distinguishes the two, that’s a problem for your institution, he said.

Finally, Robertson made the point that without well-thought-out evaluation processes, your institution doesn’t have a very good idea of the internal return on investment of online course development. “We’ve got to be able to look at [online course development] and say, where are we wasting time and money, and how can we get a better quality product out in less time, at lower cost?” Robertson said, adding those questions can really only be answered through thorough 360-degree evaluation, gathering responses from students, faculty and online course designers.

Of those institutions who were doing robust evaluation of mission-aligned online course development, Robertson said he developed the following takeaways:

- **Create a library of instructional strategies.** Rather than reinvent the wheel every time an online course is developed and created, Robertson said institutions with strong evaluation practices would look at what worked in their online offerings, and then catalog resources about successful instructional design practices in a library for future use.

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**Top takeaways for aligning mission and online course development**

Regardless of whether your institution has a faith-based mission or a secular education mission, making sure that your institution’s virtual offerings connect with your mission is key, not only for your strategic plan and accreditation, but also to ensure students receive the full value promised by your institution.

Royce Robertson, Director of Academic Technology at Le Moyne College and a recent Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) Fellow, shared takeaways from his research into aligning your institution’s mission with its online course offerings. He recommended the following:

1. **Break down the individual elements of your institution’s mission.** Really unpack your institution’s mission and identify individual words in your mission statement, Robertson advised: “If your mission says ‘collaboration,’ what does that actually mean? What are the ground rules for being a collaborator in the courses you teach online — what kind of protocols are you thinking about and designing?”

2. **Figure out assessment metrics.** For example, if part of your mission is to create lifelong learners, how is your institution going to measure that? “What are you doing in your courses to promote lifelong learning? And how are you going to check that that’s occurring [with former students]?” Robertson asked.

3. **Examine your processes.** At Le Moyne, Robertson said the institution’s instructional designers have created a map of the instructional design process and put little stickers on the steps that reflect integrating the Jesuit mission into design. “Draw out your process and say, ‘Here are the steps that are friendly to our mission,’” Robertson advised.

4. **Identify institutional partners.** If your institution has a mission of social justice, identify who the person responsible for promoting that is, then reach out to them for the instructional design process of online course creation meant to reflect that value, Robertson recommended.

“Every element in every course doesn’t have to contain all the elements of your institution’s mission — that’s when things start to become contrived,” Robertson said. “Find the courses that are most logically related to certain aspects of your mission and really bring it to life so that students get a more in-depth and immersive experience [of that particular aspect in their education].”

That way, if a faculty member has crafted thoughtful, mission-aligned learning practices into a course, they can share them with other faculty members or course designers to use in future course creation.

- **Integrate mission-driven components into teaching.** It’s much more effective to embed and demonstrate mission-aligned principles into teaching, rather than simply teaching about those principles, Robertson said. For example, Robertson shared his idea for a virtual examen (a Jesuit practice of reflection) embedded into course design. “Imagine an online business ethics course where [in an examen] students are asked to think about a time when they were asked to compromise their own values. When was it? What were they feeling? What did that experience teach them?” Robertson said, adding that such a practice would be both more aligned with a Jesuit mission, and a more effective learning tool than answering an online multiple-choice quiz.

Read more about Robertson’s research at https://bit.ly/3bi836z. You can email him at roberrol@lemoyne.edu.

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**SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE**

**As the World Burns: Teaching Parable of the Sower During the Pandemic**

James Howard Hill, Jr.

Teaching religious studies courses to undergraduate students entering their first semester of college is challenging, regardless of
the circumstances. However, toss in a death-dealing pandemic; a nation ravenously courting authoritarianism; and the inequitable, world-razing consequences of climate devastation, and a person is well within their right to wonder how the pain and promises of an unprecedented semester could be transformed into anything remotely generative. Nevertheless, here we are.

