

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

Transcript of
Intimate Wilderness: Navigating the Sacred Space
between Self and Other
19th ANNUAL Evelyn Underhill Lecture in Christian Spirituality

presented on July 24, 2019 by
Michele Saracino

Dean Thomas Stegman, S.J.:

Good morning, and a warm welcome to all. It's great to see so many of you here on a Saturday morning in July. My name's Thomas Stegman. I am the dean of School of Theology Ministry and a professor of New Testament. And on this lovely July morning, your presence is testimony not only to our distinguished Underhill Lecture, but also to the seriousness with which you take your own faith and your commitment to keep it alive and vibrant.

Now, I want to make clear that everyone here is a treasured and honored guest. But I want to extend a special welcome to our alumni and alumnae, alums of the IREPM and Weston Jesuit, and alums of the STM. So may I just ask the alums of IREPM, Weston Jesuit, and STM to please stand? So let's give ourselves a--

[APPLAUSE]

We also have some current students here, future alums. And you'll get your day to stand sometime. Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry offers more opportunities than ever for superb theological education for ministry, both for degree work and for personal enrichment. And we invite you to take them some of our materials and to consider a course with us either online or on campus. So that's the last commercial break, I'm sorry.

For 19 years now, this annual lecture in Christian spirituality has been a mainstay of our summer programming. And what a rich tradition it continues to be. Evelyn Underhill, in whose name we offer this lecture, was an early 20th century English mystic, a married lay woman in ministry.

She was both the first woman to give a series of theological lectures at Oxford University and the first woman to become a retreat leader in the Anglican church, all of this over 100 years ago. She authored numerous works on the Christian spiritual life, including her classic text *Mysticism*, which was a comprehensive study of religious experience published in 1911. It gives us great pleasure to honor the legacy of Evelyn Underhill with this annual lecture.

And at this point, I'm going to scoot off the stage, and I'm going to call up my friend and colleague, Doctor Colleen Griffith, STM professor of the practice of theology and director of Spiritual Studies. And Colleen will introduce our distinguished speaker.

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[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 Saracino, like Evelyn Underhill, remains focused on what it means for us to be truly human, human selves in a changing world and a changing church.

And like the early 20th century spiritual giant Underhill, Saracino invites marked attentiveness to the affective dimensions of personhood, which can impede or serve as powerful resources when facing the challenges the deeper personal and relational engagement in a fragmented world pose. Saracino offers valuable insight into the human condition, our anxiety about finitude, our frailty and vulnerability in relationship, and especially the emotional dissonance we experience in our encounters with difference.

Her theological anthropology points in the direction of actual practices by which these dimensions of being human get navigated. Blending theology and spirituality in ways described by commentators as both, quote, "pastorally sensitive and psychologically astute." Saracino's voice is a commanding one, inviting us all to greater reflective affectivity in relationship to self, God, and other.

Doctor Saracino is professor of religious studies at Manhattan College in Riverdale, New York. She works in an interdisciplinary fashion at the intersections of theological anthropology, spirituality, contemporary continental theory, and psychologies of the self.

Saracino is the author of four books, including the title *Christian Anthropology: An Introduction to the Human Person*, published in 2015, and *Being About Borders: A Christian Anthropology of Difference*, which was awarded first place in theology in 2012 by the Association of Catholic Publishers. Most recently, Michele has coedited a volume dedicated to the work of Boston College's own professor Shawn Copeland, entitled *Enfleshing Theology: Embodiment, Discipleship, and Politics in the Work of M. Shawn Copeland*.

This morning, she will present "Intimate Wilderness: Navigating the Sacred Space Between Self and Other." Please join me in welcoming to the stage Professor Michele Saracino.

[APPLAUSE]

Professor Michele Saracino:

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for being here on this beautiful summer day. I'm so pleased to be with you and honored to be presenting the Evelyn Underhill Lecture in Christian Spirituality. Having done a bit of reading on Evelyn Underhill, I've become inspired by her work. She's challenged many to live in new ways with an openness to God and others.

Before I begin, I would like to thank the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry for having me, as well as Professor Jane Regan and Miss Melinda Donovan, who is not here, for making all the fine arrangements. For Mr. George Cooke for helping me out with all the tech today and the theater setup.

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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 things could go awry. A storm could suddenly manifest. The path could muddy. Downed trees could block your route. More than usual brush could scrape your ankles. Or a swarm of insects could nip at your neck.

In an instant, the wild becomes unsettling. That's when we're called to exert extra attention as not to get hurt. Strategies are necessary for us to survive and flourish in the wild.

We also must be strategic in order to preserve the beauty and bounty and gifts of the wild. We have learned this from experts in the field-- from scientists, naturalists, conservationists-- who, for the larger part of the 20th century and, of course, for the 21st century in this age of climate change and environmental degradation, have shown that our previous ways of navigating all that is wild has resulted in disaster.

Instead of respecting the wild, in many cases, humans have engaged the wild as something to be dominated, used, and controlled. Species are dying out. Storms are raging. Life as we know it is regressing.

Aldo Leopold, an American conservationist, scientist, and author of *A Sand County Almanac*, who lived and worked in the early 20th century, commented on the human misuse of the wild. He provided a critique which carries into today. For Leopold, quote, "the ability to see the cultural value of wilderness boils down to a question of intellectual humility," end quote.

