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# Difficult Knowledge and the English Classroom: A Catholic Framework Using Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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## Difficult Knowledge and the English Classroom: A Catholic Framework Using Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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*In this article, the authors explore the generative possibilities of risk-taking in the Catholic school English classroom. They associate pedagogical risk with what Deborah Britzman (1998) has called “difficult knowledge”—content that causes students to consider social trauma. Incorporating difficult knowledge meaningfully requires English teachers to take significant pedagogical risks, especially in the Catholic school classroom. Drawing on critical theology and Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* (2006) as a difficult text, the authors employ a case study looking at how the traumatic difficulty of the novel could be fruitfully taught at a Catholic school. How might students reckon with *The Road* in a way that recognizes the terrible difficulty of its subjects? How might this difficulty help them to better understand their schools, their communities, and themselves? In engaging these questions, the authors provide new possibilities for class discussion, student engagement, and assessment.*

### Keywords

English language arts, literature, difficult knowledge, risk, assessment, Catholic schools, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy

Raul<sup>1</sup> and Andres look purposefully away, seeking ways to evaporate. Angelica starts crying. Grecia offers her explanation through tears: “God has another angel.” Two months into my first year teaching 11th-grade English at a Catholic school in Brownsville, Texas, and I<sup>2</sup> have already

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1 All names have been changed.

2 All first-person singular references are drawn from the first author’s experience in the secondary classroom. The first author was a secondary English teacher at a Catholic school in Brownsville, Texas, and draws upon his classroom experience in order to investigate difficult knowledge in a specific classroom context. All uses of the first-person plural (“We”) refer to the perspective of both authors, which the authors employ to approach the material analytically and theoretically. The second author, researching at the university level,

moved—unwittingly—deep into dangerously personal territory, in the name of holding “authentic” conversations about content. This was the first major risk I took during my first year, and the experience would prove to be so unsettling that I would not return to places close to it for months.

Interested in my students’ budding take on theodicy,<sup>3</sup> I held a discussion early in the year on Leo Tolstoy’s short story “After the Ball,” in which the main character struggles to make sense of the suffering of innocents, a group in which he (perhaps suspiciously) includes himself. As the discussion began to stall—it was October, and no one observing in the fall of that first year would have described my manipulation of such discussions as “deft”—I recognized an opportunity to “engage” my students on a “deeper” level, always the goal. That week, coincidentally, saw the two-year anniversary of the death of a student named Francisco in a car crash; Francisco would have been present in my classroom that day had he not passed away. Given the similar substance of Tolstoy’s story, I thought it appropriate to voice the connection in questions to my students. I suppose I thought it would help them cope; maybe I figured it would draw us all closer together; certainly I wanted to honor Francisco’s memory in some pedagogically appropriate way. Somewhat recklessly, I offered:

By all accounts, Francisco was a remarkable person who bettered the lives of everyone around him. Wouldn’t the world be better off if he had survived, if he still brought joy to his friends and family, and did good works every day at this school? As Catholics, how do you reconcile his death with your belief in a loving God?

Something like a collective gasp arose from my students. The air went out of the room, and I was faced with the terror of almost every first-year teacher: silence that I’d invoked and, in some way, deserved.

I detailed the immediate reactions of students to this question at the beginning of this essay—visibly immense discomfort, tears, confusion, and an obvious desire to talk about something else. I eventually chose to avoid the difficulty of pursuing the discussion further, undoubtedly because I felt uncomfortable and unsure about how I might soldier on, in service of my

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brings his expertise in critical theology to bear on the broader theological implications of the classroom investigation.

3 “Theodicy” refers to the oft-discussed Problem of Evil in Judeo-Christian belief—why a just and all-powerful God permits the presence of so much injustice in the world.

pedagogical project, productively. I was new to the profession, after all, and some of my mistake came in not knowing how to deal with, as Britzman (2009) has put it, “the unexpected ways we become affected by what happens to us because of what we try to make happen” (p. 87). I silenced myself and my students that day, but neither I nor they could easily move on from the nondiscussion I’d begun. Though the talk was not fully realized, I believe this was the first instance in which I had come close to breaching the formal structures of education—that distance that keeps our students from meaningfully engaging with difficult material in order to have authentic learning experiences.

