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Abbylynn Helgevold

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ABBYLYNN HELGEVOLD

# Teaching as an Expression of a Love Ethic

My introduction to vocational reflection came rather late. Prior to coming to Wartburg, my own experiences in higher education, both as a student and an instructor, were shaped by the culture of large, public, research-focused institutions. Up until my third full year of teaching, I had no direct experience with vocational guidance or mentorship, though as an ethicist and scholar of religion I often found myself working with ideas and questions closely tied to the concept of vocation. Fortunately, in 2016 I was able to participate in a vocation-focused Leadership Academy supported by the administration at my previous institution. Over the course of that year, I remember feeling embarrassed by the newness of my own vocational insights. As I dove deeper into my own vocational questions and quest, I was drawn to the powerful ethical pull of love. This call to love is expanded on most strikingly by the Danish Lutheran philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, but also elucidated by other religious and philosophical perspectives. Over time, the challenge and potential of *living in a loving way* became the lens through which I understood my personal and professional calling.

At first, I was nervous about exploring this at a public institution; talk of love seems beyond the constraints of the more rational and neutral values of our public spaces. As an instructor in religious studies at a public institution, I strove to make sense of what this could or should look like within a curriculum dedicated solely to the academic

study of religion. And, in all honesty, I was also anxious about appearing naïve or being caricatured as an uncritical, new-agey, peace-loving, hippie type. Of course, the last of these fears is almost laughable; anyone who has seriously investigated and/or experienced love in the context of our moral lives understands that choosing to love is one of the hardest things we do as humans.



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Still, I remain drawn to the idea of love as a virtue and a responsibility; in it is a bold affirmation of fundamental goodness that is life-giving in its generosity. It is also transformative in its challenge to life-numbing and destructive habits and practices. Education as an expression of love is education that is accessible to all in light

**Abbylynn Helgevold** is the Board of Regents Distinguished Professor of Ethics and assistant professor of religion at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, where she teaches courses in ethics, religion, and philosophy. Education and pedagogy are her enduring passions. In addition to starting this work on teaching as an act of love, her recent research focuses on macroaggressions from a virtue ethical point of view.

of their inherent and equal value; it is life affirming in its capacity to nurture and challenge; and it is grounded in an acceptance that goes deeper than performative concerns about success and failure.

Adopting an ethic of love as my basic orientation has greatly impacted my teaching and broader professional vision. When the opportunity to join the faculty at Wartburg College emerged, and as I came to learn more about the mission and vision of Wartburg and the distinctive qualities of Lutheran higher education, I found myself inspired by educational principles that aligned so well with my own calling. It is a great privilege to be able to teach and serve in a setting that is committed to an approach to education centered in the whole person, one that directly embraces ideals of interdependence and reciprocal human flourishing and that challenges destructive, culturally reinforced, judgments about worthiness and practices of exclusion in an effort to foster deep learning (NECU 8). Despite making this transition in 2020, during a time of great collective stress and upheaval, I remain inspired.

## Love and Critical Inclusion

One of the reasons an ethic of love is so appealing and challenging is because it is maximally inclusive. However, we all know that articulating principles and realizing them by living them out in our policies, deeds, and choices are different things. This is as true for institutions as it is for individuals. In the field of ethics, one of the most perplexing and challenging questions we

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face is the question of integrity—how does one come to consistently align one’s values and ideals with one’s choices and actions? Recently, this gap between ideals and actions has been highlighted by ongoing concerns about the persistence of cultures of exclusion and inhospitality despite professed values of inclusion, diversity,

equity and hospitality. A loving orientation to inclusivity and genuine acceptance acts as a prophetic plumb line (see Amos 7) against which we can measure our beliefs, attitudes, practices, and policies. An ethic of love is always calling for greater inclusion; imbedded in this call is the hopeful confidence in its possibility. When our failure to measure up is revealed, we are called to change course.

Already in my first year, I have been able to meet and work with colleagues who share a common concern to shift the culture toward greater inclusion. In addition to the task forces, councils, and formal and informal conversations, several of us are participating in a year-long inclusive pedagogy faculty seminar. Together we have been reading, sharing resources and experiences, and reflecting on our own teaching practices. We have begun to implement changes in our teaching. We have been called to examine our own habits, assumptions, and practices in an effort to gain a better understanding of the ways that we contribute to exclusionary practices that cut off access to and limit opportunities for deep learning experiences. In my own case, I have had to question the overall accessibility of my course as I redesign coursework, adopt new formats for assigned readings, and adapt instructional materials in an effort to make opportunities for learning genuinely open to every student in my class. I have been challenged to more deeply consider the impact of my students’ cultural backgrounds and educational histories on their ability to engage with course material and to connect with me as their instructor.

As Kevin Gannon claims in his “teaching manifesto,” this work is radically transformative and it is hard. Sustaining it requires clarity about core values and principles and a vision of transformation (8). My own source of sustenance in this work is the love ethic expressed in the dual love command, which is compellingly elucidated by Søren Kierkegaard in *Works of Love*. It is clear that the values of love and neighborliness are at the root of Lutheran higher education. For those of us who are motivated by such values, I’d like to suggest that we weave the language of love into our efforts toward inclusion as both a source of inspiration for and critique of our efforts.