Demonstrating intellectual humility requires admitting that we don't know everything about the natural world, and consequently, we need to approach the wild with a willingness and commitment to learn from the other. It's easy to blame individuals for not respecting nature because they're greedy. And in some cases, this is true. The desire for profit trumps care and concern for the planet.

Yet the manipulation of the natural world is not only a result of greed, but also the collateral damage of fear. We fear much of what is different from us. And we deal with this fear by deluding ourselves into imagining a wild place or another creature as familiar, even making the other into something familiar or someone familiar through force. In dire situations, so riddled by fear of the other, we avoid them. Or even worse, we annihilate them.

Whatever reasons for our lack of humility toward the wild, it is perishing, and so are we. Researchers implore us to change our attitude toward the natural world and reconsider our place in it.

What if we applied these sober lessons to our everyday lives? What if we framed interpersonal relationships, like our forays into forests, oceans, deserts, as unknown, mysterious, and sacred places that demand our intellectual humility?

My presentation today frames emotional openness to others through the lens of the wild as being thrust into undomesticated and unmanageable territory. My hope is that if we use the

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same strategies in our interpersonal relationships as we ought to use in the wild, we can set the stage for developing more robust, more empathetic relationships with all others in our midst.

For some, conceptualizing interpersonal space as the wilderness may seem like a bit of a stretch. How is relating to one's partner or child or colleague analogous to being thrown into the wilderness?

Here's how I'm making the comparison. Similar to the way humans have manipulated and domesticated nature for their own use and out of their own fear, individuals can fall into the trap of domesticating the other in interpersonal relationships, or avoiding them altogether because of ignorance or fear. Moreover, if making the other familiar or avoiding them doesn't work, then, much like the human disregard for the natural world, we could be tempted to try to eradicate the other completely.

In an effort to overcome the temptation to domesticate and control others in our lives, today I'm suggesting three strategies for navigating interpersonal relationships. The first is to engage all encounters and relationships as mysterious places where we are challenged to let go of all our assumptions and fears about the other and just be present with them. There, in the presence of the other, we might first observe what is unfolding instead of assuming this or that.

Second, if what we sense in the presence of the other is different than what we had originally presumed to be the case, then we are obliged to change our mind, heart, and will - in other words, improvise in the face of the other.

For the third strategy, we're called to let go of a false or fixed sense of self in order to accommodate the unpredictability of the wilderness. Adjusting our frame from thinking about interpersonal relationships as entities we can and should manage to wild places where we observe, improvise, and let go makes room for even more robust relationships in our lives, ones sustained by empathy and courage.

This is an outline of my presentation. First I begin by posing the problem of why I believe it's necessary to discuss interpersonal relationships in the first place.

This problem is neither universal nor the same for everyone. However, I'm going to go out on a limb and say that many of us are dealing with pervasive feelings of emptiness and have less-than-robust relationships in our lives. And if we don't, we have friends who feel this way. It's my hope by reframing these less-than-robust relationships as moments in the wild that we will become energized to cultivate more fulfilling interpersonal connections.

Next in the presentation, I define "wild," and then I explore wilderness as a symbol in scripture, theology, and psychology.

In the fourth section, I detail the strategies that I just mentioned for engaging the wild. And they are observing, improvising, and letting go. Many of us enact these strategies in other parts of our lives, even in everyday embodied activities.

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And so in the following section, I turn to swimming as an activity that lends itself to the wilderness experience. With any luck, as I discuss my passion for swimming, you all will think of embodied activities in your lives that work similarly.

Finally, in the last section, I suggest that embracing the wild and interpersonal relationships is a way to support our spiritual and biological drives for connection, fostering empathy in our lives. "Empathy" is a popular term these days. Empathy as I understand it-- because there's lots of different definitions-- is an emotional or intellectual connection with another, and it can be both.

It is that which orients us toward robust relationships and helps us to learn from them and grow. Some hope-- at least in some of the literature-- we see that perhaps being empathetic on the global landscape has the potential to bridge religious, political, and the cultural divides that seem to permeate our world. My aim today is far more modest. It is simply to provide a way for talking about the complexity of relating to one another so that we can inhabit relationships with others-- human, non-human, and the divine-- that are a little less lonely and a little more fulfilling.

So why wilderness? Why intimacy? What's the problem here? Truth be told, I found that speaking publicly about feelings of emptiness, isolation, and loneliness is a bit taboo.

Admitting one is feeling empty and lonely can be a deeply shameful action. If you want to make someone feel small, just tell them they look lonesome. It's like they've been caught doing something wrong. We could speak about it in terms of the infirm or the elderly. But for many others, even uttering the words "lonely" or "loneliness" is terrifying.

Discussing intimacy is no less fraught. Intimacy is often associated with sexual relationships, which are not excluded here, still not the main focus. Indeed, any interpersonal relationship has the potential to be intimate, if what we mean by "intimate" is one of deep connection, full of energy, and, quite simply, robust.

The desire to overcome loneliness and inhabit relationships of intimacy accompanies us at every stage of our lives. At least it has for me. When I was a child, there were times when I thought no one understood me. When I was an undergraduate in college, I thought there was something wrong with me for missing home and missing family, when everyone else on the quadrangle seemed to be having a great time playing frisbee and sunbathing.

