

# “To Brother”: A Personal Story

by Br. Armand Alcazar, FSC

## Brothering

I love mornings. And when I say that, I have to laugh. Because it was not always true. When I was eighteen, and living as a novice, a beginner, in a community of religious brothers, we had to wake up for morning prayer at 5:40 a.m.—earlier than I had ever gotten up in my entire life. At that time, I did not love mornings! But I do now. I love the dark, the quiet, the peace. I make myself a perfect cup of coffee, sit in my recliner, and begin each day with some spiritual reading—something to stoke my inner fire. Just this morning I read: “God self-identifies with people who experience humiliation and intense suffering.” This quotation implies that if God so self-identifies with those who suffer, so must we as Christians, as sisters and brothers.

I understand my vocation as a verb, “to brother or “brothering.” As a brother, I and the members of my community are called to be brothers—helpers, protectors, companions—to all, especially to those who are in need. There are a number of communities of brothers in the Catholic Church, each with its own particular charism or gift to give to the Church and to the world. Why is this? Each religious community of men or women goes back to one single person, a founder who was alert and sensitive to the needs of the people around him or her. The various founders of these various communities were perceptive. They saw what was lacking in society. When a particular need was left unmet, a perceptive and Spirit-led person would gather together a group of like-minded individuals and find a way to fill that need.

Thus communities of brothers were founded and continue to this day. Some communities of brothers work in hospitals; others, orphanages; still others do prison ministry. Some brothers belong to independent communities, and some brothers are part of larger communities, such as Jesuit brothers or Franciscan brothers. I am a member of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, often called the Christian Brothers of De La Salle. We are teachers and educators, and our founder, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, is known as the Patron of Teachers. Since I know my life best, I thought I’d share a little bit about this one way of brothering and what sense I’ve made of this life after living it for a number of years.

## Brothering in Teaching

I have taught at various levels, but currently I am a professor of theology in a university. In my spirituality class, we use a classic book as one of our texts, Erich Fromm’s *The Art of Loving*. Early on in the book, Fromm says that humankind’s basic need “is the need to overcome . . . separateness.” I have found that sentence to be absolutely true. All of us, regardless of our age, state or stage in life or occupation, are all trying to move away from feeling separated. That’s why I see my vocation of “brothering” as so important. I see all that I do as a way to empower others by simply being there, being present, giving time and attention. There’s not a greater gift any of us can give one another than being there for one another. Even the nomenclature of our superiors in my community of Christian Brothers moves toward this idea of accompaniment. The top guy in every district of our community is called “The Brother Visitor.” He must visit and listen to every brother in his district at least once a year, no matter in what part of the world a brother may live. Each brother is important and must be heard. In the same way, I understand my vocation as being relational, offering a human presence amidst a world bombarded by mechanical cell phones, iPads and computers—all of which I use! But my vocation keeps me grounded in personal human relationships with individual human beings.



A few years ago, I was called out of the classroom and asked to be a part of our district's administration as an Assistant Visitor. I moved to Chicago and began visiting our brothers around the district. Listening to the concerns of my brothers in the community became my main way to accompany others as a brother. As the Assistant Visitor, I also had the eye-opening opportunity to see our Institute on a worldwide scale, not only coast to coast but overseas as well. We "brother" in over eighty countries. I was inspired to see how much our brothers from around the world lived the quotation in the first paragraph of this essay, imitating our loving God by themselves self-identifying "with people who experience humiliation and intense suffering." Around the world, our brothers were filling unmet needs, particularly in the area of education. When I accepted this call for the new job, I did so with the understanding that I would be open to two three-year terms of service. But, as inspiring, eye-opening, and engaging as this work within my community was, I missed following my true call: teaching. I love to teach. I also love to learn, and so I am so blessed to be able to do both as a mainstay of my vocation. I am discovering that learners never grow old. When I've "been there and done that," when I think I know it all, when I'm no longer able to be surprised, that's what it must mean to be and feel *old*. But I can't imagine feeling that way. As a teaching brother, I keep abreast of my area of theology and spirituality through continual study, discussion, and reading. That study and the interaction with my students keep me young.

As any teacher knows, teaching is not easy. Even the scriptures warn us about teaching: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers [and sisters], for you realize that we will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). In 2008 the *Chicago Tribune* listed the Top 10 most stressful jobs. Teaching was #1! To be honest, I don't consider my job stressful or myself as particularly stressed. But, I do believe that all of us who teach are "always on." Once we prepare for a class we wonder: Will the class go as expected? As teachers we always have to expect the unexpected. For example, as a teaching brother, one of my goals has been to encourage my students to participate more in the classroom. Of course that implies: How do I get more of my students to do more of the reading? (I've experimented often and, for now, have found a pretty good tool with participation cards, but that's another story.) So I find that, as a teacher, I am always learning.

## Brothering in Community Life

The other cool part about brothering is that as a brother, I have other brothers to accompany me. I don't have to be a lone ranger in my attempts to figure out how to become and stay an excellent teacher; how to grow and remain close to God; how to grow into and thrive as a fully human being. We brothers bounce our ideas and our very lives off of one another. As I compose this article I know that I'll ask Brothers Mike and Jeff to look over this article and tell me what they think. In fact, as the three of us get together to take a walk this morning, I may read this article to them and see what they have to say. As most of us know, none of us, not even our students, like to be evaluated. But I'm happy to say that I have grown to have a deep trust of my brothers. Some of them have been life companions and we have come to know one another's stories very well: successes and failures, joys and sorrows. This kind of sharing is one of the benefits of living in companionship with others. It is part of life in community.

