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Leads / Embodied Knowledge /  
Resistance  

1 Introduction

Our common life as theological educators is rooted in a locus of reflective practice that seriously demands embodied leadership for resistance: the workplace. In the United States, workplace bullying is a hidden and silent epidemic. It has been a pervasive and growing leadership challenge even within higher education. Imagine suffering from gastric discomfort each time you shared a space with a disruptive, cantankerous student. Recall the day when you chose to work from home to avoid colleagues who publicly criticized your work, ignored you in the hallways, and sarcastically insinuated that your tenure and promotion were contingent upon their political machinations. Remember feeling deep isolation and despair, perhaps while ruminating on toxic thoughts that kept you awake all night. When your body spoke, were you prepared to listen? This critical reflection examines how embodied knowledge serves as a mobilizing source of resistance for transformation, particularly in contesting faculty incivility and bullying in the workplace. I argue that by embodying knowledge and choreographing resistance, we become effective agents of adaptive change inspired to create academies grounded in ethical principles and moral values.

2 Transformational Leadership

Bernard Bass (1985) identifies four constitutive elements of transformational leadership. In an earlier work, I have summarized and appropriated them as follows:

- **Intellectual stimulation** – leaders demonstrate how to say “no” to the world as it is by systematically challenging the status quo; promote creative innovation; model critical thinking and generative decision making; and explore multiple and new ways of meaning-making that sustain a dynamic learning community.
- **Individualized consideration** – leaders advance the holistic growth and integration of each person-agent through effective mentoring and coaching, practice empathetic ways of listening, and promote sound interpersonal relationships that support an inclusive sense of identity and belonging in the organization.
- **Inspirational motivation** – leaders articulate a shared vision that inspires others to act intentionally, engaging both head and heart.
- **Idealized influence** – leaders reveal the ethical principles and moral values in which their transformative practices are grounded, by embodying virtues such
as respect, trust, charity, integrity, collaboration, and justice (Cruz 2015, 1311–1312).

Transformational leaders view leadership as a process of conversion, underscoring their primordial role as animators of adaptive and generative change (Barrett 2012; Boyatzis and McKee 2005; Kouzes and Posner [1987] 2012). They regard followers as persons-in-relationship who seek holistic integration, thereby framing human or organizational situations through the prism of their priorities, core values, and practices (Markham 1999). Accordingly, transformational leaders allow others to lead. As a result, they form among followers future leaders as moral agents for the common good (Cruz 2015, 1311). One essential practice of transformational leadership is constructing embodied knowledge.

3 Embodied Knowledge

French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty compares embodied knowledge to typing on a keyboard without looking at the keys. When we touch type, he explains, we neither have to know where each letter is in relation to the other keys nor to develop a conditioned reflex for a specific key upon seeing it (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2005, 166). He argues that it is knowledge in our hands, a way of knowing that demands an intentional bodily exertion that cannot be objectified. Typists can distinguish where letters are on the keyboard, just as we can identify our limbs in relation to other body parts, introducing a “knowledge of familiarity that does not provide us with a position in objective space” (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 166).

Building upon Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Japanese philosophical psychologist Shogo Tanaka defines embodied knowledge as a phenomenon in which the body knows how to act without any deliberation – like riding a bicycle (Tanaka 2013, 47). He asserts that, to perform such act, there is “no need to verbalize or represent in the mind all the procedures required” (Tanaka 2013, 48). The knowledge constructed is somehow imprinted in one’s body, and the act is performed unconsciously. The knowing subject is the body and not the mind. More concretely, the knowing subject is the lived body – the embodied mind that engages in embodied knowing (Tanaka 2013, 48).

Thus, embodied knowledge is lived knowledge; it is unlike scientific knowledge that is clearly objectified. Some examples include basic bodily movements such as breathing, walking, or running; use of tools such as playing with a tennis racket, eating with a fork and spoon, or playing the piano; spatial behaviors such as differentiating front-back, left-right, and top-down; and non-verbal behaviors such as maintaining physical distance, emoting feelings with facial expressions, or gazing at a person in a conversation (Tanaka 2013, 52). What are some of the implications of embodied ways of knowing for embodied pedagogies?
Asian American educator, dancer, and sociologist Hui Niu Wilcox maintains that when we apply embodied ways of knowing, we “signal an epistemological and pedagogical shift that draws attention to bodies as agents of knowledge production” (Wilcox 2009, 105). Consequently, we affirm our body’s capacity to know. Embodied ways of knowing incorporate subjugated perspectives from underrepresented enclaves such as women, indigenous groups, and communities of color that contest, resist, or give witness to notions of objectivity, dualism, and hierarchies. Embodied knowers affirm the body’s complex relationship with subjectivity; accordingly, they interface bodily ways of knowing, lived experience, and performance (Wilcox 2009, 105).