When I was a graduate student, I doubted I would ever find someone with whom I can share ideas. When I became a parent, I was at a loss for describing the dead space between feedings and playdates, and now the lulls between driving my children here and there. Loneliness has accompanied me through every stage.

Perhaps some of you in this audience this morning experience these feelings to various degrees. Although talking about them is uncomfortable, the last thing we need is less conversation on this. Loneliness is pervasive, damaging to the human spirit, and even deadly.

I hear about their loneliness when my students come into my office and talk about their lives. I see their feelings of emptiness when they write about vulnerability in their journals.

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I detect loneliness in my friends at the gym and in my neighborhood as they search for connections any way they can. It may be the case that loneliness is too dramatic a word.

Another way of thinking about the situation is that some of us feel empty from less-than-robust relationships and less-than-robust situations. These less-than-robust relationships are connections we have with others that could be so much more fuller, more life giving if we had the tools, energies, and resources to develop them.

You may wonder how we got here to so much emptiness. The etiology of less-than-robust relationships is multifactorial. Sometimes we block others from making connections, and at times we prevent ourselves from developing rich relationships. Particular lifestyles lend themselves to isolation. For instance, with that of the homebound individual or the new mother, just to give a couple of examples.

Additionally, an individual may be lonely because they have been hurt what feels like one too many times. And then there is the very serious loneliness complicated by electronic technology.

To be sure, we have the capability to connect with individuals in ways that were unimaginable 50 years ago. Nevertheless, if we would like to deepen those relationships and create intimacy that is genuine and courageous, we probably need to work on them beyond our devices. And if that work isn't done, then those electronic connections may exacerbate feelings of loneliness.

A final cause for less-than-robust relationships and probably the most important for our discussion today, is the common-sense view that human beings are innately competitive and just not plain interested in being enmeshed with others. This idea has permeated much of Western capitalist ideology, which took root in social Darwinism. It leads us to believe that if we do, in fact, desire connections with others, there is something wrong with us, we're too needy, we're broken, and we're less than.

However, nurture and nature point a very different portrait, one in which desire for connections is a non-negotiable aspect of creaturely experience. Looking at the Hebrew Scriptures, we find that we're created for others, to be in community with others-- non-humans, humans, and the divine.

Loneliness is not an optimum, ideal, or divinely ordered situation, so much so that in the creation myth of Genesis 2, we encounter a snapshot of the divine who attends to humanity's loneliness by creating connections for them. God doesn't want humans to be alone. Companionship is part of God's plan. Sociality is part of our destiny, and genuine freedom and flourishing depends on our engagement with others.

Moreover, Jesus in the Gospels is other oriented, creating community and building relationships on care. He uses touch as a way to connect with others. He invites the despised into the community. He eats with tax collectors.

He reluctantly negotiates with Syrophenician woman, who is an other three times over. She is a woman, she is a foreigner, and she is a Gentile. And she begs him to cast the

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

The Gospels are certainly rife with examples of Jesus's other-oriented activity and his drive for connections, if you will. Less transparent is the way that Jesus negotiated these emotionally charged situations.

We don't get a lot of information from the Gospels about how he felt in these intimate encounters with others, and what he did to overcome any feelings-- negative feelings-- that emerged in those encounters, like anger and fear. Was he afraid of losing status when he associated with the downtrodden? Was he angry at that Syrophenician woman for calling him out on his bias?

Was he repulsed by the skin sores and blood of the sick? If so, how did he work through this emotional baggage? Did he have to let go of the desire for status in order to truly connect with others? While Christians certainly have biblical examples of building robust relationships with others, scaffolding is necessary for managing the emotional work involved in the building. Put simply, strategies are needed to be empathic.

Before moving on to the strategizing, it's important to note-- I think in today's day, right-- that in addition to the spiritual need for connections, we have a biological drive for connection as well. Since the 1990s, researchers have affirmed the reality of mirror neurons, which wire us for empathy. Mirror neurons fire up both when we experience something, such as pain, and also when we see someone else going through a painful experience.

People with lots of mirror cells tend to be more empathic, especially in terms of sharing emotions. Scientists believe that the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s can be compared to the Crick and Watson's double-helix revelation, leading some to believe that mirror neurons will do for psychology what DNA did for biology.

To be sure, both nurture and nature are at work in our desire for connection. That's not being contested here. What is being suggested is that navigating this predisposition takes work and strategizing.

For me, it's like working out. We generally don't drag ourselves out of bed every day, enduring these elongated workouts or strenuous cardio things, for nothing. We have muscles, and they will atrophy if we don't maintain and strengthen them. Similarly, the spiritual desire and biological hard-wiring for connection is there. Still, we need to enhance those skills and build our empathy muscles in order to create more robust relationships in our lives.

So now that you have a sense of what I gauge the problem to be-- less-than-robust relationships amid the spiritual and biological hunger for them-- let's return to the lens of wilderness and consider what makes something wild and what constitutes wilderness. For me, any creature, entity, place, or event that is foreign to us is in some way wild. Yet not all wild places are the same. Some are pleasing, some are bothersome; sometimes they're both.

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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 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 the situation and paying attention to the other.

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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.

