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A former student of mine stopped by the office for a visit. Nearly a decade had passed since he graduated from seminary. I recalled how once upon a time this very earnest and devout young man had confessed to me how he found himself, sore distressed and out late one night, standing alone on deserted city streets, in the cold and harsh winter winds, shouting at brute shadows, adrift amidst the debris and decay and desolation of human suffering, inequality, injustice and God knows what else. Dispirited by the malevolence and obscenities afflicting the human estate, what some call sin – humanity’s relentless need to divide, conquer and control, our insatiable appetite to demean, devour and destroy; the sheer madness, utter absurdity, and absolute senselessness of it all – this young man’s desperate hope was for some glimpse, some indication, some transcendent sign to bolster his flagging faith in the God of life and himself, that would save us all from terminal despair. My former student told me how he had contemplated ending it all that night but did not.

When confronted with recent headlines of late – homelessness on the streets of our cities; the surging tide of mental illness in the shadow of the nation’s capital; the daily rash of children being abused, kidnapped or worse; high schools, colleges and universities under siege; ponzi schemes, golden parachutes and bankers greed; malfeasance in high places; mortgage delinquencies and foreclosures; athletes and entertainers behaving badly; birther conspiracists, anti-health care conspirators, town hall violence, school speech paranoia and rabid partisan rancor; HIV/AIDS and H1N1 pandemics; the passing of icons, a jobless recovery, imploding wages, escalating troops and casualties in Afghanistan, despots and disputes everywhere, the deliberate targeting of innocents, the desecration of earth, an emergent post-Christian and post-American world – when considering the current social climate (no less our individual lives) I am mindful how often our theological priorities and prescriptions do in fact

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1 Opening Convocation message, Howard Thurman Chapel, Howard University School of Divinity, September 9, 2009.
acquiesce and give way before the dominating hegemony of the status quo.

The global landscape is shifting and tensions are rife everywhere. The prevailing wisdom is that earth is going to hell in a hand basket. Our obsession with our own national decline trumps all other messages. Less momentous to us, it seems, are indications everywhere that the winds of God are blowing across the face of the earth. And, yet, for we who dare to believe this is a kairos time for change. Sadly, it has seldom been our chief preferment as Christians to prophetically interrogate or engage the extant social, political, religious and economic order. We have forgotten that our glad responsibility is not to look at things as they are and ask why but to look at things as they are and ask why not? As a community of believers and scholars we suffer from intestinal failure, malaise of will, a chronic loss of nerve. In a world bedeviled with bad news we are overcome by faith fatigue.

In the twenty-first century, it is all too easy for the seminary and seminarian alike to distance ourselves from “de troubles of the world.” We are reasonable people after all and our motivations are genuine enough. For reasons of Christian doctrine, moral purity, personal security, perceived powerlessness, institutional self-preoccupation, cost-benefit analysis, callous indifference, half-baked commitment, petty self interest, or cultural despisement we cannot or will not get involved. As students and scholars of religion, as women and men who are called according to God’s purpose for ministry and leadership in the church, academy and world, my counsel to you today is this: Nourish your spirit. Live your life with integrity. Have the courage of your convictions. Be sure your personal life and your public life are companions. Bring a self-examining humility to all that you do. Balance your beliefs with surpassing knowledge, your ministry with compassion, your preaching with preparation (and not a little inspiration), your research with experience, your scholarship with action, and your hermeneutics (interpretation) with care. In the time-honored words of the gospel hymn: “Keep your hands on the plow. Hold on.”

Some along life’s intellectual and spiritual highway profess faith enough to move mountains; they have the faith of a mustard seed. I would daresay that others of us are less certain about our fidelity to the One who bottoms existence. We confess to have a faith that is unfaithful but not faithless. We possess a hope that is unhopeful but not hopeless. We come each of us in our own way to this crossroads called divinity school; to the world of theological education and formation, to matters of personal and vocational discernment. Some of us possess a blessed assurance while others are more circumspect; but no matter. Underneath it all we are all fervently searching, seeking, watching, waiting, studying, test-taking, writing, researching, praying, tarrying, hoping, hiding out, crying out – anything – in need of a sign from God.

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The backdrop to the gospel reading from Matthew indicates that expectations about Jesus of Nazareth are growing. In the towns and villages, hillside and country, shorelines and sea the people clamor, straggled crowds of strangers, wide-eared and staring, with hands and hearts outstretched – lame, seeking, quarrelsome, blind, and outcast – in hopes that the Nazarene will somehow change their situation and better their world. Many take their leave of him with a look of freedom. Some are bold and follow. Incessant religious rulers, barrenly correct, arid legalists, cloaked in the assurance of their own righteousness, and the precedent of ancient law, are starting to take notice.

