

# Intersections

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FALL 2023

# Intersections

Faith, Learning, and the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education



IN THIS ISSUE

## Vocation and the Flourishing of Educators

**Intersections** is a publication by and largely for the academic communities of the twenty-seven institutions that comprise the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU). Each issue reflects on the **intersection** of faith, learning, and teaching within Lutheran higher education. It is published by the NECU, and has its home in the Presidential Center for Faith and Learning at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, the institutional sponsor of the publication. **Intersections** extends and enhances discussions fostered by the annual Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference, together lifting up the vocation of Lutheran colleges and universities. It aims to raise the level of awareness among faculty, staff, and administration about the Lutheran heritage and church-relatedness of their institutions, especially as these **intersect** with contemporary challenges, opportunities, and initiatives.

## About the Artist



### From the Artist

I typically don't create work with a message or meaning in mind. Rather, I work with my visual ideas in the moment and decide what they mean to me when completed, just before naming them.

### Artist's Biography

Will is a self-taught artist from Chicago, IL. His art reflects his interest in historical wall/stone carvings, writing systems, quilts, architecture and music. After completing his BA in Sociology and Africana Studies at Augustana College in Rock Island, IL, he moved to Des Moines, Iowa to study at Drake University, where he currently serves as an assistant dean. [I williamzhatchet@gmail.com](mailto:williamzhatchet@gmail.com)

Permission for *UsWe* (cover image) to be published has been granted by Quad City Arts. Photo credit: Abi Kongkousonh

## Call for Artists

Submit your design for Spring 2024 *Intersections* "Vocation as Action in the Affirmative" to the editor, Colleen Windham-Hughes: [windhamh@callutheran.edu](mailto:windhamh@callutheran.edu)

# Intersections

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## EDITORIAL TEAM

Lamont Anthony Wells Publisher

Colleen Windham-Hughes Editor

Gabriel Wounded Head Editorial Assistant

Leanne Paetz Graphic Designer

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COLLEEN WINDHAM-HUGHES

FROM THE EDITOR

# So That We, Too, May Flourish



The theme of our summer conference for Vocation in Lutheran Higher Education gave space for participants—staff, faculty, administration—to voice tiredness, longing, and hope. Though students are at the center of all we do, it was a gift to all in attendance to connect the flourishing of

students to the flourishing of all of us who work with them and for them.

Vocation, the centerpiece of Lutheran Higher Education, works best when each person contributes and each person receives. Flourishing is communal as well as personal.

News from our campuses and the wider world is challenging. It affects us in our bodies and our neural pathways, and with differential impact. Dr. Monica Smith gave voice to this in her powerful comments during Plenary Session #3: Reconciliation, Restorative Justice, and the Flourishing of Black, Indigenous, and Other People of Color. “We must gently but firmly speak truth to power in love...How can we flourish if only some are centered and others are at the margins?” In a gathering of DEI officers following the conference Dr. Smith’s words arose again and again to ground Lutheran Higher Education in the call of our collective moment.

Our values—as persons and as institutions—must guide our discernment about what kind of work is most needful in this moment. Flourishing does not happen automatically through inspiring programs or stirring speeches. Instead, conditions for flourishing are planned, supported, and defended by leaders as well as tended, cultivated, and shared by each of us and all of us.

The contributions for this issue grow out of the summer conference theme of flourishing educators (broadly construed to mean persons working in educational institutions). Each piece has truth to tell and values to live out. Center yourself in the flexibility and motion emanating hope of *Us/We*, the cover art by William Hatchet, graduate of Augustana, Rock Island, and join the conversation.

Join us for further reflection on  
**“Vocation and the Flourishing of Educators”**  
by Zoom webinar on  
**Wednesday morning, November 29**  
8 a.m. Pacific / 9 a.m. Mountain /  
10 a.m. Central / 11 a.m. Eastern  
Register at: <https://tinyurl.com/3avvh932>

**Colleen Windham-Hughes, PhD, MDiv**, is Associate Vice President for Mission and Identity at California Lutheran University. Contact Colleen for conversation about this issue or your ideas about upcoming issues: [windhamh@callutheran.edu](mailto:windhamh@callutheran.edu)

LAMONT ANTHONY WELLS

FROM THE PUBLISHER

# Maintaining Our Lutheran Identity: A Source of Strength

We gather in commitment to address a matter of profound importance—the well-being of the dedicated staff, faculty, and administration within the realm of Lutheran higher education. Our mission extends far beyond the boundaries of traditional academia; it encompasses the nurturing of the human spirit through rest, creativity and innovation, religious diversity and pluralism, and the preservation of our Lutheran identity within the academy.