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In a fortunate stroke of serendipity, when I was reading up on Evelyn Underhill, I found that her *Practical Mysticism* book was really important to this conversation. And she, too, upheld the notion of self that was open to change, or what I've been calling "improvisational." Underhill writes about the, quote, "surface self who exchanges freedom for a parent's security, who resides in a defensive shell of fixed ideas and of old habits, old notions, and prejudices," end quote.

For Underhill, in order to engage in practical mysticism, we have to, quote-- this is her words-- "change our attention"-- so we have to observe-- "and then next the deliberate rearrangement of one's ideas, energies, and desires in harmony with that which they have seen." This echoes what has already been said here-- that we have a need to observe in the wilderness and improvise in relationship to new information.

There's one last thread I'd like to introduce in this discussion of wilderness as symbol, and that's namely the work of Brené Brown. You may know her, she's very popular now, and she's a well-known clinician and researcher in the areas of shame, empathy, and vulnerability.

She explains wilderness as an untamed, unpredictable place of solitude and searching. She writes, quote, "the wilderness can often feel unholy because we can't control it. But it turns out to be a place of true belonging. And it's the bravest and most sacred place you will ever stand," end quote.

Brown presents us with a picture of psychological wilderness that we are not to avoid but, in fact, we should seek in order for true freedom to emerge. The wilderness space between myself and the other is the spark, the conduit, the fuel for my freedom. Freedom emerges in opening to others. Hence without a connection, I'm not free; I'm isolated, alone, and cut off. I have less-than-robust relationships.

What all these voices show, from Scripture to mysticism to theology to anthropology to psychology, is that in seeking the wilderness, we need to observe, improvise, and relinquish a static sense of self. I think this is what Underhill means in her assertion that each one of us at any time may be called to make an adjustment of the self.

Self-adjustment culminates in letting go and mourning one's own former self. And mourning is significant here because without recognizing the loss we face when we give up uncertainty in the face of the other, we cannot move toward more robust relationships. Because-- and I'm just going to invoke Freud here-- we remain imprisoned in what he would call this "melancholia." We have to mourn to really be transformed. So I know a lot of people don't like Freud, but I do like this aspect of Freud's work that we need to mourn and we need to let go, else we're a festering wound. That's his language.

So the wilderness is where we are most of the time-- in the middle of relationships, situations, and processes. This is what Sherry Turkle, who is an MIT psychologist, speaks about when she writes, "we live our lives in the middle of things." Intimacy is what it means to be in the middle.

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And like being in the wild, intimacy is not always pleasurable. Sometimes it's uncomfortable and dangerous. And it's there in the middle of our intimate relationships of proximity where we find ourselves immersed in our desires for love and our fears of failure, hoping for a better future, and grieving for losses of the past. That's our wilderness.

We're all in the middle of something-- providing care for a loved one, raising children, the middle of a marriage, the middle of a divorce, a job, a celebration. The notion of midlife crisis could mislead one into thinking that there's only one middle in our lives, when really we're always in the middle of something, unsettling situations and unsettling relationships.

In his work on aesthetics, George Steiner describes the predicament of being in the middle in terms of a Saturday experience. He writes, "but ours is a long journey of the Saturday between suffering, aloneness, unutterable waste on the one hand and the dream of liberation and rebirth on the other."

Steiner urges us to ponder that after the work of Friday and before the celebration of Easter Sunday, there is Saturday-- the liminal space of being as being in the middle, where grace resides. The middle and Saturday are two more ways of speaking about intimate, interpersonal wilderness.

So from here on out, I suggest we consider using these three strategies as tools for navigating the middle experience of wilderness. As Brené Brown says, "you don't walk into the wilderness unprepared." So this is what for me what looking prepared looks like.

First, we need to make a commitment or intention to engaging interpersonal spaces-- wild-- eyes wide open. This is the paying attention and being vigilant I mentioned a few minutes ago.

Second, in our commitment to the otherness of the interpersonal wild, we need to be ready to improvise in the face of the other. We take cues from the other, and we change with and for them. We make, in the words of Underhill, a self-adjustment.

Third, we must let go and give up the privilege of being the center of the world. We're in the wilderness, and our place is precarious. In a way, we must acknowledge and mourn the loss of safety before we can move towards healthier relationships and more empathic ways of being.

Many of us do things every day that mirror this triad of observing, improvising, and letting go. Maybe when we're writing, we do this. Maybe when we're preparing a meal, we do this. Perhaps when we're parenting, we do this.

In addition to intellectualizing these three strategies, I'm hoping that we could think about these strategies in a more embodied experience as well. So I'm going to share an experience that helps me navigate the wilderness, and that's swimming. When I swim, the importance of being attentive, changing, and morning become front and center in all aspects of life, not just the water.

I began swimming regularly at a local health club several years ago after undergoing a minor knee surgery. It was at a point in my life when I wanted to change and mix up my

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fitness routine a bit. The first few times in the pool were strange and awkward. I had entered a new community with rules about swim caps and swim times and lane etiquette. And if anyone swims here, you probably know what I mean.

However, once learning the guidelines, I was freed up to embrace the experience of being in the water, and now each time I take the plunge, those distractions fade away. Something wild and spiritual happens. It's not always pleasurable. In fact, most of the time it's unsettling. And that's the exact frame here used for approaching our relationship with others.