Or, put another way, this was my first failure in fully engaging important questions—those that teachers purport to pursue, most particularly in English classrooms and especially in Catholic schools. What do we believe about theodicy? How does Catholic social teaching help us grieve? In what ways might a Catholic community be uniquely positioned to foster healthy healing after sudden loss? These are questions that play at the edges of Ihab Hassan’s wondering “if it is possible to teach literature in such a way that people stop killing each other (as cited in Winn, 2013, p. 127). Here I began to wonder not so much *if*, but *how*, it was possible to teach literature, in a Catholic school, to help students think about mourning with and for each other. I asked the original question but, uncomfortable with the silence (and with their discomfort), I glided on. Some of my inability to engage fully with the students came from my outsider status at the school (I am not from Brownsville; I was a part of a two-year service program and the students were familiar with the rhythm of young teachers parachuting in, investing, and leaving them; this, another kind of loss altogether) but much of it, I think, had to do with discomfort with the difficult topic of death. I shied away from problematic knowledge in favor of the comfort of the nuts and bolts of language teaching, the dispassionate instruction of vocabulary, the rote rhythm of a classroom. At that point, death was risky, and I wasn’t ready, though my students—given time and the right context—might well have been.

The risks teachers take, especially in the English classroom, provide the quickest routes to experiences such as the above; but for myriad reasons, we fear that English teachers eschew risks in favor of more traditional and tested pedagogical territory. This aversion to risk manifests in safe, canonical choices of texts; rigid adherence to schedules and lesson plans; overreliance on direct instruction and the transferal of knowledge from teacher to student; infrequent and/or teacher-centered discussions; minimal student autonomy;

deep reluctance to incorporate students' personal lives and beliefs into discussions; unwillingness to make meaningful use of creative writing; and favoring "objective" tests over written assessments. We think, however, that English classrooms, and those situated in Catholic schools in particular, are well positioned to engage in the messiness that is the human experience; we want to explore the generative possibility of risk-taking in a religious environment, informed by theory and theology. This exploration means, very explicitly, engaging with difficulty.

To explore the nature of this risk, this difficulty, we will first discuss Deborah Britzman's (1998) notion of "difficult knowledge," suggesting that in incorporating it into the classroom, Catholic school teachers must engage with various forms of risk. From there, we return to Brownsville—later in the year—to examine how, in an English classroom, risk might be used to engage with a difficult text full of difficult knowledge: Cormac McCarthy's (2006) novel *The Road*. With that first discussion on Tolstoy's story, I failed to adequately pursue risk fruitfully with my students out of my own inexperience, but also because a model of risk-taking that is specifically engendered, indeed envisioned, for a Catholic English classroom is not yet readily available. What follows is a speculative framework for how we as teachers might take risks effectively with another very difficult text; we point, through this work, toward a model that might aid other Catholic school teachers of English in pursuing difficult knowledge.

### Theoretical Framework

The reason for my discomfort and the discomfort of my students during our discussion was that Tolstoy's story introduced what Pitt and Britzman (2003) have called "difficult knowledge," that is, "the representation of social trauma and the individuals' encounter with [it] in pedagogy" (p. 755). For H. James Garrett (2011), this is "the stuff of Social Studies class" (p. 324): the Holocaust, the civil rights movement, slavery, genocide, and other forms of mass violence. Of course, teachers deal with these themes explicitly in the English classroom as well—and, in varying ways, in all courses. For English classroom purposes, "difficult knowledge" is knowledge that is difficult for the student to access, made so sometimes because of the demands of comprehension but more often (and more interestingly) because of emotional, sociocultural, and personal barriers prohibiting the student from learning. "Difficult" can also refer to the teacher's own difficulty in engaging with that knowledge in the

classroom, perhaps because of the difficulty of comprehension but again more likely because of the emotional, sociocultural, and personal barriers in place, the formal structures and power of which the teacher is likely more aware. Garrett (2011) has contended that difficult knowledge is better understood as a “process of engagement rather than an identifiable and quantified notion” (p. 322). One definition of difficult knowledge might be that it constitutes answers to what Britzman (1998) has considered the “deeply disturbing” questions at the intersection of psychoanalysis and learning:

