

Transcript of
Saturday morning in July. My name's Thomas Stegman. I am
Theology Ministry and a professor of New Testament. And
presence is testimony not only to our distinguished Underh



[APPLAUSE]

Dr. Colleen M. Griffith :

Good morning, everybody . So it's a great pleasure to welcome Michele Saracino to Boston College as the 2019 Underhill lecturer. In her teaching and her scholarship, Michele



And I'd also like to offer a few words of gratitude for Dr. Colleen Griffith. We've shared a collegial friendship throughout the years, connecting at conferences. And I appreciate her support and contributions to the field. So thank you. And I will begin.

If you've ever taken a nature walk, you know with even the right preparation -- a map in hand, proper hiking shoes -- that thin ssnit2 Tw 134 (r)-11.7 ((n)-1.w6 (e3-11.5 36 (o520.1 (e5i)-11.)05)0.61.5 ()0.6 (





demons out of her daughter. After first denying her request, he's moved by this persistent mother's retort. And her daughter is healed.



I like to think of wild places in the words of Diane Ackerman, a well-known author and naturalist. She describes them as sacred, quote, "holy places. They keep us secluded, sprung loose from reality, separated from life's routines," end quote. They are holy because they draw us out of ourselves and ask us to connect with otherness in mysterious and courageous ways.

So if you take a look at these images, I think they're beautiful. And one is the Ganges River. One's the Redwood Forest. And one's the Great Barrier Reef. And of course, they don't do justice. It's just to try to get your imagination going here.

Perhaps some of you have visited these beautiful, sacred sites. If not, just looking at them has the potential to invoke something in us. They arouse us. They stimulate our senses and can even inspire us to be better versions of ourselves.

Yet with all the delight they bring to our senses, we should never become too comfortable nor too complacent when in their company. Unforeseeable happenings can unfold. And foreign creatures can pop out of nowhere. It's in our best interest to proceed with caution and care.

These amazing places are easily seen as wild. Nonetheless, wilderness is not something we have to look for. We don't have to travel anywhere to find it. Rather, it's in every interpersonal relationship in which we find ourselves. It's the space between romantic partners, colleagues, friends, acquaintances, political rivals, human and non-human, creature and creator. Intimate wilderness is the sacred space between self and other in which we are called to observe, improvise, and even mourn.

As you probably have guessed, the notion of wilderness has symbolic value. In the Gospel of Matthew, we have a story about Jesus fasting for 40 days and nights in the wilderness. He's tested, if you will, to see if he can survive temptation and not give in to evil. He prevails,

and like Jesus, Christians are called to traverse the wilderness in their own lives. Our wilderness is not the desert, per se, but a type of wilderness experience in which living with others presents as a long journey for us to say yes to good and yes to God.

Think about your most taxing relationship, perhaps with a partner, a child, your boss, an employee, a parent. Sometimes individuals feel like they should have it all together. And when things go wrong, bad things happen, uncomfortable situations arise. There is often panic and denial.

Instead of thinking we should have it all together, could we envision ourselves as embarking on a journey into the unknown, where we'll be faced with challenges and queries and tests? We may not know what the other wants, and that probably scares us, so we'd rather leave than stay. Or it may be the case that we're too frightened to express what we want, so we'd rather leave.

Interpersonal wilderness is a place where uncertainty and sacred vulnerability abound, and it's our job to find a way to reside in this wilderness. A good place to start is by observing



Simone Weil, a French philosopher who lived in the early 20th century, wrote about the importance of attention. For Weil, being attentive is, quote, "the purest form of generosity," end quote. This idea makes me pause because to pay attention in critical moments demands commitment and care, important aspects of any relationship. To observe is not easy. It's an arduous practice and a concrete way of being for the other in the wilderness.

In addition to being attentive or observing in the wilderness, we need to be ready to improvise in the face of otherness. We see the importance of improvisation as a survival strategy in the work of the womanist theologian Dolores Williams. In her groundbreaking Christian theological book entitled *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Williams discusses how women of color are not all that different from the slave woman Hagar in the book of Genesis.

Some of you may recall that according to Scripture, Hagar was forced to flee her masters Sarah and Abraham, only to find herself alone in the wilderness with her son Ishmael. Like Hagar, women of color experience wilderness in the concrete. And for Williams, this unfolds as, quote, "a near-destruction situation in which God gives personal directions to the believer and thereby helps her make a way out of what she thought was no way," end quote.

Simply put, for Williams, women of color are called to improvise in the wilderness. The significance of the wilderness in the imaginations of enslaved and contemporary African American communities is striking, so much so that in the spirituals, for example, which are songs of resistance to slavery and oppression, wilderness represents a sacred space where grace abounds. God meets creation in the wilderness.

In the opera of our everyday life, each one of us is called to improvise in the wilderness. In her work entitled *Composing a Life*, Mary Catherine Bateson, who's Margaret Mead's daughter but a writer and cultural anthropologist in her own right, discusses the power of improvisation. And I really recommend this -- *Composing a Life* and all her books -- if you've never read them.

Bateson surmises that many of us feel overwhelmed by everything that's going on in our lives, whether it's at home or school or work. And many of us know this feeling. And for Bateson, we often feel as if we have to juggle it all. That's her metaphor -- juggling it all. And we have to at least pretend we can juggle it all so we are lovable. We're lovable. We can handle everything. We got it under control.