These relationships with other humans or non-humans or the divine is unsettling because when we dwell with others, we dwell with them in the middle of things. It's like entering a party that's already underway, in which the guests are mingling, the wine is flowing, the inside jokes are established. We are thrust into relationships. Things are in process, so much so that everything that is revealed to us needs to be engaged as part of the middle.

Coincidentally, my favorite day to swim is Saturday. This makes me think of George Steiner's work on the Saturday experience. Usually the most strenuous workout of the week, I muddle through Saturday swims with the hope of finishing.

The epitome of in-betweenness, the Saturday swim arrives after a long week of work, school, family, unforeseen problems, and happy surprises. Like my swim Saturday, the actual day-- today-- promises hope for renewal and transformation. Saturday is the day and the moment to let go and begin again. It's a day of mourning all that went wrong and trying to create all that has gone right.

Seemingly a solitary activity, swimming really is never just about the individual who is swimming, but always a social activity that unfolds in relationship to a fluid other, a wild other, involving three strategies of observation, improvisation, and letting go. Now we're going to turn to a video in which you're going to see someone swimming, and I'm asking you to imagine with me how the swim stroke encapsulates these three strategies.

Let's imagine the first strategy, namely being attentive in terms of swimming. With each swim, I'm called to a heightened vigilance to the depth, temperature, and flow of the water. In other words, I'm called to get a feel for the water.

Observing allows me to get a feel for the water and helps me to respond to unexpected events. Avid swimmers work long hours on their stroke in order to overcome what is often referred to as "hydrodynamic drag." This is the resistance to the physical movement of the swimming stroke caused by surrounding fluid. A first step in paying attention in the water is acknowledging hydrodynamic drag. So let's try to connect this to everyday life.

Like with swimming, when trying to relate to others in the interpersonal wild, we experience an analogous form of drag, an emotional friction that complicates relating. This is the baggage that I mentioned earlier that Jesus probably had to deal with but we never really get to learn about in the Gospels.

This baggage and drag is real. We need to expect it and accept it. But too often, we don't. Perhaps we feel like we should have it all together. From the outside looking in, people

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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 other 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 want or need.

The full capacity seems put together like a Russian doll." You know those nesting dolls? "At its core is an automated process shared with a multitude of species surrounded by layers that fine tune its aim and reach. Not all species possess all layers. Only a few take another's perspective, something we are masters at. But even the most sophisticated layers of the doll normally remain firmly tied to its primal core," end quote.

De Waal's Russian doll is intriguing when thinking about empathy because he gets a three capabilities. Emotional contagion, which is a way of speaking about getting a feel for the other; concern for others, which allows us to then be open to improvisation in the first place; and perspective taking, which, difficult at best, demands letting go of one's old view for another.

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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 correct their empathic acts.

For example, when a person smiles, it doesn't necessarily mean they're happy. We need to dig deeper. Beyond the smile, is the individual's body language communicating another story? There's no shame in being wrong the first time as long as one stays with the relationship and is open to being corrected by the other. Indeed, such corrections add to the robustness of the relationship.

For Stein, in empathizing, the individual's perspective is a spatial point among many. As a result, the individual will more often than not need to adjust their position or perspective because that of another. This reminds me of that swim stroke, always adjusting with feedback from the previous one. It also resonates with the perspective-taking aspect of empathy that Frans de Waal thinks essential to human development.

Ultimately, the real danger, according to Stein, is when we take the self as standard and we lock ourselves into the prison of individuality, and others become riddles to us, or even worse, we remodel them into our image and so falsify historical truth. This type of remodeling of the other to fit our view of the world does nothing to enhance or remedy our loneliness. It is the opposite of the intellectual humility necessary for navigating the wilderness.

An American essayist and novelist, Leslie Jamison, in her work, *The Empathy Exams*, demonstrates a deep sense of empathy that resonates with much of what has been said here relative to surrendering to intimate wilderness. For the larger part of her life, Jamison

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defined empathy as feeling another's pain, so much so that when she underwent several medical interventions and expected comfort from the people around her, including physicians, family, and even her boyfriend Dave, she felt disappointed.

They didn't seem to know exactly what she was going through-- that not knowing felt like distance to her and even a rejection of her. She wanted her loved ones to show they cared for her by feeling what she felt. Jamison eventually changes her mind when her boyfriend reveals to her a higher purpose of empathy, namely just being there.

Jamison writes, quote, "Dave doesn't believe in feeling bad just because someone else does. This isn't his notion of support. He believes in listening and asking questions and steering clear of assumptions. He thinks imagining someone else's pain with too much surety can be as damaging as failing to imagine it. He believes in humility." She writes, "I remember lying tangled with him how much it meant that he was willing to lie down in the mess of wires to stay there with me," end quote.

Dave teaches her about the grace of the Saturday, in which one is thrust into a fluid relationship with the other, in which neither party knows everything about the other and stays there anyway. We're in this wilderness with the other and called to empathize with them. Whether we're there for religious reasons, biological ones, or otherwise, communion with the other in the wilderness is our best strategy for building more robust relationships in our lives, and perhaps revealing something about ourselves-- and certainly of the other-- that we never knew. Thank you. [APPLAUSE]

Professor Jane E. Regan:

Thank you so much. That was excellent and gives us a new way to think about our relationships. Even those that seem tame may, in fact, be wild and recognizing that.