How [is] learning put into question? How [does] learning put the self into question? How [can] this work reverse its content and turn against the learner? And how [can] learning become entangled in the vicissitudes of unhappiness, suffering, conflict, accident, and desire? (p. 30)

The distinction must be made between the difficult knowledge of Social Studies education, which Garrett discusses, and that of the English classroom. Yet despite these differences, the “psychic events” that occur as a result of encounters with difficult knowledge of a literary or historical nature are largely similar, as are the risks that must be taken to see these events manifest productively in the classroom. Garrett (2011) noted that in the “acquisition” of difficult knowledge, “students and teachers are asked to take significant risks” (p. 321). Incorporating risk asks the teacher to forgo barriers in an attempt to engage with pedagogically rich psychic events. As always, the benefit of risk is a potentially greater reward—though its implementation demands much from both teacher and student. A “greater” reward here, from the perspective of the teacher, might constitute more substantive evidence of student “critical thinking” in reading and writing; it might also take the form of a more richly animated, lively, and—if we’re being honest—actually fun discussion of the text. From the students’ perspective, a greater reward might constitute improved skills (and scores); but I think it might also manifest in the thrill of meaningful engagement with the difficulty of learning, a thrill that remains too-often absent from lessons.

Uncomfortable learning is uniquely possible in Catholic schools’ classrooms for reasons of theology and community. We turn briefly to an argument for positioning Catholic classrooms as spaces of risk and disturbance, and then explore the ways in which such risks might be employed to engage fruitfully with the difficult knowledge of Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 novel, *The Road*, in the Catholic English classroom. We note that this case study

is less about the specifics of McCarthy's novel—though they were certainly germane to the learning objectives in the classroom at the time—than an examination of what a move from failing to engage difficult knowledge toward actively pursuing it in an English classroom in one Catholic school might look like. We are not aiming to be prescriptive, but rather to make a broad argument about possibility through curriculum.

### Catholic Schooling and Disturbing Knowledge

Peter Kreeft (2007), quoting 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century French writer Leon Bloy, noted, "Life offers only one tragedy, in the end: not to have been a saint" (p. 78). And though it might seem perhaps egomaniacal to suggest that teachers in Catholic schools are charged with the production of saints, Kreeft continued, "The future of the church in the twenty-first century and in any century, in America and in any country, is dependent on its saints.... Saints are little Christs. Be one" (p. 78). C. S. Lewis (1952) continued along the same path, noting, "Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else" (p. 177). Part of this work along the saint production line must-needs occur within Catholic schools, where—as the National Catholic Education Association suggests—catechesis explicitly involves "helping learners understand their own faith so they can confidently and respectfully engage with people of other religions or beliefs in ways that reflect God's love and plan for the world" (n. d.). We don't need to be doing apologetics in science class, per say, nor reciting Augustinian bon mots in band, but we do, in Catholic schools, have a unique opportunity to model what it might mean to pursue the Christ-like, the sainted in school and, more vitally, beyond it.

This commitment means, very explicitly, helping our students take risks. We are not, God-willing, looking to produce martyrs in any literal sense; rather we're girding students with a kind of courage, from Tillich (1957) "that does not need the safety of an unquestionable conviction" (p. 118).<sup>4</sup> In other words, if we're not helping our students delve into the vicissitudes of suffering and accident, then we're doing an active disservice to the formation of their faith, their intellect, and their ability to develop not only as intellectuals, but also as Catholic intellectuals. This effort would be, we think, faith seeking understanding at its most powerful. This isn't, mind you, to suggest that

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4 Such courage might allow, perhaps, for the citing of very famous Protestants in an argument about Catholic education and faith.