From Bateson's perspective, this juggling act keeps us from leading a flourishing life. So as an alternative, she asks her readers to engage the fluidity of life in a metaphor of they should compose their life. Composing involves being attentive to what's going on, like was already mentioned, and also being open to change.

Going with the flow is one way of talking about improvisation. But it's not an uncaring about what's happening. On the contrary, it's because we have an investment in the relationship or the matrix of relationships that we give ourselves permission to change our mind, heart, and will in the presence of the other.



seem to have it all together. Think of social media and posting the best parts of your lives, right? These perceptions cause anxiety, making us feel that we're not good enough to be loved by anyone, really.

In addition to paying attention in the water, swimmers then need to improvise and let go of unhelpful patterns in order to move through the water more efficiently. This is the self adjustment we were talking about before. And I want to break down the swimmer's stroke into two phases, the catch phase and the recovery phase.

The catch phase is when the hand enters the water and pushes and pulls. And then the recovery phase is when the arm comes out. In an ideal situation, after recovering and before re-entering the hand in the water, the swimmer strategizes to fix their stroke. It's like a split, not even a second. It's a split millisecond. They're fixing their stroke based on bodily feedback from the previous stroke.

This is where all the improvising and letting go happens. Like swimmers, who have to adjust their stroke, we may need to adjust our stroke or at least adjust how we're moving and engaging with the other. We may need to let go of unhelpful patterns and stories. Really, to give more robust relationships a fighting chance, we need to unlearn unhelpful, metaphorical muscle memories. Only then when we unlearn these memories or let those negative patterns go are we able to relate to others with empathy and grace.

There is so much being said about empathy today. And it's a buzzword, and I already talked about it. But for the remainder of this presentation, I'm really going to work through a couple of ways we can emphasize the spiritual benefits of being empathic, in that at least of deep connections and robust relationships.

So in my discussion of empathy, I begin with the work of Frans de Waal. He's a renowned primatologist who asserts that empathy is an affinity or trait that has developed across mammals to more or less degrees.

In his work *The Age of Empathy*, de Waal writes, quote, "empathy is of a heritage as ancient as the mammalian line. Empathy engages brain areas that are more than 100 years old. The capacity arose long ago with motor mimicry and emotional contagion, after which evolution added layer by layer until our ancestors not only felt what others felt but understood what others might feel." (de Waal, 2009, p. 13)



What I take away from de Waal is that mammals have a genetic impetus for empathy that desperately longs to be developed. Today, here together, we are planting the seeds for empathy's flourishing by struggling with these strategies, tussling with them; observation, improvisation, and letting go.

There is an abundance of resources for further reflection on these seeds of empathy. Some of you might be familiar with Edith Stein. Born in 1891 and raised in a German Jewish family, Edith Stein studied philosophy under Edmund Husserl, the most significant phenomenologist of the 20th century.

Perhaps in a different time where women were allowed to excel at the university, her story could have been very different. She probably could have had a university post herself, and she may have been touted as one of the greatest phenomenologists of the 20th century.

However, her life took a different turn after converting to Christianity from atheism and then becoming a Carmelite nun, she was forced to flee Holland after Christians of Jewish descent were threatened. Unable to escape the wrath of the Nazi regime, in August of 1942, Edith Stein was deported with her sister and murdered in Auschwitz. Under John Paul II, she was canonized in 1998 as Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

When she was at university, she wrote her dissertation on the problem of empathy. And it's a very important and interesting book, and it's receiving some attention these days. For Stein, empathy is an act of cognition. It's an attempt at knowing, all the time aware that one cannot fully know the situation of the other. And there are moments when individuals may need to c



oneself. So how do you navigate that so both the external and the internal have their share?

Professor Saracino :

Thank you for your question. Oh. Wait. Don't go away. I think you're talking about self-care, that people get too -- they're too much of a caretaker or they're too much about the other. Is that —

Participant :

Something like that.

Professor Saracino :

That's a great question. Part of what it takes -- and this was not in the presentation. But what it takes to be able to observe, pay attention, and improvise is to have a bounded



Thank you. And thanks for your work. I appreciate your compassion toward whomever is buying, whoever is in the market. And I think that's an important piece.

I think loneliness is probably part of it. But the structural system and what it works with -- we can't just call it "loneliness." We have to say there's more going on. So why are these individuals whose bodies are being bought and sold -- what kind of system allows for that? It's not just the loneliness, it's so much more going on.

So I think there's a couple of pieces going on. We could have compassion for the person who's entering into that exchange. And we can try to figure out what we can do to alleviate the suffering that's causing them to cause someone else's suffering, but the structural issues are the much bigger issues in my question.

Do we really know if it's loneliness that's the reason why they're entering into that exchange? Do we know that? We don't. So that's a dangerous move to make. I like the compassion, but I think that's a dangerous move to make. I'm not going back on that we're lonely, but I wouldn't want loneliness to be used as an excuse for global exploitation.

So that's my point. I feel like we need to do some more research if loneliness, in fact, is the driver there or one of the drivers or if it's something else, a skewed anthropology about the victims and malformed sexual -- I don't know. There's other things.

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people. It is helpful to other people to know that pain is part of human existence, and yet we can still keep on going.

So I don't know if that answers your question. I think a lot of it starts in the family, and it would just