Now we're going to take some time just to unpack this conversation, what we've heard so far. To start, please take about three or four minutes with the people sitting around you, just a neighbor or two. What stands out for you? What do you want to remember? What invited you to think differently? And then what questions does this raise for you? So we'll take that time. And then we'll have time for questions and response.

We're grateful to Dr. Saracino for granting permission to videotape, including the conversation portion. So if you have a question to ask, please come down to one of the two mics that are situated in the aisle. We'll be asking questions from alternative sides. Please keep your questions or comments brief. Give everyone a chance to engage.

So please, questions, comments.

Participant:

I don't think I've ever been to a better lecture. Thank you. And my question is, as appealing and--

As appealing and persuasive as everything you've said is-- and I'll repeat, I've never been to a better lecture. But as appealing and persuasive as everything you said is, I'm thinking, I may not be the only person who is all too good at losing oneself in the other outside of

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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 at the—

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 sense of self. You need to have boundaries, and I didn't talk about that at all. And perhaps it was probably a missing part.

But that's kind of my starting point-- that we need to have boundaries. Because even when we read about-- you're talking about the good aspect of not having boundaries, if there is a good aspect. We're doing a lot for others, but even there is a negative aspect-- that when people don't have boundaries, those are the people who we consider narcissistic.

So boundaries are really an integral part of human development, and it takes a lot of work for people to keep their boundaries, especially people who have been designated as caretakers or specific women. We've been socialized to just kind of keep on putting ourself out there for the other.

So there needs to be a lot of boundary management to be able to do these strategies. So I think that's really helpful for me to think about. I didn't discuss it, but I think it's a really important question. I really appreciate that. Thank you.

Participant:

I also swim. And I teach these techniques-- not exactly what you said, but my own version of them, so I am totally excited to be here and just am amazed. Could you talk a little bit about how you got interested in these techniques?

Professor Saracino:

Thank you. Did you swim today?

Participant:

Not yet.

Professor Saracino:

OK. You know, this has been an evolution of thought. I think when Colleen introduced me, she said I paid a lot of attention to emotion, and that's the theological driver in my

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anthropology that we need to incorporate when we think about what it means to be human-- that there is a very important emotional side. And people in spirituality are doing that, but how to deal with those really messy emotions?

So a lot of my anthropology is based on dealing with emotions, so I've read a lot of psychology and that sort of work. I really have been pressed by Buddhism to think about being present. And that really comes from just teaching an Intro to World Religions class in my undergraduate college and being like, oh, Buddhism is excellent. I'm really into this, and how much just being present can change the dynamic of a relationship.

And the improvisation aspect comes from the work of Mary Catherine Bateson, and she really does great work on that. But self-correction is part of my background. Even Bernard Lonergan-- you have to correct yourself, right? You have to correct your thinking, and you have to keep on thinking about your thinking.

So it's been part of my thought process for a while. And it comes from a lot of different streams, whether it's philosophy or psychology or anthropology. Thank you.

Participant:

I'm a psychotherapist and psychologist, and I'm moving more into looking at theology. And one of the questions I have as a person that has taught psychotherapy for quite a number of years is, what are the capacities that we need to be teaching people who are going to be going into the field? And I wondered if you had some thoughts about that-- about, what are the relational capacities that we really need to be growing in ourselves and growing in others? You mentioned humility, for example.

In my own teaching, I taught theories and practices of psychotherapy. And what I realized was it was neither the theory nor the practices that was really essential. It had something to do with use of self. It's something to do with forming a relationship, creating relationships with others. I just wondered if you had some thoughts about what we need to be teaching people that are going to be moving into fields of ministry and caring for others. What are those capacities?

Professor Saracino:

The biggest point that I try to communicate to my students or embody, or something like that, is the sharing of story and just sharing your humanity with other people, telling your story. And I don't mean just telling every aspect of your story, but showing your vulnerabilities a little bit because people walk around, as you know, with so much, carrying so much. And people are desperately hiding you know their brokenness.

So I think if we could just find ways for people to say, OK, everybody's broken to more or less degrees. And that's a reality. Talk more about that. There's so much shame in being human. There's so much shame in being broken, and that's no service to us. So I think just the basic of sharing stories and talking about humanity more in terms of-- not that we're flawed. I don't like that word-- that we're struggling, that we're all struggling.

Participant:

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Thank you for your lecture. I wonder if you could say a little bit about applying your analysis and theories to one's relationship with God.

Professor Saracino:

That's a great question. I kind of throw God out there a few times, and that needs to be developed. But I think all the strategies are relevant depending on the person's faith relationship. Do everyday people feel comfortable just being present in that relationship and observing instead of feeling that they have to have the right answers? That would be the first one.

Our relationship towards the divine changes. Are we OK? Do we give ourselves permission to allow that change? Do we give ourselves permission? I think sometimes we feel like-- some of us, anyway. We feel like we have to stay the same or if we're not really feeling it with God that we're somehow less than. No. It's OK. It's OK. It's changing because we're changing.

Letting go of that fixed sense of self of course is going to reflect on any relationship you have. And I think the letting go piece and the mourning piece is probably the most important strategy. And they don't have to happen in any order, but the mourning piece is letting all expectations go about what I thought this relationship was going to look like or how it was going to work for me.