Catholic schools and Catholic teachers (in both public and parochial contexts) fail to pursue the line of difficult knowledge in the classroom; indeed, we're certain that it happens all the time. What we'd like to suggest here, however, is a framework for what it might look like, in this case, to fail and later to succeed, in such an endeavor in an English classroom, and further to begin a conversation about the ways in which Catholic schools might make engaging, difficult knowledge a selling point of the work they do. In an era in which public schooling has become increasingly tied to the measurement of "objective" knowledge through reductive assessments meant to peg student achievement to "deliverables" (e.g., Giroux, 2011; Labaree, 2010), Catholic schooling actually stands, in some sense, athwart history, able to do different things not only because of freedom from regulation (at least in places where schools are not actively pursuing public funding as a mode of survival) but also because of the unique charge of a charism that suggests Catholic spaces must engage with the moral and the difficult, and worry about the testable later, if at all. These elements of learning, of assessment, need not be mutually exclusive, but perhaps run the risk of becoming so in a culture of "achievement" at all cost.

Some of this work, then, as outlined below, will require the teacher to risk asking authentic questions and proceeding without fear through genuine answers. In this spirit, Kumashiro (2004) has suggested:

Learning what we desire not to learn (as when learning that the very ways in which we think, identify, and act are not only partial but also problematic) can be an upsetting process, [and so] crisis should be expected in the process of learning, by both the student and the teacher. (p. 55)

And whereas Kumashiro (2004) focused a great deal on desire in his text—something we choose not to engage much here—he turned, productively in our view, toward the notion that "it is important to reiterate that students are constantly entering crises in school" (p. 31). Although these crises (of identity, faith, resistance, etc.) may vary in their seriousness and in the ways they impact students, teachers have a duty to provide a "learning process that helps them to *work* through their crises" (p. 30). We see Catholic schools as uniquely situated to aid in the working through of crises particularly because they "cannot be...factor[ies] for the learning of various skills and competencies designed to fill the echelons of business and industry..."



Rather the Catholic school sets out to be a school for the human person and of human persons” (Miller, 2006, p. 24). Failing to engage difficult knowledge runs the risk of putting teachers and students in the situation of having had the experience of Catholic schooling (the crosses on the walls; the religion classes; the prayers to start classes) but having “missed the meaning” (p. 45).

A great deal of this work (through crisis in pursuit of meaning) will mean reading and discussing genuinely troubling texts with the faith that, in a properly framed Catholic classroom, “education” might “[bring] things out” of students whose “minds produce [their] own explicit ideas” (Merton, 1998, p. 154). Or, as John the XXIII would have it, “In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all, charity” (2000, p. 322). That is: we do our best work as teachers and with students when we help students work within the framework of Catholic teachings not when we read and write and speak about matters that are settled, but explicitly when we work, in charity and liberty, on matters of difficulty and risk. Metz (as cited in Johnson, 2011) has called this effort, in the context of Nazism and suffering, “the practice of dangerous memory” (p. 66). If we are, indeed, to do things in remembrance of Christ, particularly in our teaching, then we cannot elide the suffering of Jesus (nor of all the little Christs around the world, in literature, etc.). We have to write lamentations into our everyday lives, into our classrooms, and that means most simply, engaging honestly, with difficult texts, uncomfortable knowledge, so that students can produce their own explicit ideas about the hardest truths of this world. What else, in the end, ought a Catholic school be for?

### Difficult Knowledge and the English Classroom

I have chosen *The Road* for this investigation because it presents difficult knowledge that is relatively unfamiliar to students. McCarthy’s (2006) novel is difficult in ways that are speculative and fictional rather than historical. In presenting a postapocalyptic novel to my students, I am offering them difficult material that is free from the certainly difficult but also historically saturated content of the Holocaust or the civil rights movement. *The Road* is also an apt choice because it is accessible, given the simplicity of McCarthy’s (2006) pared-down syntax, and its relative brevity. Yet despite this accessibility, it is still an incredibly difficult novel to deal with emotionally, as student and teacher alike attempt to reconcile the extremes of human/inhuman behavior and uncivilization with the very civilized conditions of modern American life.

