YOU WILL BE REWARDED FOR SEPARATION AND CALL IT GROWTH

A *CURRERE* IN THREE SCENES

By Todd Edwards
Miami University

ACT 1: SUNDAY MORNING, 1975

I was maybe six, maybe seven—the age when you still sit cross-legged in your pajamas with a bowl of cereal balanced in your lap, close to the TV screen.

My parents didn't go to church. Neither did I. What I knew about God came mostly from television—the same place all latchkey kids from the 70s learned about everything. We were one of the first houses in Middletown to have cable, part of a pilot program. Thirty-two channels. A brown plastic cable box with beige push buttons mounted on top of the TV.

That Sunday morning, I was flipping through channels. Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. Dak tari. Wonderama, maybe. The less exciting Sunday programming. I was looking for something—anything—more interesting than what was on.

What I found was a man's face, filling the entire screen. A tight closeup. Eyes wet, tears tracking down both cheeks.

I stopped pressing buttons.

Behind him, tones from an organ swelled. A woman sat at the keys, pressing each note slowly, deliberately, letting it reverberate before moving to the next. Her eyes were closed. She played with the gravity of someone performing a sacred duty in a televised cathedral.

The man spoke. His voice cracked with emotion.

"This church does so much. For so many people. But there is only so much we can do alone." He closed his eyes. The organ grew louder.

"Pray with me now. Dear Jesus, we are blessed to have this ministry. The good we do, we do through you, Lord. And we pray to you, Father, to be able to do more. To be more. To have more so that we can give more."

The camera cut to images of children. Small faces. Dark eyes. Thin arms. Dirt on their cheeks. They looked at the camera without smiling.

"These children are hungry. They are lost. They need to know Jesus. And we can help them. With your support, we can help them."

I felt something tighten in my chest. I didn't have a word for it yet. It felt like being needed. Like being seen by someone who didn't know I was there. Like being told I could matter. "Please. Call this number now."

A phone number appeared at the bottom of the screen. White numbers on a dark blue field. I started crying.

The phone was in the basement. Push-button, beige, with a curly cord. I could reach it from the couch where I sat watching the screen.

I picked up the receiver and pressed the numbers carefully, one at a time. My eyes were

still on the television. The man was still praying. The children were still there.

I pressed the last button and waited.

A sound. Rapid. Staccato. Harsh.

Not a ring. Not a voice.

I hung up. Pressed the numbers again. My hands were shaking now.

The same sound.

I tried a third time. A fourth.

Is everyone calling?

Did I do it wrong?

I didn't know that long-distance numbers needed something else—a one first, or a zero, or some other code I had never learned because I had never needed to know. The phone was something that rang and you answered. It was not something you used to reach out into the world. A fifth time. A sixth. My breath was coming faster now, uneven.

Did I break it?

Am I in trouble?

A seventh time. An eighth.

What about those children?

I tried nine times. Maybe more. Each time the sound was the same. Each time I got more upset.

Finally, I gave up.

I put the receiver down. I buried my head in the couch cushions and cried.

I don't know how long I stayed there. I don't remember if I told anyone what had happened. What I remember is this: I had been called to do something. I tried. I did not know how. And no one came to help me figure it out.

ACT 2: MAX CURRANT'S FUNERAL

I knew the funeral home. I had been there before—once for a classmate who died in a car accident in high school, other times over the years as the people I grew up with started dying in the ways people die when they're young: accidents, overdoses, sudden illness.

The place reminded me of my Uncle Wendell and Aunt Velma's house in Hamilton. Wood paneling. White carpet, slightly yellowed. White curtains with a print of flowers, slightly yellowed. It felt like a window had never been opened in the place. Ever. The ceilings seemed low somehow. Just a hint of claustrophobia, a whiff, as I entered.

Max Currant was dead. Lung cancer. He was my age. I hadn't seen him in years. Max had been one of those guys in high school—tall, six-four, with wavy blonde hair and big horse teeth and a laugh that filled a room. Later he grew into himself: deep voice, mirrored sunglasses, high fringed leather boots. He was the kind of person who seemed comfortable in his own skin in a way I never quite managed. He was tight with my best friend Rich. Max and I were never that close, but I orbited him. I wanted his approval the way you want approval from someone who represents something you're not sure you can be.

I was a straight-A student. I worked harder than anyone I knew. I also did my best to raise hell on weekends.