Moreover, Wilcox presents qualitative evidence to prove that embodied pedagogies form communities of belonging and foster inclusion by contesting Eurocentric and androcentric systems of knowledge production grounded in a body-mind binary (Wilcox 2009, 104). She declares that, to advance such pedagogies, we must develop alternative models of knowledge production that (a) resist the intersectional dualisms and hierarchies of mind-body, male-female, and white-other; and (b) acknowledge the body’s ability to know. Drawing from the work of feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz (1993), Wilcox emphasizes that “the body is not just another thing or object to be controlled and studied”; for “it is in and through our bodies that we experience the world and develop consciousness” (Wilcox 2009, 106). To illustrate, she purports that in the civic arena, activists use embodied pedagogies to provide emotional access to science-based information and to mobilize for social change. She animates artists, activists, and educators to utilize embodied ways of knowing in forging creative alliances and transforming radically their work, institutions, and systems of meaning making – where the body is at the very core of knowledge production (Wilcox 2009, 104).

Lamentably, U.S. higher education still bifurcates the mind and body, and theological schools are not sheltered from this predicament. For instance, in some seminars, we still attempt to delineate clearly the limits and boundaries of intellectual, spiritual, human, and pastoral studies – rather than aspiring for a more holistic or integrative approach. Wilcox warns that, whenever we perpetuate this dichotomy, we replicate the very system of power that we aim to resist. We find ourselves in such an impasse, particularly when we privilege the texts and contexts prescribed by the canons of our degree programs, extricate teaching and learning from real life, or exclude anything that happens outside the classroom, or any embodied knowledge constructed in the classroom from the curriculum. If we insist that only thoughts count, we essentially frame knowledge as disembodied; concomitantly, we assert that, when the body thinks and articulates a thought, it is essentially irrelevant (Wilcox 2009, 107). As a result, selected popular paradigms of critical pedagogy are still too theoretical and disembodied, while attributing power struggles in the academy to socio-historical contexts. Wilcox elucidates that this problem makes it difficult for some educators teaching from the trenches to assess the effectiveness of some theories when put into practice (Wilcox 2009, 106). Let us explore
how embodied practices support choreographies of resistance, particularly in contesting faculty incivility and bullying in the academy.

4 Choreographies of Resistance

Research on workplace bullying is fairly recent, and not much has been written prior to 2000. In one of the earliest comprehensive studies on faculty incivility, Darla Twale and Barbara De Luca write on the rise of the academic bully culture (Twale and De Luca 2008). While recognizing that the general literature on workplace bullying defines the phenomenon in various terms, they emphasize that bullying is fundamentally characterized by actions: verbal, indirect, or passive. Bullying is “a voluntary deviant behavior that is deliberate and systemic, and departs from positive workplace norms” (Twale 2018, 8). The target of bullying has limited space, time, or option to flee the physical setting, avoid the personal provocation, or evade potential social interaction with the bully. On one hand only bullies know their intent to bully the target. On the other hand, the target does not have to name the experience as bullying (Twale 2018, 9).

In a 2014 study of U.S. health care workers, more than 50% of survey respondents confirm having been targets of bullying, and 80% have witnessed bullying behaviors in the workplace. Bullying has affected about 23% of university faculty and staff, as well as public school teachers. Among department chairs or heads, 59% recognize faculty incivility as a pandemic leadership challenge. Worse still, 25–50% of the time, administrators are the perpetrators, and in at least 38% of the cases, targets are bullied by co-workers (Twale 2018, 4). Unfortunately, there are currently no studies on workplace bullying in U.S. theological schools.

However, participants at various faculty development seminars, academic conferences, and facilitated professional support groups – during my tenure as dean at three graduate schools for nearly fifteen years – have attested by way of anecdotes and personal testimonies that explicit forms of workplace bullying are common. Seminary bullies may be senior faculty who unknowingly (not having done reflective work in therapy and spiritual direction) remain insecure about their professional status in the university or guild, despite their scholarly publications, promotion in rank and tenure, popularity as teachers, compensation and benefits, or formal administrative and ecclesial appointments. They usually cannot let go of previously held positions of power and prestige, like some recalcitrant emeriti pastors-in-residence who oblige their successors to minister in their shadows and perennially disrupt any attempts of incumbent administrators to lead effectively and introduce adaptive change. For instance, they may perceive any curriculum revision, reframing of faculty and staff appointments, or new recruitment initiative to be a malicious critique of what they had either accomplished or not. Some demonstrate diffused or unfocused anger expressed at academic meetings, social events, or even at worship services. They target through disruptive micro-aggressions or dramatic expressions of rage.
Many exhibit narcissistic and other ego-dystonic behaviors that may warrant mental health intervention. In a case study that I present at the end of this chapter, I attempt to capture some of the critical issues and challenges of workplace bullying encountered by theological educators and their implications for embodied leadership. What do targets generally experience, and when are actions considered bullying?

