Thirsting for God in the Classroom: A Meditation on Psalm 42:1–8

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Abstract. This brief meditation on teaching was shared at a gathering of mid-career theological school teachers for a retreat in Scottsdale, Arizona. It draws upon the author’s familiarity with the desert to provide a metaphoric exploration of the “desiccation and delight” that surprises us repeatedly in our classrooms and instructs us in humility and hope.

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”

These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.

By day the LORD commands his steadfast love; and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

Psalm 42:1–8, New Revised Standard Version

Teaching often reminds me of my childhood years in Arizona, desert rat that I was. I fondly recall exploring the back roads and trails behind my parents’ home on my modest three-speed bicycle. It was a time before the land was developed into cookie-cutter suburbs and water-wasteful golf courses. I would encounter coyotes, roadrunners, desert tortoises, and an occasional diamondback and Gila monster, all thriving under the life-giving sun and the deep blue sky that seemed to stretch toward the infinite. For me, the desert was no wasteland; it was a vibrant oasis, an enchanting world far removed from the rocky terrain of adolescence. After a long ride, I would come home at once thirsty and fulfilled. The desert embodies a brutal beauty, and there is nothing like a hike or a ride in the hot desert to remind you how utterly vulnerable you are.

My upbringing in the desert probably explains my fascination with Psalm 42, for I have come to learn that there are in fact two ways to die in the desert: by thirst and by drowning (Childs 2000, xiv). No Arizona summer goes by without hearing of casualties on both fronts, such as the deaths of undocumented aliens from Latin America who come seeking jobs as migrant farm workers or house cleaners. To avoid immigration officials, they must cross a godforsaken stretch of land known as El Camino del Diablo (“The Devil's Road”). Their smugglers (“Coyotes”!) give them only a gallon plastic milk jug filled with water. The trek requires several days of hiking, and many die on the second or third day, “their tracks of discarded belongings and empty milk jugs signaling insanity” (Childs 2000, 13).

Equally distressing are the not infrequent reports of hikers swept away by flash floods in pristine, desert canyons every summer. The floods always seem to come with the least warning and during the hottest time of the year, when the last thing on anyone’s mind is too much water.

The psalmist is well aware of both extremes: a parched desert and a flash flood. Seeking water where there is seemingly none to be found, she recalls a time
when the land was inundated. The backdrop of the desert serves as the canvas upon which the psalmist paints the journey of faith. Throughout this psalm and the next, flood and drought serve as metaphors for fulfillment and frustrated yearning, joy, and despair in God. It is as if to say that the journey of faith is no "happy trails" of progressive insight; it is rather a God. It is as if to say that the journey of faith is no fulfillment and frustrated yearning, joy, and despair in the next, flood and drought serve as metaphors for fulfillment, perhaps of theological teaching in particular, bears the desert remains for me a Christ-haunted landscape and, as such, serves as a fitting metaphor for my vocational journey as a teacher. Naturalist Craig Childs tells of an experience while hiking in a Utah canyon that served as a flood path only the night before. Childs's account reminds me of the unexpected that I have come to expect in the classroom.

I walked through with this memory [of last night's flood], the canyon still and quiet around me. I stopped. I heard people talking. I turned my head and waited to make sure of this. For at least a week I had seen no one else. This sounded like a group. As I reached the next turn, I could hear a fair number of people, maybe as many as ten; an overburdened backpacking group or worse, a hiking club. Speech against such slender walls tends to echo like spilled coins, but the enclosure was still too loud with running water for me to distinguish exact words. I could hear inflections well enough. Questions, then answers. I could nearly tell the age of people by the tone. I heard a woman in her forties.

It annoyed me that they spoke so loudly and freely in here. I thought I would startle them as I rounded their corner. I hoped so. They would fall silent upon seeing me, a man from out of the desert, fingers bandaged from cuts, eyes deliberately wild. When I waded around their corner I stopped. Water funneled down the canyon's cleavage. I stood knee-deep in the pool, sunlight landing in small daggers. There was no one.

I became aware of my breathing. The weight of my hands. The voices continued. Right here, in front of me, around me. Now they were so clear I could see the point where they began. The canyon crimped into a sliver ten feet up from the pool. Out of that sliver, water fell from darkened hallways. Within rooms I could not see, the stream plunged, poured, filled, and overflowed, addressing the canyon with innumerable tones, which then folded into echoes sounding so much like human voices that I had no category for them. I walked forward, approaching the slim waterfall. I reached my hand out and slipped it inside. Red water came down my fingers and laced my forearm like blood. (Childs 2000, xiv–xv)

Childs mistook the babbling sounds of a canyon stream, the vestige of an earlier flood, as the voices of human interlopers. He approached this inner chamber with righteous indignation, only to be caught off guard by new "voices."

I find Childs's experience an apt metaphor for teaching. Filled with knowledge to dispense, I would approach my class ready to make substantial deposits from which students could draw for their edification. I treated my (!) students either as extensions of myself or as foils for my brilliance. It did not take long to realize that my pedagogy – indeed my sense of identity as teacher – wasn't working, either for my students or for me. Over the course of time, I came to favor active listening over authoritative proclamation.

In the classroom, I learned to listen to the other and to the classroom of co-learners united by a common thirst for knowledge. Professor Hess lists three marks of "conversational education" that counter narcissistic pedagogy: (1) sensitivity to signals of voice, (2) tolerance for conflict, and (3) the capacity to see the other in ourselves (Hess 2003, 134–37). My experience in the classroom, and in the desert, suggests at least two additional marks: (4) the willingness to struggle in partnership with students, even with "poor-quality" students (see Locher 2001, 1, 3), and (5) the capacity for amazement. Only to the trained eye is the desert found to be a place of wonder teeming with life in all its various forms. Only to the engaged listener does the diverse classroom become a source of amazement, a classroom of co-learners united by a common thirst for God, and yet whose experiences and wisdom are richly varied.

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In the psalmist’s world, and in the classroom, there are neither interlopers nor foils. Bringing together the voice of many waters and the voices of many at worship, the ancient poet suggests that epiphanies are encountered in the most unexpected places. Wherever the thirst for God is greatest, there lies the promise for fulfillment. Far from the Temple, the psalmist discerns God’s sustaining presence even in the turbulent waters, where “deep calls to deep” in liturgical mystery (Ps. 42:7), echoing the peals of praise that reverberate in chambers (v. 4) hallowed and hollowed out by God’s redemptive love, by waters mixed with tears, and even blood.

As two currents in a river fight each other’s undertow Till converging they deliver one coherent steady flow, Blend, O God, our faith and learning till they carve a single course,

Till they join as one, returning praise and thanks to you, their Source. (Troeger 1994, 34)

References


Locher, David. 2001. “‘Poor-Quality Students’ Reveal Teaching Skill.” The Teaching Professor 15, no. 7:1, 3.