I was trying to live in two worlds at once. One world said, "School is a waste of time, trying makes you a sellout, a conformist, a wimp." The other world said, "Put your head down, work

your ass off, follow orders, prove yourself."

I never quite fit in either.

I was nervous as I drove to the funeral home. Would I see anyone I knew? Would they recognize me? I was hoping to reconnect, to offer support, to stand in a room with people who knew me before I became whoever I was now.

I didn't expect to see Max's wife and kids. I didn't even know he had kids.

His wife was standing near the front of the room, greeting people. I recognized her immediately—we'd once been in the same history class. I remembered her as being smart, funny, and insightful in ways that didn't always get rewarded in school—the kind of person who probably wasn't going to college, who probably wasn't leaving Middletown.

I approached. Offered condolences. Started to introduce myself.

She said my name.

She remembered me.

I was stunned. After all these years, after everything that had happened, after all the distance I'd put between myself and that world—she knew who I was. Not as a professor, not as someone who'd moved to Oxford, just as Todd. She remembered me as the person I'd been when I sat in the back of that classroom. I felt seen. Honored. Like maybe I hadn't disappeared completely.

Her kids were standing nearby. Young. Middle school, maybe high school. They had Max's height, his features. One wore a Kiss t-shirt. I didn't know what to say to them. *I'm sorry for your loss. Or, your dad and I used to hang out. He was a good guy.* Everything sounded wrong in my head before I could say it out loud. Their mother asked what I was doing now. The question people ask when they haven't seen you in decades.

"I teach," I said. "Math. At Miami University." Her face shifted slightly—interest, maybe, or just politeness.

"Oh," she said. "At the Middletown campus?"

"No," I said. "In Oxford."

There was a pause. Just a beat. But I felt it.

"Oh," she said again. "That's nice."

One of her kids looked at me. Then looked away.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "It's good. I walk to work. The students are—"

I didn't know how to finish the sentence.

"That's great," she said. Her voice was kind. Genuinely kind. But something had shifted. One of the kids said something to her I didn't catch. She nodded.

"We should go," she said. "It was really nice to see you."

"You too," I said.

"Take care, Dr. Edwards," she said.

I watched them walk away. I stayed a few more minutes. Signed the guest book. Looked at the photos of Max on a table near the casket—him laughing, him with his kids, him younger than I remembered. Then I left.

I didn't see Rich. I didn't reconnect with anyone else. I drove back to Oxford and didn't tell anyone where I'd been.

ACT 3: A THURSDAY NIGHT IN HAMILTON

That whole semester, I carried around a quiet dread that I wasn't reaching my students. They were loud, scattered, funny, exhausted—working-class students balancing jobs, families, and school. I cared about them more than I expected to and doubted myself more than I wanted to admit. Thirty years into teaching, I still hadn't mastered classroom management, mostly because I never really believed in it. I believed in people. I believed in conversation. But some weeks, even that conviction wavered.

I drove to campus that Thursday night—the last night of the semester—feeling like I'd failed them.

I opened the door.

On the board, in big letters: *We love you, Dr. Edwards.*

And beneath it: a table overflowing with homemade food. Not store-bought. Not last-minute. Family food.

One student brought her mamaw's biscuits and gravy—made every Sunday. Another brought her aunt's flan from Mexico. Someone else handed me snickerdoodles made from her mom's handwritten recipe card and said, "Dr. Edwards, this is what home smells like when things are good. I wanted you to have that."

Something in me cracked. I cried. They cried. It was absurdly tender for a Thursday night. I told them how unsure I'd been feeling. They told me no professor had ever said anything like that to them.

For a moment, the roles fell away. No "students." No "professor." Just people.

After class, three of them walked me to my car, carrying leftovers like a little procession. On the way, they asked me about my personal relationship with Jesus. I told them I was not a man of faith—something younger Todd would have never imagined saying out loud in southwestern Ohio. Then, right there in the parking lot, they asked if they could pray for me.

Nobody had ever asked me that before.

I didn't know what to do, so I did the only thing that felt honest—I said yes.

They put their hands on me. Six hands. They encircled me. One prayed out loud under the yellow sodium lights while the other two bowed their heads and closed their eyes. Three Hamilton students praying over a math professor from Middletown who now teaches in Oxford.

I felt honored.

I felt confused.

I felt seen.

And yes—I felt violated.