In our exploration of these critical dimensions, we can draw wisdom and inspiration from the profound insights of the authors in our book *So That All May Flourish: The Aim of Lutheran Higher Education*. In this resource we have an opportunity to reflect upon the broader context of Lutheran higher education especially among the Network of ELCA colleges and universities (NECU). However, as we embark on this journey, we must first acknowledge the painful reality of Finlandia University's closure this year, a poignant reminder of the challenges we face in this endeavor together.

## Rest: Nurturing the Soul of Educators

In the relentless pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, it is easy to overlook the importance of rest. The trends of teacher burnout in the academic world are deeply troubling, and their toll on our educators is undeniable.

**Rev. Lamont Anthony Wells** is the Executive Director, Network of ELCA (Lutheran) Colleges and Universities (NECU). As an international human rights activist, he focuses on enhancing and expanding access to education in equitable ways among global populations.

Burnout not only erodes the well-being of individuals but also undermines the very quality of education we provide.

As we aspire to a state and season of flourishing in our lives we must recognize that all of God's creation need rest from our mental, emotional, professional, and physical labor. The realities of professional burnout within multiple areas in our academic institutions are key indications of the need to draw from faith traditions and practices that support renewing principles. As a network we have the opportunity to strengthen and encourage each other not to ignore the toll our dedication and commitment to our mission takes on all of us. It is only when our colleagues are well-rested and rejuvenated that they can guide our students towards their full potential. We cannot effectively nurture the minds and souls of our students without first nurturing ourselves.

It is a recognition that transcends time, echoing the sentiments of Martin Luther himself, who said, "I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer." These words underscore the necessity of spiritual renewal and rest even amidst the busiest of schedules.



## **Creativity and Innovation: Embracing Change for Growth**

Creativity and innovation are the lifeblood of education, and they must be embraced wholeheartedly. In a world marked by rapid change and evolving challenges, our commitment to fostering a culture of creativity and innovation is paramount. Innovation is a key cornerstone of Lutheran higher education. Our institutions have a rich history of adapting to changing times while staying true to our values.

In so many ways, we must see innovation on our campuses and curriculum as essential, not because it can guarantee a successful education environment, but because it refreshes the fact that we all are called to continue to learn and grow. Embracing innovation allows us to remain relevant in an ever-evolving educational landscape, fostering an environment where all can flourish. Stagnation is the enemy of progress, and our role and calling in higher education is not just to impart knowledge but also to inspire growth through innovative thinking.

## **Religious Diversity and Pluralism: Celebrating Differences**

One of the powerful hallmarks NECU institutions and growing value in Lutheran higher education is our commitment to religious diversity and pluralism. Our campuses are enriched by a tapestry of faiths, creating an environment of dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect. This commitment aligns harmoniously with the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who famously said, "We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now."

As we navigate the vast seas of diversity, we should echo the sentiments of recently published resource, "So That All May Flourish," emphasizing that each person's faith journey is unique and deserving of recognition and respect. This inclusive approach not only enriches our educational experience but also fosters a profound sense of belonging.

## **Maintaining Our Lutheran Identity: A Source of Strength**

Balancing our faith with our academic pursuits can be a delicate task, but it is also a source of strength for our institutions. We must remain steadfast and rooted in preserving

our Lutheran identity within the academy. This identity is not a mere adornment but a cornerstone that sets us apart in the world of higher education. Our commitment to Lutheran values, theology, and social statements is what makes our institutions unique. It is a beacon of light for those seeking an education rooted in faith, curiosity, and openness to different ways and possibilities.

## **Belonging: Inclusive Communities**

In our commitment to well-being and flourishing, we must create inclusive communities that foster a deep sense of belonging. NECU is expanding our diversity in strong ways with several schools growing their enrollment within populations of people in the global majority. Supporting affirmative action is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic imperative, harnessing the talents and perspectives of individuals from all walks of life. With this growth we do have some challenges of being prepared to create atmospheres of welcome, hospitality, and inclusive environments. We are seeing this manifested with triggering low retention rates of students, particularly students of color, who bravely enroll at our schools. It is crucial to ensure that every member of our community feels valued, supported, and included.