Targets of bullying express knowledge through the body, which manifests itself through stress-related physical disorders. For an action to be considered bullying, it must be executed as a complex pattern of negative behaviors rather than an isolated occurrence. Such action may include abuse, cruelty, threats, mocking, rancor, oppression, hostility, ostracism, exclusion, and marginalization. On a micro level, bullying includes: (a) inaction, such as silent treatment, withdrawal, or withholding things from the target; (b) subtle action, such as interrupting, glaring at, or eye rolling directed toward the target; and (c) manifested action, such as shouting, blaming, humiliating, name calling, or criticizing the target. On a social or macro level, bullies use tactics that attack or denigrate a target’s reputation such as name calling, rumor mongering, or overt public humiliation. Moreover, bullies may live through feelings of personal inadequacy, professional jealousy, or the inability to control negative behaviors as a result of more serious mental health issues (Twale 2018, 7–10). In every social system, beginning with the family, persons are socialized to bully. For this reason, no workplace is immune from this dilemma.

Did you ever wonder what happened to the playground bullies at your grammar school? Twale concurs with other scholars who are strongly convinced that playground bullies have all become adults and that, deplorably, some are today’s notorious academic bullies. She writes:

Bullying may result when faculty members believe their institution fails to meet their needs. According to the theory of work adjustment, dissatisfaction precipitates maladjustment and resulting negative behaviors. Bullies may use these feelings to attack colleagues and the administration. Administrators may simply rate these negative behaviors as unsatisfactory work performance rather than label them bully behaviors. Lack of knowledge about bullying on the part of administrators translates into mishandling the situation and avoiding the consequences of bullying (Twale 2018, 11).

At every faith-based, ecclesial, and academic institution in which I have ministered, there has been at least one bully and a target. In some cases, bullies targeted in a mob, a circle of bully allies who preyed on unsuspecting and vulnerable targets such as junior non-tenured faculty, international students, women, and staff of color. The digital age has increased the methods and frequency with which we communicate using social media; consequently, bullies no longer rely simply on face-to-face encounters to traumatize their targets (Twale 2018, xii–12). A threatening email written in a belligerent, rude prose is a common example. An academic bully culture ineluctably creates a toxic, vitriolic, and hostile work environment.

R. Kent Crookston, in his book Working with Problem Faculty, alerts us that bullies “often operate behind closed doors or cloaked in the confidentiality of a group”,...
such as on a rank and tenure committee, and “from a position of seniority or hierarchy”, such as full professors who have served as former deans and department chairs, aware that “their prominence, rank, or connections [...] serve as effective cover for their maneuvers” (Crookston 2012, 132). Their targets may develop stress related physical and emotional disorders such as high blood pressure and depression, and demonstrate poor self-esteem, lower institutional commitment and satisfaction, burnout, resentment, impaired concentration, and compromised safety in the workplace (Crookston 2012, 133).

Furthermore, bullying imposes additional burden to the organization. It builds strained peer relationships manipulated by dystonic mobs and clicks. It leads to habitual absenteeism, accelerated employee turnover, sub-standard levels of work productivity, and higher human resource related expenditures such as healthcare cost. It threatens institutional reputation through legal action (Lester 2013, vii–xi). Let us examine some of the legal issues and challenges.

Labor and employment law professor Kerri Stone explains that, under U.S. federal or state law, bullying behavior as such is lawful. She clarifies that anti-discrimination statutes (Civil Rights Act of 1964), as several courts have interpreted, are not civility codes designed to promote collegiality, compassion, or morality in the workplace. On the contrary, “they exist to combat class-based discrimination with respect to the terms and conditions on one’s employment” (Stone 2013, 88). Stone states that bullying is deemed actionable only if it “amounts to or may be seen as amounting to discrimination based on a protected class such as race, religion, sex, age, disability”, and so forth (Stone 2013, 88). Bullying may also result in individual and/or employer liability insofar as it falls within the category of an actionable tort. In common law jurisdictions, a tort is a civil wrong – such as assault or defamation – that causes someone else to suffer loss or harm resulting in a legal liability for the tortfeasor or the person who commits the tortious act (Stone 2013, 88). The legality of bullying challenges the limits and boundaries of academic tenure.