Peter, James and John are in the company of Jesus, winding their way up a high mountain. Footed and bent to the dust, forging a hewn stone path, pushing through their exhaustion, they reach the top at last. Spent in the splendor of the midday sun, their eyes hear gold and their ears see dreams. Out of a brilliant alabaster sky, points of fire are born. Light broods and casts the smallest gleam before them, cascading radiance like the moon, a star, the sun. Spirit moves and visions appear of Jesus with two of the Hebrew prophets. From out of the luminous shadows comes a resounding refrain: “This is my son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

The disciples see and hear and are filled with fear. Since that candescent hour on the mountain’s crest Jesus has changed. Promptings of head and heart, of vision and voice, of signs and callings, of mystery and mandate, of insights and wonders, of love fierce and sure are parented on that day. Opened by such a birth, where glistening sky meets spirit, and words and worlds collide, grasped by the heart’s treasure, radiant with valences of the divine, in the presence of the beloved, this band of vagabonds, a few derelict fishermen, now turn their face toward tomorrow and life. For the disciples of Jesus it is a defining moment. Intimately companioned by their own inward seeing, illumined by a deeper genesis – of being known and searched without limit, of love and being loved – they will dare to go out and take risks for the world.

Such a reading is important for us, the current generation of Howard University School of Divinity. In this defining vision for Jesus and his disciples we find communicated the luminous message of commitment to principled action whatever the circumstances, the odds, or the outcome. To bear witness to the transformative power of the spirit and of the mind for such a time as this is our rich legacy to have and to embrace. Colleagues and friends, it is good to remember that we have joined the company of the faithful called Divinity not because we must but because we may. As learners, you applied to the School of Divinity because there is a standard of excellence here. As faculty, you were drawn because of the bright promise of forming leaders. As community, our efforts have met with success due to the dedication of our staff. Each day we enter Mays Hall sustained by the witness
of those alumni and forebears who came before us. Weekly we gather in Thurman Chapel in celebration of God’s great faithfulness. We have come to Divinity’s space – the classrooms, offices, hallways, library, computer lab, student lounge, residential hall, prayer garden, and common areas because we are in search of a dynamic vision, a liberating word, a great preparation, a signature education, a theological witness to transformative possibilities for this world.

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Which brings us to this defining moment. The strength of our theological education at the School of Divinity lies not only in a great cloud of witnesses but in a clear and compelling mission:

Howard University School of Divinity’s mission is to educate, form and empower academic and religious leaders to transform the church and the world; and to celebrate the religious and cultural heritage of African Americans, the African Diaspora, and Africa, as we engage in the pursuit of excellence in scholarship and ministry, driven by a passion for justice and freedom, and a relentless search for truth.

I love our mission statement. It is beautifully written and expertly crafted. I am deeply moved by its implications. And among the many things our mission says is that theological education, at its best, is for the common good. It is a holistic declaration that compels our School to take up the work of academic freedom, spiritual innovation, and moral leadership in the public square for such a time as this. It calls us to be intentional about the fostering of education that leads to reflective, principled and prophetic action in an unjust and uncertain world. To prevail in the face of poverty, violence, corruption, malaise and the many other spiritual challenges of our time, requires an expansive vision of leadership that is rooted in head and heart. Beloved, we are that change.