Years ago, in our early formation, every Sunday we would have a session that we'd call "community living." At that gathering we would share what went on during the week and how our lives were going. Or we would bring up an issue that was a Church concern, or a current event in the world. A group of us still do that. Oh, we don't call it "Community Living" nor do we meet every week. But regularly, a group of us get together to share what really matters in our lives. We "brother" one another, and that time together is priceless. We share our professional, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and psychological lives. How valuable is that? Recall the thought from Eric Fromm: Our greatest human



need is to overcome separateness. Some people pay big bucks to do this with therapists; some of us confide in our spouses. I spill my life over to my other brothers freely, and willingly share their concerns as well.

## Learning to Brother

I'm continually learning what it means "to brother." Over the break, a student emailed me to ask why he got a lower grade on his team presentation than some of the others on his team. In emailing him back, I apologized—not for the grade, but for my failure to share with him that I had noticed his gradual withdrawal from class participation. Formerly an active participant in class, he had become complacent and seemed to be less than present. I told him, "I failed you in not pulling you aside to ask what was going on." He wrote back the same day protesting that I did not fail him but that he had failed himself. He admitted that there was something going on in his life and he had pulled back not only in my class but in others as well.

I tell this little story for a couple of reasons. First, despite my student's protest, I *did* fail him. Brothering implies a venturing out into the lives of our students, not in an intrusive but in a simple, truthful, invitational way: "David, you seem to be less focused lately. Are you doing okay?" As a brother, my concern should lead to action. Second, learning "to brother" is ongoing. I've yet to perfect what it means "to brother." I can only keep on trying to be a true brother, to accompany others, as their needs call me.

## Brothering in Presence

This call most happens for me while I am teaching. A Lasallian tradition of ours is a particular way that we begin our prayers. We say: "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God." As indicated earlier, presence is so important in so many ways, whether invoking the presence of God to remind us that we are not alone, or in becoming a presence for others.

As a very young brother, one of the ways that I would connect with my students outside of class was through sports. I played and coached tennis, and played a good deal of competitive handball and racquetball. Youthful speed-skating days, other sports, and my genes that weren't too kind on my joints all added up to a number of knee surgeries. While walking through campus to class on my forty-fifth birthday, it was painfully clear that I would no longer be able to connect with my students through sports. I was frightened. Honestly, I was less bothered by not being able to play my favorite sports than I was worried about how I might continue to be present to my students outside my theology classes. Finally, one day, the light bulb went on. We began prayers in the usual way: "Let us remember that we are in the holy PRESENCE of God." My query became clear. "Armand, you're trying to find out how you can be PRESENT to your students. Let them know that you *see* them."

In the wonderfully made movie *Avatar*, the daughter would always greet her father with the phrase, "Father, I see you." I don't take you for granted; you are not business as usual. I *see* you. I decided that in the most simple and honest way, I would let my students know that I saw them, that they weren't a number in my grade book. Both before and after class, I would pull aside a student to say: "Meagan, today you seemed really on top of the world. Did you win the lottery or what?" Or, "Sam, you seemed pretty sleepy today. Late night?" Or, simply, "Roberto, you don't seem yourself today; are you okay?" The questions are specific, honest, yet wide open enough for students to be as open or guarded as they choose. But here's the thing: the students knew that I noticed them. They recognized that I saw them, not as a detective or a scorekeeper of some sort, but as a brother, as someone who cares and accompanies.



I've been doing this for years now and only once did my reaching out backfire. All of the other times, students responded. One student would come into class with maybe just a little warmer eye contact; another would greet me with a "good morning" where there had been no greeting before. Often, a student would ask to come during my office hours to talk about something other than classwork. Others have called or emailed years after the class to talk, because I had found a way to brother, to accompany. I was present to them. I saw them.

Much of what I have to say about being a brother is probably quite similar to how I would describe being a satisfied teacher. The truth is, in my life, I'm hard pressed to separate brothering from teaching. Of course there are differences, as well as similarities, between the lives of teaching brothers and teachers who are not brothers. We brothers take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, as well as a vow of stability and a vow involving the Gospels' preferential option for the poor. For me, these vows have become more a way of life than a checklist. And that is really the point.

## Brothering from the Heart

Our founder, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, invites us as teaching brothers to "touch the hearts of your students." Our hearts are at the center of our bodies, protected by an intricate amalgam of muscle and bone. But we credit the heart as our center in other ways too. We use the shape of the heart to indicate love; we talk about "the heart of the matter" as what counts most. We compliment someone when we say that he or she "has a big heart." In my teaching, I am always looking for ways to touch hearts. And I have found one way that seldom fails: I tell stories. In teaching theology, I don't think that there's a class period that goes by that I don't tell some kind of story to get a point across. Not infrequently, a number of former students remind me of the stories I told when they were sitting in my classroom. Stories go to the heart. So I tell stories!

Listening to stories is just as important. Over the years, I've learned the importance of listening closely to the real life stories of my students. As a brother, I've become part of an intricate web of lives woven together through heartfelt stories. Through teaching, and through brothering, I am now part of a huge network of sisters and brothers, former students, present friends. Only an open heart touches other hearts. Mine has become so full as a teaching brother of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

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