## **The Mission of ELCA Colleges and Universities**

Our commitment to these principles is not isolated; again, we all are a part of a broader network of ELCA colleges and universities. Together, we share a common mission, a commitment to nurturing well-rounded individuals who are not only academically prepared but also spiritually enriched. Our collective strength lies in our shared values and dedication to excellence in education.

## **The Painful Reality of Finlandia University**

Before I conclude, I must address the somber reality of Finlandia University's closure this year. It serves as a stark reminder of the challenges we face in the world of higher education. It underscores the importance of our mission,

the need for adaptability, and the urgency of nurturing the well-being of our institutions including our staff, faculty, and administration.

In closing, the well-being of our educational network rests upon the pillars of rest, creativity and innovation, religious diversity and pluralism, and the unwavering preservation of our Lutheran identity within the academy. As we continue to navigate the complexities of our roles, let us remember the words of my predecessor, The

Rev. Dr. Mark Wilhelm, who said to me as I began this role as executive director, "Lutheran education is a manifestation of the church's mission in higher education." It is my hope that our mission is not just to educate but to flourish—to ensure that all may flourish.

Thank you for your dedication to Lutheran higher education, and may we continue to nurture the well-being of our staff, faculty, and administration, fostering environments where all can thrive.

• SAVE THE DATE •

# Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference

Augsburg University, Minneapolis, Minnesota | July 8-10, 2024

*Topic:* Educational Access: Lutheran Roots, Contemporary Practices



# A Lutheran Call for Educator Flourishing



Educators deserve to flourish as they live out their vocations.

In 2023, educators are not flourishing.

The intersection of this conviction and this reality poses a vital question for the Network of ELCA Colleges & Universities (NECU) as our institutions move into a

not-quite-post-pandemic era—within an industry that was facing considerable challenges prior to the arrival of the Covid-19 virus and amidst other ongoing threats of climate change, systemic injustice, and civic strife.

Because of this context, it is all the more important that Lutheran Higher Education (LHE) attend to questions of educator flourishing. Yes, to serve our students well, whether as staff, professors, coaches, or administrators, we must put on our proverbial oxygen masks first. But a LHE framework assumes more than this utilitarian attitude. Educators themselves are the relational and cultural roots of campus communities. If our campuses are to host and promote healthy communities of belonging, thriving educators are vital. There simply is no student flourishing without educator flourishing.

Flourishing may seem to be a high and unrealistic bar given the range of challenges facing NECU institutions. From a Lutheran perspective, it is a call nonetheless. For

Lutheran institutions, the physical, psychological, and social health of all members of our campus communities is a missional commitment and central to our common institutional vocations. According to *Rooted and Open: The Common Calling of ELCA Colleges & Universities*, the diverse institutional members of NECU share a mission to “equip graduates who are: Called and empowered / To serve the neighbor / So that all may flourish” (3). This “all” must include the very educators who are engaged in the work of equipping graduates.

Institutions cannot, of course, safeguard their constituencies against every sling and arrow of life, much less the world’s staggering systemic inequities. From illness and other personal tragedies to poverty and racism, humans suffer. What NECU institutions are institutionally charged with is to cultivate the best conditions possible, given both resources and limitations, for the education of whole persons within a community of respect and care—in the words of *Rooted and Open*, to nurture campus cultures of “radical hospitality” (7-8).

My reflections in this essay invite educators on NECU campuses to consider ways to create communities and cultures where not only students but also educators might flourish, even amidst the challenges facing higher education today. I reflect on how the Lutheran emphasis on vocation enlivens the educational experience for students and educators alike, but when distorted, can impede educators’ flourishing. I also consider how other

**Krista E. Hughes** is the Director of the Muller Center for Exploration & Engagement and Associate Professor of Religion at Newberry College (Newberry, S.C.) and recently began serving NetVUE (the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education) as their inaugural Director of Resource Development. She is active in NECU as a member of the planning committee for the annual VLHE Conference and as chair of the Faculty Working Group.

Lutheran theological and educational values might mitigate the imbalances caused by some of contemporary higher education's reigning concepts. A Lutheran "third way" that holds in generative tension the values of its heritage and contemporary higher ed practices can ground transformative education for students while vocationally nurturing educators.

