

Guest Editor: Edward Mooney, Syracuse University



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Kassam: You taught mainly undergraduates for many years. What would you say to aspiring PhD students preparing to teach introductory classes?

Mooney: Well, first I'd say that teaching might be a career, but it's best if it's a calling. You have to feel compelled by the idea of thinking out loud, for others and with others, in such a way that they acquire their own voices. That means that you're out to do something other than knowledge-transfer.

If you think your job is to be a friendly information-transfer machine, you're in a losing competition with the Web and libraries, and have to end up with a low self-conception. Of course, information is part of the picture, but a young teacher shouldn't fixate on it. Teaching isn't writing up an hour-long, good PhD qualifying exam or dissertation chapter. And it isn't much of a step up, either, to think of yourself as a methods instructor — training someone, for

example, in “the method” presumably in use in the academic study of religion. That’s what to avoid, on the negative side, as it were. The positive side is easy to state and hard to do. I’d encourage an aspiring teacher about to face beginners in religious studies to think about the particular world that you already find captivating, or compelling, and then try to evoke it, bring it alive for them. Evocation isn’t information-transfer or methods-training.

Kassam: Are you saying that teaching is evoking something for students?

Mooney: I think that’s the best place to start in thinking about what one does in teaching. It’s imparting meanings and possibilities, not just facts.

Kassam: Can you give some examples?

Mooney: I’ll try! Let’s say I’m teaching Basho’s *Narrow Road*, or Camus’s *L’Etranger*, or a poem of Emily Dickinson. First of all, I attend to language, word by word. I read aloud. And I hold the book up for all to see. In a large class, I’ll project a passage onto a screen, and we’ll read it different ways together. I think part of the recent neglect of texts in the study of religion is related to our discomfort, as a culture, with enjoying the sound of words in books. We’re so used to television and movies or dry print news. The great religious traditions are built around beautiful, gripping, wounding language. If a passage doesn’t hurt or sting or soothe or caress or provoke, something’s wrong. We’ve forgotten how language does that. I find I have to make it alive for students. You hold up the book and say, “Hey! There’s magic in these pages!” And help them find it. Sometimes I bring in a paperback that a friend annotated for me decades ago and tell them how traditions of reading and meaning start like that. I try to get them gripped by words and books. Actually, they’re better at poetry than you might expect, but I think that’s because they listen to so many lyrics through their iPods. A world gets evoked when words begin to spark. Of course, pictures or music can work, too. But I think words and texts are central, and presently at risk.

Kassam: Where does critique, critical thinking, come in?

Mooney: It’s very important. But critique doesn’t guarantee a replacement world when the one critiqued collapses. You have to inhabit a world you respect and love if your critique is going to be relevant. You have to inhabit the world you interrogate. Otherwise, your objections miss the

mark; people don't know why they should listen. And you learn to inhabit the world of Basho or of a Dickinson poem by letting its words evoke something. If the words do their work, students can get a glimmer of what it would be like to inhabit the world those words evoke. I'm cautious about critique, especially of the strange worlds of religious, or quasi-religious, texts. We push words and worlds away without letting their vitality speak. Of course, if someone gets brash or dogmatic or thoughtless about a presumed knowledge of this or that, critique, in large doses, is the appropriate medicine.

Kassam: You mentioned pictures and music as evocative, as well as words. Would you ever use hymns or chants in class?

Mooney: Maybe chants they hadn't heard before, or shape note stuff. Hymns they knew would be too obvious, and probably backfire. In teaching a beginning course — say one called "Religion and Meaning" — I might have students listen to the funereal pace of a late Schubert Sonata, and listen for the death knell, and have them think about how certain rhythms and sounds induce sadness, and why religion evokes and replicates moments of grief and mourning, and thus lets us relive them. Sometimes an unexpected piece of music works wonders.

Kassam: How does teaching at the graduate level differ from teaching at the undergraduate level?

Mooney: I hear colleagues say that the big difference is that undergraduates need to be initiated into the excitement and rigors of a discipline, while graduate students are already going full steam ahead and only need some direction. That might be partly true. I think an undergraduate needs to be captivated by the worlds the discipline attends to. But graduate students need reminders in that direction, too. Sometimes I fear that they are so concerned with establishing their academic credentials — which is a real concern, not an illusion by any means — that they forget the pure fun of intellectual exploration and experimentation. As an advisor at the graduate level, I find I have to remind thesis or dissertation writers to keep their readers excited about what they write about. They have to watch out not to kill the excitement that brought them into a religion graduate program in the first place. If that excitement stays alive, it can get them through a stiff program, and also keep their teaching alive as they get out on the job market.

Kassam: What's the greatest reward of teaching?

Mooney: I think it's seeing a student or several of them — and sometimes, at a magic moment, an entire class — come alive in a moment of discovery. If I set the stage properly, the world I evoke, or that is evoked through my text, will resonate for them, singly, or maybe in pairs, and then all together. If it manages to resonate, then something very valuable has happened. And of course, if in my revisiting I can come at the texts from the right angle, a world dawns for me, as well as for them, in the evocations of a passage. Great rewards, sharable ones, are palpably there in those moments.