I have identified eight signature principles for transforming our theological life and education together at the School of Divinity (and there are surely more). Some you have heard before while others are less familiar. It is my good fortune to have begun to work out the meaning of these principles together with you at HUSD. Let us now plumb the theological depths of our defining vision:
Distinctive – From the administration to the faculty; from students to staff; from alumni/ae to friends; from academic affairs to student affairs; from academic renewal and curriculum review and revision to admissions and financial aid; from an expanded institutional portfolio to enhanced student services; from greater academic expectations to more rigorous course requirements; from accomplished course writing and research to honors and exams; from principled and prophetic preparation to leadership and service in the pulpit, pew and public square; from field education to internships, from foundations to donors, from strategic initiatives to outcomes and assessment, from student government to our community life in common, from optimizing improvements to our aging physical plant to matters of personal security, whether M.Div., MARS or D.Min., our aim is to establish a higher profile in the academy, church and world and to put you, our next generation of religious leaders and scholars first.
Moral – A meaningful theological education values “the more excellent way” of that which is ethical and virtuous, just and true. As a learner and scholar, it can be difficult to go one’s way in opposition to the way that is well-traveled, time-honored, acceptable, customary, popular, and proved. The impoverished language of complacency claims, “It has always been done this way.” Duplicity says “Others have done the same thing.” But there is a greater moral imperative upon our lives. In our scholarship and in our faith we must hold one another accountable and be willing to examine how far we ourselves are the cause and the reason of the injustices, the violence and oppression in our world and once having done so, to act. I challenge you, as members of this learning and believing community, in your personal and public witness, to be exemplars of intellectual and moral honesty. While painful, I must state the obvious: Don’t cheat, don’t plagiarize, don’t “liberate” books, don’t steal supplies, don’t skip class, don’t come to class unprepared, don’t make excuses, don’t pander, don’t be rude to staff, don’t disrespect each other, don’t play yourself, don’t settle for mediocrity, don’t game the system, don’t. In life, in work, in relationships, in ministry, in scholarship, always aim higher. Remember: We are the success we aim for. Now more than ever the world has need of your moral and ethical, principled and prophetic leadership. Go in wisdom. Be consistent in all your ways. Walk with integrity. Live with passion. Act with compassion. Proceed with courage. Speak truth to power and in love. Anything less is a disservice to the God of life in you.
Ecclesial – It is a painful admission for some. The Christian Church as we know it in the United States is experiencing a decline in membership, relevance and influence. Black believers have long helped to keep a part of the universal church faithful and this country human. We continue to have a magnificent vocation today with respect to a witness that binds together spiritual and social transformation, which is a requirement for our authentic humanity. Notwithstanding, members of our own communities are now reading back to us how we as the church respond to them in ways that are less than healing and life-giving. Persons of every age and description – young, middle-aged and elderly – are calling into question our relevance, our rejection and our fears as never before. Some have abandoned the churches altogether out of sheer moral frustration and exhaustion. The lack of adequate and transformative seminary education had by many Black pastors and the meager salary, benefits and administrative support they receive only serves to reinforce the need. Now more than ever, a transformative witness by the Black Christian faithful is required to challenge the complex of forces in the present age that deny, demean and oppress. Our collective responsibility as the School of Divinity is to become mature interpreters of what we read, see and hear as relates to the church and the world, for the sake of the church, and for the sake of us all.
Cultural – As a primary community of African descent, and like the preacher Baby Suggs Holy in Beloved, we will love and celebrate the transcendent worth of our own Black flesh, we will call forth the sacrality of our being: female and male, young and old, gay and straight, bi-sexual and transgender, haves and have-nots, Christian and non-Christian, African American and Caribbean, African continental and Diasporan. We will cultivate partnerships with African and Diasporan school, civic and community agencies, embassies and organizations until such connections are commonplace in our curriculum and programs. We will know and honor the legacies of our forebears: Burroughs, Bethune, Cooper, Ellington, and Douglass. We will remember the magnificent witness of Divinity’s own, the ancestral and the living that makes us strong: Mays, Thurman, Farmer, Reeves, Tyms, Wright, Jones, Crawford, Ferry, Rice, Carpenter, Felder, Davis, Sanders and more. We will embrace the continuous involvement of spirit sensibilities in our personal affairs and in our common life together. We will love ourselves deeply. We will accept no hierarchy of humanity. We will love the earth. Ours is a collective ancestry and ethos that invites us to enter into liberating and holistic relationships and affirms the inherent worth of all who live, work, play, pray and study among us. Ashé!
