Entering Creatively into the Life-transforming “Way of Wisdom”: The Usefulness of the “Moving Step Exercises”

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At the outset I should point out two presuppositions operative in this essay. A half century ago, Waldo Beach (1955) said that the Bible has always been and will doubtless remain the chief source book for the study of Christian ethics. Therefore, as befits my signature course, “Womanist, Feminist, and Mujerista Ethics,” I require students to critique with rigorous honesty the relevance of sacred texts in the service of concrete social good.

Second, I learned a great deal about the academic teaching of ethics and biblical studies when Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and I team-taught several courses on this subject during our tenure at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the 1980s. As part of our pre-course planning Schüssler Fiorenza and I spent hours upon hours breaking bread together as we discussed what constitutes feminist liberationist theological scholarship; which methods should be employed in analyzing contestable issues in both canonical and apocryphal scriptures; and which pedagogical strategies might prove most effective in the seminary classroom.

Students came to my “Womanist, Feminist, and Mujerista Ethics” classroom with diverse race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and national backgrounds. The group consisted of three African American women (two Baptist and one a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church) and five European American women (four Presbyterians and one Unitarian Universalist), who are full-time Master of Divinity seminarians; one Tanzanian Lutheran clergywoman who is working at the Doctor of Ministry level; and one Ghanaian United Methodist pastor/denominational executive who was a visiting exchange student. Due to this diversity, the “Moving Step Exercises” in Wisdom Ways provided us with tools for creating a shared language as we explored the kyriarchal interstructured pyramid of multiplicative oppressions. Especially in a class populated with nine women and one man who ranged in age from twenty-four to fifty-four, the “Moving Step Exercises” in Wisdom Ways gave us an effective theoretical strategy in finding common ground.

What most struck me pedagogically was that one-third of the way into the semester, when we began reading Wisdom Ways, the seminarians made a conscious commitment to work as covenant-partners in completing the “Moving Step Exercises.” Schüssler Fiorenza’s relentlessly keen analyses in Wisdom Ways confronted the inherited, conventional Christian thinking in each seminar participant. The added advantage of wrestling collectively with this demanding text and excellent glossary is that Schüssler Fiorenza made it difficult to slip, slide, hide, retreat, or even to coast unconsciously downhill to homegrown, simplistic, Bible-thumping arguments.

The “moving step” questions played a crucial role in enabling students to keenly identify the numerous ways that academic and ecclesiastical leaders promote kyriarchal relations of domination in their use of scientific forms of biblical exegesis. Traditional, masculinist interpretations usually obscure hegemonic cultural frameworks and suppress present-day socio-ecclesial locations. The mainstream mode of scientific exegesis, created exclusively by and for the education of men, does not acknowledge that everyone has perspectival lenses with which we engage the Bible. Scientific exegetes, with warlike zeal, insist that we silence personal interests and abstract ourselves from our socio-political locations in order to linguistically manipulate a detached, value-neutral interpretation of biblical texts.

The seminarians early on came to understand how Schüssler Fiorenza’s concept of the “spiraling dance of wisdom” contextualizes the scriptures by creating a space to open up passages that present subjects that are often painful and difficult to wade through, such as rape, abuse, and dishonor. A feminist liberationist understanding of biblical interpretation does not sepa-
rate one’s real-life context from exegetical interpretations; rather, it correlates the text’s discursive situation with present-day existential problems. A graduating senior pointed out that she is learning from the spiraling dance of wisdom how to select those biblical passages that speak to and illumine her contemporary framework of meaning – the position from which she interprets texts. By taking into consideration the various existential situations from which women and men interpret the Bible, seminarians improved markedly in redefining the significance of texts in relation to where they are concretely situated.