Letting it go and feeling sad and feeling bad and just being like, yeah, this isn't great if it's not working out-- because once you have those feelings, you kind of open to new ones. Labeling feelings-- I feel bad, instead of walking around with them all ashamed about them or all scared to admit them-- once you label them, it just frees you up to a new beginning. So I think the mourning piece would be the most important. Thank you. That's a great question. Thank you.

Participant:

I work in human trafficking with sisters in Boston, and I wrote a paper about the global situation of human trafficking. And the biggest problem is, stop the demand. And one of the things I said was talk to everybody, don't let everyone out. And I feel an attraction to do something to the men or those buying sex. Something's missing-- that loneliness, that wholeness with Mr. Kraft has all those billions, Epstein.

I have the other one about-- I'm reading Ilia Delio about cosmology and our lack of wholeness. And I think that's the real problem. But thinking thoughts-- I say, a nun-- we're celibate. But I want to do something for the men to say, there's more to life than that. There is more, but I don't know how to do it.

And sometimes I feel that I'm out on a limb, that I'm going into deep water. But there are 9,000 hits a day for sex in the greater Boston area. And we don't know who the men are. But just smiling at somebody in the street or something-- I'd know if you could help me with this-- what I have, my thinking new thoughts, how to do it better. Thank you.

Professor Saracino:

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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.

But I wouldn't want to gloss it with loneliness until I had some more data on that. But I do appreciate your compassion and your work. It's just that makes me pause a little bit. Thank you. That was a very important discussion piece.

Participant:

Thank you so much. I was wondering if you saw the play Dear Evan Hansen.

Professor Saracino:

No. I want to.

Participant:

Last night I had the pleasure of seeing that. And your being here today and all that you shared-- the play really embodies that as the adolescent journey of loneliness and the person's insides looking at another's outsides and feeling insignificant and where it leads to.

And it's really heavy stuff, but it's a musical. And the music is delightful, so you're taking it in and enjoying the music with it. It's very, very well done. And so that's all I could think of this morning as you were speaking. I recommend it for everybody to see. Thank you.

Professor Saracino:

Thank you.

Dear Evan Hansen, right?

Participant:

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I just wanted to say one of the many things I so appreciated in the hopes that it would invite you to talk more about it. And that is that your analogy of swimming brings to my mind that when I enter into the wilderness with other, not only do I bring other with me-- that's not the right way to put it, but you know what I mean-- I also bring with me my prior things that I think I did well in the past, things that I think I messed up in the past. And I loved the way that-- I don't think we've addressed that specifically, but I bring that also. And that's part of what happens in the wilderness.

Professor Saracino:

That's an excellent point. I don't tease that out at all. I say we have to unlearn metaphorical muscle memories or something like that. But yeah, all those stories that we bring in with us that seeped into our being-- some of them lead to flourishing lives, and some of them are so damaging for us and for the ones around us.

So that takes a lot of the humility to take stock of those stories, to think back, and yeah, that's part of it. That's what makes the wilderness such a messy place, right? Because you're not just coming in. Excellent. Thank you.

Participant:

That makes me think of the attending in terms of the question about our spirituality and the humility and the honesty, et cetera. I think for me, one of the most important places of applying this to my relationship with God is attending first to myself and being honest with what's going on inside of me, whether it's shadow stuff or whether it's positive stuff. And it relates to the baggage that was just mentioned, too.

I think it is so important that we are aware and attentive and honest and not shamed, but humbled by what's going on within myself as I come into a prayer moment, and being unafraid to share whatever is going on with the God of my life. Because that God will definitely teach me how I need to improvise.

Can you stay there for a second? So are there things that you do to prepare for that? How do you get in that space?

I think one of the Ignatian practices of the Daily Examine, for example, invites you to go through the day. I do it usually in reverse because I'm falling asleep in the morning, or at night, so I do it at the beginning of the day looking back and try to be as honest as I can about what was going on in those exchanges with people. How was I feeling?

And a lot of times, it's what's going on in the inner doll that doesn't get reflected in the outer doll. But I know what's going on, and sometimes I'm not very proud of it. And for me, that's where spirituality is so important. And it's attending and being honest with what's going on and sharing that with the God of my life, and then anticipating the day that's coming up and envisioning the kind of person that I would hope to be. And that sometimes makes a difference in the way I live that day.

Professor Saracino:

You said that beautifully. Thanks.

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Participant:

Thank you.

Participant:

Hi. Thank you so much for your talk. This was a really great lecture, one that I really appreciate not only from the spiritual side, but also the theological side.

In my work-- so I'm a first-year grad student. One of the things that I'm really intrigued by-- you mentioned robust relationships. And I've had some experience working with youth who have faced difficult situations, particularly with shame. So how do we work with-- I think particularly intergenerationally, how do we work with-- as adults-- work with youth and young people who have experienced shame and trauma?

Professor Saracino:

Thank you for your question. That's a big question. It seems like a lot of people in this room are already doing that. In addition to the professionals and the committed professionals in this room that are doing that, so much needs to be done in the home, which is not going on.