In the fall semester of 2021, I taught a religious studies course, Introduction to Religious Studies, to nearly 50 undergraduates, many first-year college students, and lived to tell the tale. However, none of this would be possible without Octavia E. Butler’s path-breaking opus *Parable of the Sower* (1993) existing as both balm and guide for students and me.

While the following account emerged from a religious studies course, I believe the transformative impact of Butler’s work on undergraduate students crosses disciplinary borders. Besides, those who choose to accept Butler’s invitation to enter the dystopian world inhabited by Lauren Olamina, the novel’s focal character, will immediately encounter Lauren’s visceral resistance to any appeals to inerrancy and infallibility.

Instead, Lauren is convinced that the only way to counter the death-dealing realities of a dystopian society is to imagine a world beyond walls and dogma. In the wake of the unprecedented conditions undergraduate students face now, *Parable of the Sower* offered our intellectual community a way to creatively examine how race, gender, class, politics, climate and religion coalesce to produce both present and future realities.

**Knowledge Emerging from a Freedom-Soaked Pain**

*Parable of the Sower* is a dystopian novel detailing how global climate change and economic crises lead to social chaos in the early 2020s. Readers are introduced to the story’s principal character, a 15-year-old Black girl, Lauren Olamina, living within a gated community outside Los Angeles. Lauren’s father is a Baptist pastor and professor at the local university whose theological position toward a society on the road to chaos provides twin glimpses into both the world Lauren wants to leave behind and conceptions of world-shaping through faith and dogged persistence.

Determined to create a better world beyond her walled-off cul-de-sac, Lauren eventually leads several characters of diverse races, genders and ages on a quest to establish a community in the spirit of Earthseed—a religion Lauren crafts in the wake of a world literally on fire.

I would be lying to you if I suggested that going into this semester, I was confident that teaching *Parable of the Sower* to a classroom of predominantly White students would be the most successful decision of the semester. In fact, millions of U.S. citizens across the country are actively working to outlaw books like *Parable of the Sower* from grade school libraries and curricula. I was resigned to the possibility that students expecting to encounter exoticized religions might viscerally oppose sitting through a first-person account of a Black girl dreaming of other worlds precisely at the moment her current one unraveled at the seams. Thankfully, I could not have been more wrong.

More than any peer-reviewed journal article or scholarly monograph we read that semester, *Parable of the Sower* invited students to see how racism, climate devastation, misogyny/misogynoir and ableism are all realities that societies refuse to reckon with. Through Butler’s work, students discussed how themes of justice, law and order, equality, truth, and progress are not as simple as we may believe them to be. Mainly in small discussion groups, students uncomfortably sat with the possibility that—far from outlawing concepts like freedom and change from public discourse—power-hungry, authoritarian leaders readily use such freedom-soaked language. They do this not to construct a more equitable society for all but, instead, to consolidate their own lust for power.

Far more than a standard textbook that required students to learn terms they were destined to forget 30 seconds after an exam was completed, Butler’s work invited students to interrogate their own relationship to knowledge production critically. If education is a means to an end, Butler invites students to face the horrifying possibility that we are all wasting our lives laboring toward an end that is fused by scars produced by pain too fruitless, too hollow, too quotidian to ever be mistaken for joy or freedom.

**Everything We Touch, We Change**

Improvisation is a term wedded to comedy and jazz, not college teaching. Despite those who remain convinced that all pedagogical approaches must be preplanned and accompanied with a manuscript, teaching in-person in the wake of the COVID-19 taught me that virus-related outbreaks and sick family members disallow this formalism. As a class, we entered Lauren’s dystopian world at a time when few things around us were stable, secure or certain. Guaranteeing all students will meet course objectives when one-fourth of students, at some point in the semester, will not be able to taste their food is a futile exercise. Syllabi become both errant and fallible in a national public health crisis that shows no signs of ending. By the time the class examined Lauren’s world, I—and a majority of students—were weary of the troubles of a capricious and far-too calloused world.