Kassam: How does your teaching intersect with, or recoil from, various public, political displays of religion — everything from 9/11 to the death of a pope?

Mooney: If you see things from a broad enough angle, there's something happening all the time that can intersect with the sort of religious themes I work to bring out in my introductory classes. You can feed off the feelings and thoughts students may have about 9/11, say when the topic of compassion or love of neighbor is foremost. Is it realistic to think one can love one's enemy? How does one grieve for one's dead? The connections are endless. And we shouldn't be afraid to make them. It's not a matter of preaching anything. It's a matter of seeing that the sorts of adjustments we make in our daily lives to injustice, hatred, exceptional love, death, suffering, are just the sorts of adjustments religious texts enact and evoke. The trick is to be imaginative in finding the correspondences. Is a killer tsunami the flood from Genesis? Is it just about as unfair in both cases? The questions are key here, not the answers.

Kassam: Do you see any great changes in the way we teach in religion programs at the undergraduate level?

Mooney: I think the shift toward visual media, PowerPoint and films for example, is going to continue to grow. I think the danger is that we encourage spectators, viewers of this and that, rather than people capable of sounding their own voices, coming to know the poetic and eloquent registers of their speech. If you slow a film way down, you can let its evocations be more transparent, and give students a chance to muster a kind of dialogical response. Otherwise, you just sit back and let yourself be overwhelmed. Or bored. In contrast, it's hard to be just a spectator of a text. You have to work to bring it alive for yourself. And that's the main thing I try to pass on in a class, the art of evocation, of letting something be evoked through words not yet your own, and then finding words that can be your own, words that give back a matching evocation — of what you've read, but also of the world you inhabit, and a possible one you might inhabit. There's a kind of mutuality in the art of evocation. We wax or wane with the

text. Maybe this is a minority opinion, but I don't think texts will go away.

Kassam: Did you always know you'd be a teacher?

Mooney: No. In high school I didn't like school or teachers. I wanted to escape. And in college I was still pretty ambivalent. It wasn't that I didn't like books — or music. I read Emerson in high school, played a lot of music, and read a lot of philosophy and literature in college. I was a contrarian. It took a while for me to realize that teaching didn't mean having to be a clone of someone else, especially when it came to how one taught. By the time I got to graduate school, I began to see that there was a way to teach that wasn't just information-orientated or wedded to a narrow methodology. It took time to figure out what that other way was. I always thought words could set the heart and mind free, because I had experienced moments of that. Gradually I began to sense that was a classroom possibility, too. Now I'm certain that that's a real possibility, and I can point to a good number of teachers much better than I am at that sort of release of the mind and heart toward the world. But the possibility that I could work in a classroom for that sort of freedom was slow to dawn. Many of my friends became dropouts. I feel very lucky to have been able to do what I loved, pretty much following my own instincts, and get a job or career out of it.

Kassam: So you'd place the study of religion among the humanities?

Mooney: I've met some very good people doing exciting work in the area of cultural studies, which is part humanities, part social science. Of course the great theoreticians of religion — Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Freud — all brought philosophical, literary, and historical perspectives together with what we might call behavioristic or scientific-quantitative concerns. Personally, I think the humanistic approach should be vigorously defended. The social science path doesn't need defense, as I see it. It already has an impressive momentum as things stand. It's the foundational texts that seem in danger of disappearing. In a typical university, it's business or management in the ascendant positions, social science and natural science in the middle, and the humanities, with their texts, at the bottom and shrinking everyday.

Kassam: What would you recommend for summer reading for a bright niece or nephew who approached you?

Mooney: First, I'd check up on what they were already planning to read, and talk about that, if I knew anything about it. Then I'd turn them toward the *Dao Te Ching*, *The Book of Job*, some Kafka, some Zen. If they were precocious and theoretically inclined, I'd have them read some Freud or Kierkegaard or Marx on alienation. I'd let them scan my library for ideas.

Kassam: If you were to deliver a "Last Lecture" on the occasion of your retirement, what notes would you sound?

Mooney: I had a chance to reflect out loud on teaching for an audience of friends and colleagues when I retired from a position in California a couple of years ago. I talked about the importance of evoking the appeals (and downsides) of certain ways of life and their values. I stand by that theme. Education is an overwhelmingly reverent (and massively irreverent) ceremony of evocation. We don't need to pass on dead letters from the past. We need to resurrect the dead, so far as possible. The worthwhile letters are the ones we can bring back from the past into present dialogue. Down the road a bit, I'd talk about deep religious sensibilities and their carrying power — their power to carry us through the ordeals any human must face at any stage of life. When I actually did that retirement talk, I played some Schubert and read some Henry James. The title *Wings of the Dove* comes from the Psalmist: *Fear and trembling are come upon me; oh, that I had wings like a dove*. Since Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is the single text I've written most about, it was easy to link James's prose to those other religious lyrics. James, the Psalmist, and Kierkegaard explore a fragile balance of intimacy and loss, of anxiety and mitigating hope. You can't get more human or religious or scholarly than that!