That word matters. Being seen that fully, without armor, crosses a boundary even when it's loving. Even when it's genuine.

It was beautiful. It was disorienting. And I haven't stopped thinking about it.

WHAT THESE THREE ACTS SHARE

William Pinar calls this method *currere*—the running of the course (Pinar, 2004). Not curriculum, but *currere*: the lived experience of moving through time, returning to moments that won't let go, examining them from different angles until patterns emerge.

I keep returning to these three moments because they show me something I couldn't see

while living inside them. They map a single pattern across my life. A child wants to help. He doesn't know the codes. He tries anyway. He fails alone. A man attends a funeral. He is briefly recognized. The codes shift. Distance reasserts itself. He leaves. A professor receives care from students. They bypass all codes. He consents. It feels like violation because there are no barriers to manage.

These aren't just memories. They're evidence of how institutions—religious, educational, professional—promise connection while teaching separation. Mike Rose (1989) writes of students who live on the boundary between worlds, never quite belonging to either. These three moments show me I've been living on that boundary my entire life—not despite my education, but because of it.

The televangelist promised: give and you will help. But you had to know how to give. You had to have access.

The funeral home promised: come, remember together. But recognition dissolved the moment institutional markers appeared. Oxford. Professor. Dr. Edwards.

My students promised nothing. They simply offered. And that's why it unsettled me.

For decades, I believed the story the university tells about itself—that higher education is about becoming your full self, about freedom through knowledge, about transcending the limitations of where you came from.

And in many ways, that story is true. The university gave me tools, language, opportunities my eighteen-year-old self couldn't imagine. It let me become someone I wanted to be. But it also taught me—quietly, persistently, powerfully—to separate.

To separate from people who didn't have degrees.

To separate from ways of knowing that don't count as knowledge.

To separate from the working-class cadences and certainties that shaped me.

bell hooks (1994) names this plainly: upward mobility through education often requires separating from your origins, learning to perform a different class identity, calling that transformation freedom.

To call that separation *growth*.

To call that distance *professionalism*.

To call that transformation *becoming educated*.

The university doesn't just give you knowledge. It gives you identity. And identity, in this system, is produced through sorting. Bourdieu (1984) showed how educational institutions don't simply transmit knowledge—they transmit cultural capital, teaching us to recognize and enact class distinctions that feel like personal preferences.

You learn what counts and what doesn't.

You learn who you are by learning who you are not.

You learn to maintain boundaries—between expert and novice, between educated and uneducated, between Oxford and Middletown.

And you are rewarded for it. With status. With salary. With the quiet comfort of being on the right side of the line.

That Thursday night in the parking lot, my students didn't ask for my credentials. They didn't ask where I taught or what I believed or whether I belonged. They saw me. They cared. They acted. And I felt violated because I had spent decades learning to prevent exactly that kind of encounter.

Not because it was harmful. But because it was unmanaged.

Because it crossed boundaries I'd been taught to maintain.

Because it reminded me that those boundaries aren't natural—they're institutional. And I had become their keeper. Britzman (2003) writes about how teachers learn to maintain professional distance, how we construct boundaries that protect us from the vulnerability of genuine encounter.

My Hamilton students are training to be teachers. They will stand in classrooms like the ones I sat in as a child. They will teach kids like young Todd—kids trying to figure out which world they belong to, kids working harder than anyone they know, kids who don't yet understand what they're being asked to give up.

And I don't know what to do with that.

I don't know if I'm preparing them to disrupt the system or to reproduce it.

I don't know if their certainty will serve their students or constrain them.

I don't know if the boundaries I've learned to maintain are wisdom or cowardice. I do know this: the separation I've experienced wasn't accidental. It was structural. It was rewarded. And I participated in it long before I had language to name it.

Pinar says the synthetical moment of *currere* is where understanding emerges—where past, present, and future converge into meaning.

But I don't have a tidy synthesis.

What I have is this: three moments across 50 years that keep circling back. Three encounters with institutions that promise belonging but deliver codes I didn't know or couldn't accept or learned too well.

And a growing awareness that the university—this place I've called home for decades—asks the same thing every institution asks: choose sides, maintain boundaries, call separation by another name. I'm still here. I'm still teaching. I still care about my students more than I expect to. But I see it now. The cost. The sorting. The quiet, persistent separation we call becoming educated. And I don't know what to do about it except to say it out loud.

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