Susan Taylor, a scholar of organizational leadership in higher education, writes that academic freedom and tenure are new topics in workplace bullying literature (Taylor 2013, 23–40). She explores how job security may effectually support and perpetuate faculty incivility, in light of how higher education comprehends academic freedom and tenure.

The American Association of University Professors, in its 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, upholds that a tenured appointment is an indefinite appointment, i.e., “after the expiration of a probationary period, teachers or investigators should have permanent or continuous tenure, and their service should be terminated only for adequate cause, in case of retirement for age, or under extraordinary circumstances because of financial exigencies” (AAUP 1940, 2018). This provision ensures that no tenured faculty may be terminated without due process. The organization also declares that lack of collegiality should never be considered when adjudicating personnel matters.
Collegiality must only be evaluated within the parameters of teaching, scholarship, and service; this policy makes it difficult for targets of bullying to seek redress. However, AAUP emphasizes that in some cases, there are legitimate issues worthy of investigation and evaluation, e.g., malfeasance (meaning any illegal or improper behavior) or professional misconduct (AAUP 2006, 40). More concretely, obstructing the ability of colleagues to carry out their normal functions, engaging in personal attack, or violating ethical standards are legitimate issues worthy of investigation and evaluation (Taylor 2013, 36; Gula 2010). Still, tenured faculty who bully are difficult to terminate.

Since bullying is not illegal and does not fall under any of the federal protected categories, human resource departments and ombudspersons often resort to mediation and other negotiation methods to address complaints. Given their limited options, they end up leaving most cases of unresolved, often perpetuating a faculty culture of normal abnormality and chronic resignation. Common responses include: there is not much we can do; this too shall pass; that is just the way she is; or let’s just wait until he retires in three years. Confronted by an acute leadership challenge, what role must academic leaders play to change systematically such a dystopian status quo?

5 Saying “No” to the Academy as it Is

Reflecting within her context as director of the office of academic integrity at the University of California San Diego, Tricia Bertram Gallant observes that once administrators have recognized a wrongful behavior, they typically introduce rules to clarify what behaviors are inadmissible or even illegal. Subsequently, they establish policies and protocols for managing perpetrators. She argues that, when administrators primarily focus on the victim-perpetrator aspect of a complaint, they might ineluctably privilege institutional compliance. Consequently, they fail to facilitate, support, and form ethical persons and organizations (Gallant 2013, 104). She claims that articulating shared standards and establishing policies for dealing with undesirable behaviors can be helpful; however, to be successful, such strategies must be part of a larger organizational vision to support ethical conduct “that is honest, transparent, and accountable to higher order principles (such as do more good than harm)”, even, “when there may not be a law or rule to guide behaviors, or when there may be no known resolution to conflicting interests, needs or demands” (Gallant 2013, 104). Her vision calls for the creation of an ethical academy in which bullying will find no place to thrive (Gallant 2013, 105). Such locus of practice inspires constituents to produce embodied knowledge – both personal and collective—that forms and sustains a culture of embodied resistance – one that says “no to the academy as it is.” For theological schools, this leadership practice demands building a community grounded in virtue ethics.
Roman Catholic moral theologian Richard Gula identifies the constitutive elements of virtue ethics in his book *Just Ministry: Professional Ethics for Pastoral Ministers*. He writes:

In virtue ethics, we turn to the character of a moral exemplar as the ultimate court of appeal for what constitutes the good life, or the life of a fully flourishing person. Christians know something about what it means to be human, to be good and to live the good life because we have seen it in Jesus. Christian morality regards the life of discipleship, or being conformed in the image of Christ, to be the best life for us to live. The long tradition of following Christ (imitatio Christi) echoes this feature of virtue ethics. In Christian virtue ethics, we turn to Jesus to see whom we are called to be, to know what constitutes good character, what counts as virtuous behavior, and what the good life looks like (Gula 2010, 48).

What happens when we intentionally seek the ‘good life’ in our graduate schools, departments, and seminaries—the same ‘good life’ that we aspire for our students? I am cognizant that we require students to meet ethical and professional standards prescribed for graduation, ordination by judicatories, or licensure and certification by regulatory boards. I know that, at least in my institution, students with an A or 4.0 grade point average (GPA) could still be dismissed from a degree program for failing to embody good character. Yet, we do not impose the same standards on ourselves due to certain unearned privileges that rank, tenure, or academic freedom might have bestowed upon us. We fail to model the way for our students to live out our core vision of professional and pastoral leadership, a practice that embodied leaders must articulate through adaptive action. Therefore, as theological educators, we must strive to become embodied leaders for resistance by committing ourselves to the good life. How do we go about this?