The first risk teachers must take when introducing a difficult text like *The Road* is to discard answers in favor of questions, which means that plans with any sort of thematic resolution, conclusions about what students should learn about a text, or a rigid schedule should be forgone. This method is rooted in a desire to prioritize student learning. As Britzman (1998) has noted, “To act as if education is or even should be a site of continuity and a movement toward resolution shuts out consideration of how discontinuity, difference, and learning might be the conditions of a passionate subjectivity” (p. 28). In discarding the teacher’s resolved “content,” the planned material of the unit is no longer the teacher’s interpretation of the difficult text, or any sort of objective/authoritative body of knowledge, but is rather a series of questions that serve as access points to difficult content for students. This approach is consistent with the notion that, rather than content deliverers, teachers are “theorizing agents” who work in a mix of “theory and practical knowledge” that is “contextual, affective, situated, flexible, and fluid, esthetic, intersubjective” (Britzman, 2003, p. 56).

As students approach and encounter an instance of difficult knowledge in *The Road*, teachers must resist privileging their own reconciliations of that difficulty as a solution at which students should arrive. Teachers might pick their spots, but cannot define the routes of the conversation. Of course, teachers risk losing control when taking this tack—but without taking that risk, they cannot make the material truly “difficult” for students. As an early example of in which difficult knowledge might be fruitfully introduced, I use this passage from McCarthy’s (2006) novel, which articulates some of the “stuff” that is the effect of difficult knowledge surprisingly well:

This is where I used to sleep. My cot against this wall. In the nights in their thousands to dream the dreams of a child’s imaginings, worlds rich or fearful such as might offer themselves but never the one to be. He pushed open the door half expecting to find his childhood things. Raw cold daylight fell through the roof. Gray as his heart. (p. 27)

In visiting his childhood home, the father in *The Road* attempts to reconcile how such a world might have once existed, given the postapocalyptic, ravaged state of the present. McCarthy (2006) purposefully transposed one world on top of the other here. It can be enticing to start by asking students to reconcile these two worlds, and in doing so to reconcile the fictional horror-world with the real one, but beginning this way would actually be

helping to avoid the difficult knowledge itself. Garrett (2011) has aptly noted, in his discussion of a now-conventional subject for difficult knowledge in the classroom: “By focusing on whether or not the atomic bomb should have been dropped, for example, we often avoid the consideration of what happened to the hundreds of thousands of people on whom the bomb was dropped” (p. 338). Similarly, I needed to ask students to fully contend with the material within *The Road* before I asked them what lies beyond it. I do so by having students write around the above quotation, encouraging them to imagine how the room got this way, what the father’s childhood must have been like, how he feels, and so forth. I might even have students write themselves into the story; what I would not do is have them write about the father in *their* world. In writing around the story, the student can approach the lines between McCarthy’s (2006) world and their own, allowing difficulty to be encountered on their terms in what—it is hoped—constitutes one of Britzman’s (1998) “psychic events.”

From there, I choose to risk implicating students within the difficult material of the story, a technique often adopted in the social studies classroom. Garrett (2011) discussed similar effects at the center of any encounter with difficult knowledge: “We must not only attend to the world ‘out there’ but to the world ‘inside’” (p. 321). Using the previous passage, I embed students themselves into the difficult context by asking them, “What do you miss about your childhood?” One risk is that this question falls flat, because the content of the discussion depends on both whether students feel they have suitable childhood material to share, and whether they are willing to share it. Often enough, the question falls flat not because a student doesn’t miss her childhood, but because she is unwilling to share. Modeling willingness to engage with difficult knowledge is crucial here. We, as teachers, cannot expect students to divulge personal traumas in order to make meaningful connections with a text if we will not risk vulnerability ourselves. This vulnerability is part of Winn’s (2013) English classroom as peacemaking activity, in which dialogue is used for the restoration of trust, and “wounded healing” can happen (p. 130). I might share a nostalgic anecdote from my own childhood, or I might more fruitfully write a reflection on a piece of personal writing I did in high school or college, connect that with what we are reading in *The Road*, and share both with students. Curiously, Garrett (2011) contended that this strategy is often the very problem that stalls most difficult learning in the classroom: in their haste to make learning student-centered, teachers avoid the “difficult” themselves.