Several students commented that what is important in Schüssler Fiorenza’s statement, “the patterns of domination can be seen as functioning like a choreographic design that determines the steps and movements of the dance, although often such designs are not conscious to the dancer” (103), is that so much of life, especially biblical interpretation, is presented as so-called “natural” tendencies. However, what seems natural is actually determined by experiences in our social environment. Recognizing how systemic oppression is constructed as natural, and enforced by society through socialization as normative, is the first step in the process of liberating moral discernment. One student described it this way:

When I arrived at seminary, I saw a bumper sticker that said, “Eve was framed.” I had never even thought of blaming Eve for initiating sin in the Garden of Eden as a frame-up. As a little girl, I remember always hearing that Eve was a disobedient, sinister woman who ate the forbidden fruit. Throughout my Sunday School years, even in religion courses in college, the damnable blame game against Eve continued.

Reading Wisdom Ways makes me realize that no matter how much I try to distance myself from what church and society deem “natural,” the dominance of the choreographed dance moves are so much a part of my life, that far too often, dehumanizing cultural patterns often go unnoticed and unchallenged.

This student does not stand alone in her process of conscientization. “Whoever holds the reins of biblical interpretation,” says another seminarian, “holds the power.” She continues,

There are good reasons that when I read the Bible I do not see myself in it. The Bible is not a text through which I know God or that God speaks to me. And even now when I use critical feminist methods for biblical interpretation, my approach and findings are devalued by my professors because I am not using one of the inherited traditional methods of biblical exegesis and research.

Schüssler Fiorenza makes an important point in reminding readers that because our experiences and social location are constantly changing, we must also constantly adjust the lens with which we interpret the Bible in order that it may fit our new perspective. Her “emancipatory rhetoric” enabled seminar participants to take into account the thick texture of their own experiences, to find their own voices in scripture, and to envision constructive change that will enhance women’s presence and agency in real-life communities of faith. In doing so, women and men leave behind the baggage of preconceived notions and begin to use experiential wisdom to challenge the norms and politicized rhetoric in sacred texts.

After providing scholarly background data, Schüssler Fiorenza’s “Moving Step Exercises” invite students to think more sharply about the ranges of options available within institutionalized systems of domination, subordination, and alienation. For instance, in sharing their imaginary conversations with mythical, historical, biblical women, such as Miriam, the unnamed concubine in the Book of Judges, and Mary of Magdala, seminarians expanded their intellectual horizons beyond the particularities of their own social locations.

Without doubt, the students’ conscientization reached a high water mark while researching the Acts of Thecla. Seminar participants experienced all kinds of cognitive dissonance regarding the politics of exclusion in Christian discipleship. Each student became more aware of the gendered dynamics in the ongoing journey of faith. The words of a third-year seminarian are helpful in understanding how investigating the emancipatory struggles of Thecla allowed for a deepening of socio-cultural understanding during the seminar.

When looking on the Internet, I discovered 10,100 hits for Thecla. I was somewhat surprised because I had never heard of the Acts of Thecla, even though I have completed all four of the required testament classes. My professors have discussed books that were left out of the Bible, such as the Gospel of Thomas, but no one ever mentioned Thecla. I think she was left out because she was a martyr and an anointed servant of God, who spoke out against the exploitation of virgins and wives.

Responding to the question of what one might say if granted the opportunity to walk and talk with Thecla in our contemporary times, the Tanzanian clergywoman wrote:

If I were blessed with an opportunity to meet Thecla, I suspect that she would talk about the numerous persecutions, the risks, the difficulties of being a Christian in her lifetime. Also, I think that Thecla would say that women were more prominent than we ever imagined in the early church. It is my understanding that members in the early Christian movement met in homes and gath-
All in all, the “moving step” questions about embodied Wisdom calling in the streets, in the middle of the seminary quad, in all kinds of public places, served well in creating tension between categories of socialized feminine behavior and the liberation mandate to uncover contradictions in inherited Christian teachings. Schüssler Fiorenza’s critical thinking exercises continually raised a series of soul-searching questions as to how to conserve what is valuable and transcend what is not. This attention to embodied Wisdom, loudly calling to seminarians, motivated students in the “Womanist, Feminist, and Mujerista Ethics” course to name their roadblocks, to identify obstacles that deliberately hinder open-mindedness, and to enter creatively into the life transforming way of wisdom.

Reference