Within our communities of belonging and accountability, we must promote creative innovation, critical thinking, faithful discernment, and generative decision making in order to rebuild our enervated, dysfunctional academies targeted by workplace bullies. We must facilitate the holistic growth and integration of each of our constituents (*cura personalis*) through effective mentoring and coaching. We must listen with empathy, maintain sound interpersonal relationships, and support a diverse yet inclusive sense of identity to dismantle the biases and prejudices that divide us. We must articulate a shared vision that inspires others to embody knowledge and choreograph resistance, acting prophetically with both head and heart. We must reveal the ethical principles and moral values in which our teaching, scholarship, and service are grounded, by embodying virtues that in the Jesuit Catholic tradition reside in solidarity, service, and justice (Cruz 2015, 1311–1312). Ultimately, our mission is to breathe forth and live the good life.
6 A Case Study

Catherine was a first-generation Asian immigrant and a vowed member of a Roman Catholic religious order. The graduate school where she had taught for six years appointed her academic dean, a month after she was granted tenure and promotion in rank as Associate Professor of Theology and Practice. At 43, she was the youngest member of the faculty. This case study depicts her struggle and survival as a target of workplace bullying within an academic institution committed to “educating the whole person”.

The seminary president appointed Catherine as academic dean upon the unanimous and enthusiastic recommendation of the core faculty. While she had only been recently tenured, her previous experience as an effective parish and health care administrator, as well as her demonstrated excellence in teaching and scholarship, made her an obvious candidate for leadership. She was very articulate, imaginative, passionate, and engaging, particularly as a public speaker. Her empathy and deep concern for the overall formation and welfare of the students were remarkable. She embodied the school’s vision of educating for solidarity, service, and justice. She was collegial in her teaching, scholarship, and service. However, her experience of moving into a new role as dean was quite traumatic.

Catherine’s predecessor – a religious priest who had been on the faculty for more than 25 years – was given a sabbatical to facilitate her transition. There were three other senior colleagues, two white females and a white male, all of whom supported and mentored her during pre-tenure. Catherine never expected incivility to dominate her school.

Each time Catherine facilitated a faculty meeting, the senior faculty would sit together on one side of the room and criticize every idea or change she introduced. They would either interrupt or engage in side talks whenever she spoke, and usually avoided any eye contact. Once, Catherine sent an email to confirm an academic policy change that had already been carefully vetted by the faculty, only to receive a cantankerous response from one of the female senior professors. Since the entire faculty was copied on that response, it triggered a series of negative comments from other senior professors, including her predecessor, each one explicitly questioning her competence to serve as dean. Catherine chose not to respond to the messages. Subsequently, each junior faculty spoke to Catherine in private to offer her support and affirmation. One of them explicitly described what he had witnessed at meetings and online as “bullying”. Finally, Catherine had a name for what she had been struggling with.

Now, Catherine could even claim that she had also been bullied behind closed door. The same female senior faculty who wrote the cantankerous email yelled at her on two occasions about administrative decisions that Catherine’s predecessor had made regarding faculty workload and course scheduling. Perhaps for cultural reasons, Catherine found it difficult to challenge verbally anyone older than she.
While not accepting culpability, she would simply reply in a low tone of voice, “I’m sorry,” in an attempt to diffuse the conflict. Since that encounter, she found herself avoiding her colleague at all costs, even to the point of taking the back exit when leaving the building to make sure they didn’t meet in the hallway. Each time Catherine heard that woman’s voice – or any voice similar to hers – she would hide in her office sheltering herself from a perpetrator. Her entire body would tense up.

After working in such a toxic environment for six months, Catherine developed a serious form of acid reflux, which triggered chronic cough and inflamed her vocal cords. Her speech was impaired; she had to go to a therapist to learn how to speak again. She remembered a friend saying, “you really lost your voice there”. Losing her voice convinced her that she must explore other employment options. At the end of the academic year, she gave up tenure and the privilege to lead. She has since accepted a job at another institution on a modified tenure-track contract.

Reflection questions: How can practical theologians utilize embodied ways of knowing to resist the hidden and silent epidemic of workplace bullying in higher education? What is the role of an academic leader in this case?

Bibliography