Another risk involved with implicating the student is that he or she will reject the association or avoid it altogether. In their discussions on psychoanalysis, both Britzman (1998) and Garrett (2011) described the ways in which learners use defense mechanisms to avoid difficult knowledge, with the latter providing clear examples of the ways in which White teachers “route” themselves away from difficult considerations of race. Such dismissal would likely be common in the more extreme scenes of *The Road*. By way of illustration, I point to one of McCarthy’s (2006) more notorious passages:

He was standing there checking the perimeter when the boy turned and buried his face against him. He looked quickly to see what has happened. What is it? He said. What is it? The boy shook his head. What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. He bent and picked the boy up and started for the road with him, holding him close. (p. 198)

The difficulty with this passage lies in the reconciliation of human/inhuman behaviors. An immediate problem presents itself: in choosing such an extreme example of difficult knowledge, I risk shutting out students right away. The easiest, nearly universal response for students as they read this passage is to skip over it, or to divert discussion away from the disturbing. Even upon consideration, the reaction will almost always be to write off the cannibalistic as “other,” that in its repulsiveness students must distance themselves from it. But, to make this a meaningful encounter with difficult knowledge, one must hazard identification with “the other.” These people are, after (or, perhaps, before) all, human beings in McCarthy’s (2006) book. An English teacher might point to the examples Garrett (2011) has mentioned as instances in which this type of horrific violence has occurred in history. *The Road* is difficult fiction, but its difficulty is not unlike what students might encounter in the world. What’s more, the novel can also easily be read as a love story between father and son. I would challenge students to reconcile how the same author might conceive of both such a touching portrayal of parent/child love and such a disturbingly “impossible” one, how those two portraits might exist within the same world—which is our own.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth acknowledging here one of the difficult issues looming over our conversation on difficult knowledge: How can teachers distinguish between what is “difficult” and what is “inappropriate”? Briefly, we argue that innovative use of the difficult demands reforming previous notions of the “inappropriate”—the latter is necessarily fluid and specific to the group of students, the school, and the teacher.

One question I would use to implicate students more directly in these issues would be, “Where do we see examples of extremely personal instances of violence in Brownsville?” Given the traumatic events stemming from Mexican cartel violence in Brownsville and nearby Matamoros in the last decade, I am fortunate (ironically, sadly) here to be able to draw on an abundance of suitable material. I ask students to describe their personal reactions to seeing the evidence of violence firsthand in both written and verbal accounts. Though not all students have these types of scenes to draw on, sharing the firsthand experiences of some brings that difficulty out of *The Road* and into the classroom, in a way that has proven fruitful.

Inevitably, these discussions segue into what will constitute the greatest risks for English teachers engaging with difficult knowledge in the classroom. Taken far enough, a discussion of difficult knowledge implicates others in the students’ lives. And such a discussion with *The Road* doesn’t have to be taken very far. In McCarthy’s (2006) depiction of an American future, how are humanity’s current systems not condemned? Is there not the specter of a question, looming over the landscape of the entire text—how did we cause this? The passage below is but one example of descriptions that populate McCarthy’s (2006) text: “By dusk of the day following they were at the city. The long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchanges like the ruins of a vast funhouse against the distant murk...the mummied dead everywhere” (p. 24). Such a world is our own not only because of the landscape, but also because of the realism of McCarthy’s (2006) portraits: if we are to be touched by the humanity of the father’s love for his child, are we not also disgusted to see another parent cannibalize a newborn baby? Isn’t such an act only possible because of the world we have wrought, systematically, or rather, one that we are in the process of making in the present?

In an essay on McCarthy’s novel, Michael Chabon (2008) characterized the story’s power thusly: “Above all, the fear of knowing—as every parent fears—that you have left your children a world more damaged, more poisoned, more base and violent and cheerless and toxic, more doomed, than the one you inherited” (p. 108). Much is at risk here: the relationships between not only students and themselves, but also their friends, relatives, role models, and parents; their faith and beliefs; the legitimacy of other members of the faculty and administration; the community at-large; and, of course, my job. In such a discussion, implicating a student’s family in the violence is a very

dangerous route to take. What's more, in the Catholic<sup>6</sup> English classroom, I find it difficult to frame questions in a way that compares McCarthy's (2006) world to our own without questioning the legitimacy of some of what is fundamental in my students' faith, as well as what is taught in our religion classes, and the foundational beliefs of the school. Of course, I would agree with Garrett (2011) that a sufficient respect for the difficult "stuff" of the English classroom makes this part of the job, as teachers are working with the riskiness of language: "Language limits what we can articulate and how we can release ideas; it provides the avenues along which ideas can be released, but it does not guarantee that those avenues lead where we intend to go" (p. 326).