Unsure of how students would receive Butler’s work, I made sure that every discussion was well-structured and formalized. No question would catch me off guard. Awkward silence would not be a part of our gathering. However, much to my surprise, students took Butler’s work far more seriously than I planned. Keeping with Lauren’s contention that “God is Change” and that we must “adapt” to “endure,” they, without knowing it, invited me to allow questions...
and provocations to emerge in our learning space I never considered.

Realizing that I could not teach a book centered on the concept of Change as a cosmic principle and remain bound to lesson plans, I began to improvise alongside the students. The results would forever change my approach to teaching undergraduates.

A Shape-Shifting Way Forward

Most undergraduate students who take my introductory courses do not come from large cities. Many of them grew up in small towns with high schools whose mascots were fashioned in the image of local farming animals. Few students have heard Judith Butler, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa or Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. While I believe that, had I offered these path-breaking writers and theorists instead of Octavia Butler, students would have tried their best to rise to the challenge. But there is something about the universes Octavia Butler created that offer a different learning experience that cannot be duplicated. By assigning a work of fiction within a course traditionally built on anthropological, sociological and historical scholarship, I invited students to interrogate the assumption that literature can only be taught within literature departments.

Moreover, by placing Lauren Olamina as a producer of religious knowledge alongside Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha), Confucius, Jesus of Nazareth and The Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), students were invited to study the haunting patriarchy of both the study of religion and lived religious practices of communities around the world. However, engaging Lauren Olamina as both a theorist and pedagogue is generative for studying religion. Leading from a constant awareness of my cishet-male presence and the misogynistic legacy of most cannons

Perhaps, as I shared with students, the beauty of Parable of the Sower lies in the fact that it is a story about, as one friend once shared with me, the process itself becoming the prize. More than a novel that eases rising tensions with a triumphal ending, Butler leaves us with an invitation to embrace a process that, while open to the possibility of finding a home within other worlds, allows us to discover, in relation with others, the possibility of locating anew the aim of our lives within the burning planetary body we inherited.

Ultimately, that is the greatest invitation study can make: the opportunity, alongside others, to embrace the haunting process of knowing ourselves in pursuit of taking root among something beyond ourselves. And, if Lauren is right and the things we encounter through touch changes the fabric of all existence, even frustration becomes a sacred sign that roots are indeed, reaching the soil of a ground existing beyond the horizon of our burning trouble.

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EDITOR’S THOUGHTS

Getting Started at NTLF

Lee Shallerup Bessette

When I first told my husband I was taking over as editor of this publication, he very lovingly asked me: “Are you sure?”

He knows that editing isn’t my most favorite part of the writing and publication process. He wasn’t wrong, either: I much prefer writing words than fixing words. I have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and writing is one of my superpowers. I can sit and hyperfocus on writing, but when it comes time to take a step back and look at the details (citations, formatting, naming conventions for files, etc.), my attention wanes and I find myself stuck, unable to focus and complete these relatively simple, but also boring (for me) tasks. My ADHD brain doesn’t just shut down, it actively resists the tasks.

Cultivating Attention

If there is one thing I have gotten really good at, it is procrastinating productively. When I should have been editing/formatting/returning emails, I was instead digging into James M. Lang’s most recent book, Distracted: Why Students Can’t Focus and What You Can Do About It (Basic Books, 2020). The book is excellent, a welcome antidote to the “kids these days and their devices” rhetoric. Attention, Lang continually reminds us, should be considered an achievement, something that needs to be cultivated, rather than forced.

The book provides numerous strategies that faculty can use in their own classroom to cultivate attention, with the recognition that it isn’t easy, and that it is natural for the human brain to be easily distracted. One misunderstanding about ADHD is that it is assumed that we have a lack of attention, but it is actually just the opposite—we have too much attention, and almost no ability to decide what we should be paying attention to. I appreciate that much of Lang’s advice would help someone with ADHD better understand what they should be paying attention to, and how they should be paying attention to it.

Lang specifically addresses early in the book that while his advice can help neurodivergent students, the primary focus of the book is on the neurotypical student. When he