical Thinking,” *The Journal of Contemplative Inquiry* 1, no. 1 (2014): 1–22.

Walvoord, Barbara. *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2008.