Another factor mitigating this risk is that of weighing it against what is risked if English teachers do not take chances with difficult knowledge. Britzman (1998) described the "violence of innocence" that accompanies "conformity in education...and curriculum [which] glosses over the difficulties and conflicts in life" (p. 35). This possibility seems to me substantial enough in itself to justify taking "difficult" risks. It certainly provides a force upon which we might draw, should we need to defend our pedagogy against those we're critiquing. And we need to be prepared as teachers to confront these necessary consequences of the difficult curriculum. In James Baldwin's (1985) "A Talk to Teachers," he addressed this reality:

You must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending this won't happen. (p. 325)

We thus argue that this implication of important others in our students' lives is the inevitable but often unspoken (and thus, unaddressed) terminus of a discussion on difficult knowledge, and in spite (or perhaps because) of the resistance Baldwin (1985) described, it also presents one of the best opportunities teachers have to make literature meaningful and moving for students.

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6 I want to pre-empt one obvious response here by saying that the "Catholic" aspect of my classroom, and my school's identity, is unavoidably important in the way it affects the "difficulty" of content in significant ways. I do not think that this quality limits the relevance of our theory: the "Catholic" serves as one example of forces that impose difficulty onto content. There are many other powerful cultural forces in play in the secular classroom as well.

Here we point to the pivotal moment in the title story of a recent collection of fiction by Nathan Englander (2012), *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*:

“It’s the Anne Frank game,” Shoshana says. “Right?”

Seeing how upset my wife is, I do my best to defend her. I say, “No it’s not a game. It’s just what we talk about when we talk about Anne Frank.”

“How do we play this non-game?” Mark says. “What do we do?”

“It’s the Righteous Gentile Game,” Shoshana says.

“It’s Who Will Hide Me?” I say.

“In the event of a second Holocaust,” Deb says, giving in, speaking tentatively. “It’s a serious exploration, a thought experiment that we engage in.”

“That you play,” Shoshana says.

“That, in the event of an American Holocaust, we sometimes talk about which of our Christian friends would hide us.” (p. 32)

This fictional conversation between present-day American Jews illustrates a clearly much riskier encounter with the difficult knowledge of the Holocaust that social studies teachers present every year. As the story progresses, the conversation shifts from discussing Christian friends to discussing those in the room, with wives “playing the game” with their husbands. Englander (2012) transposes the world of the Holocaust onto the world of the marriage, and somehow, imports the immense difficulty of the former into the latter.

The conversation takes a serious turn, then, as the spouses are implicated in the difficulty. Shoshana puts her husband on “play” trial; he fails, and the story ends stunningly: “And from the four of us, no one will say what cannot be said—that this wife believes her husband would not hide her” (Englander, 2012, p. 34). Ironically here, Englander “says” on the page “what cannot be said.”

It will never be a teacher's responsibility to "say" that student themselves are responsible for the trauma in their lives, or that their parents might be. What teachers *can* do is create opportunities for students to say these things to themselves. In that sense, the role of the teacher in the risky classroom is that of artist, rather than authority figure. Britzman (1998) affirmed this role, theorizing that "the artist returns to education difficult knowledge," because "within the arts, one can find something more to do. It may have something to do with understanding that imagination can exceed what everyday thoughts tolerate as normal" (p. 61). A final written assessment for *The Road*, then, becomes not a teacher's interpretation of *The Road*, but another, student-created text that demands interpretation, insisting on more serious contention with the difficulty of the novel but also, in contrast and reflection, allowing the difficult material to be contended with on an accessible level.