I teach at an undergraduate college, and sometimes the students come in for-- I have them come in for a meet and greet every semester. I don't want to assume they're lonely, but they seem really lonely. And it's not just because they're at college, it seems like they really don't have dialogue partners.

And intergenerationally-- that was your question-- where are the parents or the grandparents or the aunts and the uncles? Why are we not talking about this stuff? So when someone has a baby, they're trained in childbirth or trained in this. We need to be trained into how to talk to children, I think, and be a dialogue partner.

It's a vicious cycle because so many parents are ashamed of what they feel and what they think, and so they don't talk about things because they're just riddled with shame. I think that's a pretty-- if it's not trauma induced. You asked about trauma. It's a whole different situation. But if it's not trauma induced, you could break that cycle and just say, I'm ashamed.

Sometimes in the classroom, I'll break out and be like, I was really ashamed. If you say you're ashamed in front of people who you're giving a grade to, it's like, oh, she's ashamed? Because I'm ashamed. We're all ashamed.

It might not be the most exciting moment, and I'm best professor in the world, but all of a sudden, you have like young men raising their hand, like, I'm ashamed about this. It's like the first time they've ever admitted they're ashamed, and it's a relief. So I think a lot of it happens in the classroom,

but even every day, we can create that conversation in our community with our friends. We can create that conversation. And since we're in the conversation-- we all talk about this stuff on a regular basis-- we should expand that conversation because it's helpful to other

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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 be nice if people just admitted a little bit more their human frailties.

Participant:

Just like everyone else in the room, I'd like to thank you for a very wide-ranging talk and, if I may, as we move toward the close, invite you to expand it just a little bit further. Three of the really big formative influences in your own intellectual and spiritual development were our own Shawn Copeland, Bernard Lonergan, who taught here at one point, of course, and Emmanuel Levinas.

You wrote a book back at the beginning of your four books on Lonergan and Levinas. I'm wondering if you could share with us how those three influences may have fed into your development here on self and other. Thank you. An easy question. [LAUGHTER]

Professor Saracino:

So should I start with Professor Copeland since she's right there? I'm going to start with Levinas because I didn't bring him up at all. And I love, love him. He's in my heart. And--

[SNEEZING]

Bless you. For those of you who had read Levinas, he's a Post-Shoah thinker. He writes in French and deeply engaged with the question of subjectivity. But he turns it around a little bit-- that we become who we are because of the entity in front of us, the face of the other. So it's the other that draws us out of our selves.

My improvisation conversation is a way of talking about our response to the other, our response to the other, but it's not in French. We can improvise. It's more pragmatic, we improvise, and Levinas is not pragmatic.

For Lonergan, when I was reading over my notes last night, I said, oh, this sounds a little bit like Lonergan but not saying Lonergan. He was all about self-correction-- I have two big Lonergan scholars here, so now I'm nervous-- correcting yourself, thinking about your thinking.

And so that's what's really going on with empathy. You might be in this relationship and think you know what's going on, but you need to ask questions and then go back and reflect and correct. And people feel like they have to be certain all the time. They don't. We could just keep on asking questions.

And of course, Dr. Copeland. She does anthropology. I mean, I don't even know. She's so part of my worldview that I wouldn't even know where to pick it up, to be honest. So she's imbued all over the place, but I wanted to bring Levinas in because I think he's a big specter in this whole thing.

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Participant:

One of the questions a couple of questions ago got me remembering an event when I went swimming at Walden Pond in early June a couple of years ago. And something under the water-- I couldn't see it-- came at me, and I thought we just bumped into each other. We came in second or third, and my neck was bleeding a little bit.

And it makes me think about timing. In the wilderness, depending on where you're doing something, timing makes a difference. In the winter, trying to go up an icy rock mountain is very different. Can you say just a few words about timing and observation, improvisation, letting go?

Sometimes it's not the right timing for a relationship, or it has to marinate. You can't just observe and then improvise and let go. Sometimes the timing influences that. So in the pond, the creature wasn't ready yet, or it wasn't used to yet that people were going to be coming and swimming there.

Professor Saracino:

I like that. [LAUGHTER]

Thank you for that. Yeah, the way that the arrows worked from observation to improvisation to letting go and mourning, it makes it seem sort of chronological, and it kind of goes that way. But behind the whole conversation today is that we can't force anything. So we can't force a relationship.

And that's something that I remind myself of every day-- that we can't force it. We could show up, whether in person or mentally or in prayer, but we can't force it. We can try to force it, but that's just not working out. So you go on your swim, and something nibbles at your-- did you say your neck? All right. That's great.

[LAUGHTER]

So you had to adjust. So there was improvisation right there. So timing is important, but you can't control the time either, right? And this is where Daoism comes in-- wu wei, non-intentionality, and it's not go with the flow in an unthoughtful way. It's just being present and taking your cues from the other. And I think the question of time is very important. I would need some more time to think about that, but you can't force it.

And my last point is this. For any of this to be helpful, for any of these strategies to be helpful for anybody, we have to give ourselves resources and-- the big one-- time to do it.

Most of our lives is so hurried that we don't have time to embrace the other like it's wild. That's why we're putting people in boxes. But if we gave ourselves some more time-- or if structurally and social systems more time was allowed-- to engage the other, I think things will look a little bit differently. So thank you. That's a great thing to think about.

[APPLAUSE]