Technological – An enabling theological vision causes one continually to grow, learn, and adapt. To recall our initial text (Mt. 17:1-8) at first the disciples did not understand their transfigured new world but could only embrace it by fits and starts. Present-day learning environments extend from the conventional and smart-room classroom context and local congregations to the convenience of home and every intersection of life. Digital technology in media and communications, rapid dissemination of information and new modes of cognitive processing continue to excite and emerge. For those in the know, cloud-based, wireless and web-based systems are a given for their theological, cultural and economic feasibility no less their remote interactive applications. Twenty-first century theological education must work diligently to download, upgrade, improve and mediate its existing computer, media, digital, and information applications. At the same time, faithful and meticulous attention must be paid to the more mundane matters of mutual responsibility, social capacity, learning outcomes and assessment in every digital environment, in order that our pedagogical and theological witness will be truly deepened, broadened and enhanced. An immediate commitment at the School of Divinity is to improving our existing computer lab, office applications, media center, common spaces and classrooms. To take life and learning seriously in the present age is to ever embrace the challenge of new technologies – for the rainbow people of God – and for the living of these days.
Ecological – How often do we ask ourselves as people of faith when are we going to become ecologically responsive? When are we going to go green? When are we going to stop desecrating the earth? All creation groans and waits for our faith-filled response. Our answer must be to contribute to the solution and not the problem by being institutional leaders and stewards toward a more just, verdant and friendly world. Regrettably, theological education and the faith community have come late to the conservation conversation, to engaging in ethical and innovative environmental work, to ecospirituality and the spiritual disciplines of simplicity and sustainability. With rare exception, African-descended seminaries and ordained clergy have not been active participants in this discourse. Seldom have we made as a priority the vital connections between social justice and eco-justice, between environmental racism and pollution, between human development and care of the earth. From recycling and energy management to sustainability and respect for the earth our theological preparation must manifest a reverence for life. We look forward in the weeks and months ahead to the scheduled retrofitting of Mays Hall – valve controls for more effective heating and cooling, timers for lights and other energy-saving measures – and our personal commitments to a greener way of life. The change will not always be easy. In our classroom instruction, worship liturgy, building facility and communal life together we can foster global health and wholeness; we can make the preservation and celebration of our neighborhood and world our essential conduct; we can choose Life. Already, the East Campus is an oasis of beauty and peace. Our very lives are dependent on nature and are beautifully and intimately intertwined.
Contextual – An ethic of belonging calls us to engage our local context. We are citizens of this great capital city of Washington, DC, and the greater metropolitan region. One of my very favorite courses I used to teach was called “The City as Symbol.” At the heart of this course was an idea I describe as urban grammatology, a study of the transmission of meaning, power and value beyond structures; a kind of religious reading of portents and dreams in the contemporary urban context. All around us the signs are unmistakable – vanishing jobs, displaced peoples, intergenerational misgivings and social divisions more enduring than the city’s quadrants – of our collective failure to make life-giving choices that will prepare our congregations and citizenry for the present age. The needs and concerns of our local environment from grass roots collectives and the neighborhood ward to Capitol Hill must find expression in Divinity’s theological curriculum, embedded in every field of study from bible and religious history to world religions and pastoral care. To this end, we have already identified religion and public policy as one of our crucial foci going forward at the School of Divinity. Furthermore, our theological commitments must translate into service, advocacy, mentoring and internships having profound social, political and economic implications. We will covenant and partner for substantive change with local organizations, congregations, and colleges. Why this social and moral obligation? Because there is human need unmet and human development unchecked in the District of Columbia and beyond. Remember these words well: *Vox victimarum vox dei.* The cries of the (victimized) people are the voice of God.
Universal – When all is said and done, transformative theological education in our
day and time must attend to the full spectrum of human wisdom, compassion,
advocacy and endeavor. The theological task of “faith seeking understanding”
requires radical openness on our part to diverse perspectives from many peoples
and religious faiths; from madrassahs and mosques and temples and mandirs to
those who have no discernible faiths at all. In short, we must be ready to delve into
the entire and sometimes confounding universe of higher education for education’s
sake. Today’s interfaith, interdisciplinary and international climate presents us
with a greater opportunity than ever before to acquire a wide body of knowledge
for compassionate and prophetic leadership in the church, academy and world. A
vast array of religious traditions, beliefs and practices are legitimate candidates for
conversation in theological education, informed by contemporary scholarship from
the humanities and social sciences, and in conjunction with discourses of gender,
race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, ability and a myriad of socially contested values. In
this way we will wholly affirm our commitment to the core disciplines of theological
education, while considering new course offerings and initiatives that equally affirm
non-traditional ministry and religious studies. We who are part of the helping and
healing profession called ministry will especially benefit from the perspectives
of the natural sciences from medicine and nursing to public health. Professions
ranging from business, social work and law have much to teach us if we are willing
to make the “thick” connections. A vast expanse of knowledge is one of the great
and unsung gifts of the university-related seminary. I encourage you to take full
advantage of what the School of Divinity has to offer from the main campus of
Howard University to the Washington Theological Consortium – your tuition is
paying for it!
My simple benediction to you is this … Go deeper!  Ashé.  Amen.
Howard University
School of Divinity

A Defining Vision

Presented in Eight Commentaries
by
Dean Alton B. Pollard, III