This assessment might be incorporated as part of Italo Calvino's (1988) "pedagogy of the imagination," which seeks to "accustom us to control our own inner vision without suffocating it" (p. 92). Though purely theoretical at the time of conception, Calvino's (1988) idea envisioned his pedagogy as reconciling the real and the fantastic, the difficult and the ordinary, through writing: "All 'realities' and 'fantasies' can take on form only by means of writing, in which outwardness and innerness, the world and I, experience and fantasy, appear composed of the same verbal material" (p. 99). In contending with the difficulty of a text, we believe that students need to see themselves in contention—and writing their own difficult words would allow such a remarkable event to occur. A final reflection on both the source text and the student text, simultaneously, compresses the distance between them, placing them as actors reconciling the difficulty of their own written world.

### Conclusions

McCarthy (2006) ends *The Road* on a relatively optimistic note: given everything awful to which the readers have been exposed, the child is safe in the arms of a caring woman, his goodness intact:

She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn't forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man though all time. (p. 286)



Of interest here is evidence of Garrett's (2011) "rerouting," as the child reroutes difficult questions about God and the world through the safer channel of his (ironically, now dead) father. McCarthy (2006) comforts readers with what teachers have known all along: that the difficulty is the same no matter where one sees it; that trauma exists only in different forms and that people reconcile it with their lives in different ways—always different and "passionately subjective" ways. What one might take from this understanding is that riskily forcing students' hands to find these ways themselves *is* the beneficial use of difficult knowledge in itself. Because that reconciliation must be subjective, one need only make it difficult for students. In a religious sense, we are pointing to the power of humanity to rebut hopelessness, for "human-kind too, thus, has power, though not as much as God. Power is dialectical. It is the intertextuality of God's and humankind's expectations" (Blumenthal, 1993, p. 16). That rebuttal, however, relies on engaging the crisis, most importantly, in dialogue and, particularly in this case, in the structured space of the Catholic English classroom.

Regarding the anecdote that began this article, the first author never followed up, so we have no way of knowing how fruitful an encounter with difficult knowledge that initial discussion was for his students. We would speculate that in initiating that process of reconciling difficult knowledge in the literary with difficult knowledge in the personal, his students' understandings of the nature of death, tragedy, and friendship likely altered, and for the better. As English teachers, we should aim for this outcome consistently as we introduce the difficult. Like the father in *The Road*, we need not be present at the time of resolution; we need only be voices with which students might contend to find solace of their own.

We see the Catholic English classroom as uniquely positioned to teach this way because of the singular nature of Catholic school communities. Often enough, these are communities in which individuals share some (but not all) understandings of how and why they live. But less important than what individuals share in Catholic schools is their desire to share: questions, discussions, identities, selves. Perhaps the best example of this propensity is the class retreat—which is often touted as a transformative experience in the life of a Catholic student. Judged on the ability to transform the faith lives of every participant, such retreats seldom result in the miraculous, immediate appearance of Lewis's "little Christs." Certainly some students leave retreat on the final day without the answers they expected. But, regardless of the outcome, a retreat at a Catholic school offers students a forum for honest

discussions about the most difficult questions of their lives: Who am I? How do I see myself in relation to others? How should I act? What do I believe? Why? Why not? The retreat becomes valuable not because it “fixes” all students in a transformative way, but because it poses to students questions that are almost never broached intentionally, or in any sustained way, in their lives outside of the context of the retreat. That remarkable event is possible because of an explicitly Catholic approach to education. The Catholic classroom can, then, make of itself a retreat and can engage the difficult because it already is, and long has been, engaged in the difficult project of forming a communion of souls.

Carroll (2009), cribbing from “the Gospel of John,” noted, “The truth will set you free.’ First it will break your heart, yes, but the truth is what counts” (p. 312). Because “meaning itself is created; its creation is the noble task of human intelligence” (p. 313), the Catholic English classroom must navigate the difficult knowledge produced through dialogue with students and texts, accepting that the truth the class gets closest to will often be heartbreaking. To avoid this fact, to elide it, is to do a disservice to the strength of the community that is possible in the faith of our classrooms, our students, ourselves.

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