Kierkegaard was gifted with an ability to *call out* his readers for their complacency and inauthenticity, while at

the same time *calling them into* spaces of honest reflection and reorientation. My first encounter with Kierkegaard felt a little like a punch in the gut followed by an intense moment of clarity and a call to honor the power of the demand. I had never appreciated or felt it quite that way before. Though

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nothing can quite describe the process, it seems to me now like that THX audio sound in a movie theater (remember those?) when things begin to resound in their clarity. What once was a smattering of ideas and concepts became clearer, and more significant, than it ever had before. What I had experienced was a radical shift in perspective, which has been with me ever since.

## Upbuilding through Education

One of the most meaningful ways that Kierkegaard’s thought shaped my own love ethic was through his reflections on the statement in 1 Corinthians 8:1 that “love builds up.” In reflecting on what it means to say that love “builds up,” Kierkegaard underscores the importance of our presuppositions. Love in its true expression will presume and affirm a goodness already present in the other. This affirmation builds the other up. Love, in its generosity, leads with affirmation, and upbuilding love consists in this affirmation. To be built up is to be strengthened and empowered; it is to experience being welcomed and accepted. When you are loved by another, Kierkegaard states, “even when you doubt yourself, doubt that there is love in you, [the loving person] is loving enough to presuppose it.” Through this presupposition you will be liberated from the weight of this doubt to trust in the goodness that is affirmed by this love (224).

Kierkegaard here reminds his readers that we love best when we bring forth love in others by *presupposing its presence* in the very ground of their being. To cultivate upbuilding love requires us to turn inward and examine our own presuppositions or assumptions about others and

it challenges us to start from a place of affirmation and acceptance. There is great power in this. In an educational setting, this presupposition acts as a counter-narrative to a range of destructive messages about worthiness, value, and lack of belonging that serve to exclude. A truly inclusive educational setting will be one in which participants are built up in this deeper sense. The affirmation expressed in upbuilding can go a long way toward supporting students’ agency as they understand themselves to be valued members of a learning community.

Using upbuilding as our plumb line, we ask: how often do we come across instances that do not measure up? How often do we, usually unintentionally, communicate messages that tear down and exclude? Do our assignment policies and grading practices communicate to students that they are here to be judged and to have their shortcomings pointed out in a way that amplifies their concerns about worth and belonging—or do they communicate a message of support and inclusion? Because upbuilding is tied to our presuppositions, Kierkegaard reminds his readers that anything we do or say has the potential to build up or tear down. When we look carefully at things like our syllabus language, what presuppositions about our students are revealed? Do they align with our shared educational principles?

One effective inclusive pedagogical practice that can contribute to creating an upbuilding educational setting is collaborative expectation setting. By encouraging students to establish mutually agreed upon expectations about the learning environment, we affirm students’ interest in their own learning and their experiential wisdom. This presupposes that their experiences and insights are valuable and that they have a genuine interest in their own education. As Kevin Gannon notes, such practices can help instructors become better able to “use [their power] in ways that work for, rather than against, student learning” (88). Students are invited in as allies and collaborative learning partners. When instead we give them “paragraphs vividly describing the consequences for a litany of specific cheating scenarios,” we communicate that “we are expecting them to do something wrong, that we expect them to pounce on any opportunity to game the system, that we see them as adversaries” (118). In moving toward greater collaboration with students we move toward more opportunities

for upbuilding. If we lead from affirmation, what we say and how we say it changes, and these shifts in perspective can go a long way toward creating an environment that manifests genuine hospitality and inclusion.

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Keeping our attention focused on upbuilding can be especially important when things “go wrong.” When mistakes or poor choices are made, it can be easy to slide into what Gannon calls an “adversarial” stance that further serves to undermine deep learning experiences, growth, and engagement (116). Addressing problems with students that range from poor attendance to plagiarism or cheating from a place of affirmation opens up possibilities for problem solving and supporting agency. If we presuppose and affirm the good in our students rather than rushing to judgment, we are likely to learn more about who they are, what is going on in their lives, and how to support them. Perhaps they’ve disengaged from their own learning because they overburdened by repeated microaggressions that consistently serve to point out their lack of belonging. Maybe their anxieties about how to pay for their education are overwhelming their capacity to prioritize their learning experiences. Shifting from a punitive to an upbuilding stance changes the nature of the relationship we have with our students; it invites us into a space where we can acknowledge that the lives we live are complicated and difficult and that we are each more than the sum of our poor choices and mistakes.

## Concluding Reflections

My inclusive pedagogy seminar has made its way through a range of discussions about the need for and examples of inclusive pedagogical practices. Throughout, I have been continuously struck by the ever-present need to remain humble and critically reflective about our own assumptions and presuppositions. These are at the root of everything—and what grows out of that root makes all the difference.

Unexamined presuppositions can work to sustain exclusionary practices that have an enduring impact on our students and our environment. As we strive to reduce and remove our harmful assumptions, we do well to focus on strengthening those that have the capacity to build the other up. The Lutheran theological tradition that informs the “common calling” of the NECU emphasizes a “radical freedom” that consists in “a freedom from false ideas about earning one’s own worthiness and a freedom for a life of service to and with the neighbor” (NECU 4). Embracing the freedom to choose the way of upbuilding love in our interactions with others is one important means by which we can create inclusive interactions, which in turn extend that experience of radical freedom to each of the students we encounter.

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