## The Vocation of Educators and the "Passion Tax"

A belief in education's potential to change lives and a love for students drive most people who work in higher education. Even those unfamiliar with Lutheran concepts are apt to say that their work on college campus is more than a career. It is it calling. LHE gives a conceptual frame to this felt sense. "NECU institutions," explains theologian and Lutheran educator Marcia J. Bunge, "speak about vocation as the many ways in which *all are called to use their unique gifts and strengths to love others, seek justice, and contribute to the common good in various spheres of life—whether at home, at work, or in civic life*" (13, italics in original).

As Bunge goes on to note, this framework of vocational exploration at its best includes not only students but staff and faculty. This is more than simply a Lutheran conviction. In his study of vocation programming involving interviews and surveys of nearly 800 individual faculty and staff across 26 campuses, sociologist Tim Clydesdale found an outcome he had not been looking for: that robust vocation programs not only benefited students but significantly increased employee satisfaction, morale, and retention and helped educators themselves "hone [their] own sense of [their] 'vocation,' 'calling,' or 'purpose'" (132).

The call to higher education carries tremendous rewards. There is nothing quite like witnessing a student make new discoveries, achieve new skills, light up with fresh awareness, and grow into themselves more fully. Like many callings, the vocation to higher education also involves sacrifice, some of it necessary and some of it, if not exactly welcome, then at least expected and accepted.

What happens though when the sacrifices become too great? This is not a new question. Martin Luther's

understanding of vocation has proven to be a double-edged sword: because all work is sacred, people may feel compelled to persist in jobs even as the sacrifices deepen beyond the point of sustainability. Although there may be occasions and circumstances that call for unsustainable sacrifice, this cannot be the only or primary model for vocation.

Where vocation meets the contemporary values of neoliberal capitalism and the rise of "workism" (the premise that our paid work is our primary locus of purpose and meaning), those with a strong sense of calling pay what has been called the "passion tax."<sup>1</sup> This is the price paid—in their psychological or physical health, in insufficient income, in excessive time on the job, in their personal and family relationships—out of a commitment to those they serve. Contrary to the adage, "love what you do, and you'll never work a day in your life," it can be the case that one's sense of purpose becomes so strongly wrapped up in their paid work, they never cease to work. Yet more troublesome is how this passionate sense of calling can be and is manipulated and even abused by organizational leaders. Layer this problematic dynamic with cultural expectations about who primarily should carry such burdens—women, people of color, and most especially women of color—and vocation becomes not a life-giving concept but an exploitative one.<sup>2</sup>

Values-based higher education, like LHE, is a field rife with people paying a passion tax with their lives, their bodies, and their mental health. In fact, this is often something celebrated and marketed to prospective students and their parents. At my institution, Newberry College, we applaud the "personal attention" given to each student. Such personal attention is truly remarkable and worthy of celebration. It also too frequently leads to exhaustion and burnout.

Especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and with a rise in mental health challenges among students, the personal attention that they need to thrive has become at times overwhelming. In many cases, basic student survival requires tremendous time, energy, effort, and emotional labor from educators who care. As educators are asked to do more with fewer resources and to wear multiple hats on their campuses, they are also asked—and feel moved to—care for their students with even greater

attentiveness. Even for those willing to answer this call, the passion tax has become alarmingly high.

Must educators deplete themselves in order to care for their students and get their jobs done? Is there another way? A Lutheran framework would say, “yes, there is another way.” It would also insist that true vocation is not equivalent to workism, for it encompasses our whole lives. How, then, might we rethink our campus cultures so that all, including educators, may flourish?

## An LHE Framing of Institutional Values

Because the passion tax is not only about individual choice but about institutional structures and expectations, NECU schools would do well to tap into Lutheran values to reimagine campus life for students and educators alike. The Lutheran tradition, both theological and educational, is known for its dialectical “third-way” thinking, that is, its method of avoiding reductionist dualisms as a means of capturing life’s complexities and ambiguities. Here I use this Lutheran dialectical approach, placing key Lutheran values in fruitful tension with some of the operative values that guide today’s higher education industry.

"Because the passion tax is not only about individual choice but about institutional structures and expectations, NECU schools would do well to tap into Lutheran values to reimagine campus life for students and educators alike."

These operative values are not in and of themselves wrong. They have arisen to keep campuses open, developing, and improving for the sake of their students. When such values are out of balance, however, they contribute to burnout and low morale among institutional personnel. Holding these operative industry values in tension with Lutheran theological and educational values is, I offer, a missionally faithful means by which NECU institutions might

nurture campus cultures where students, staff, faculty, and administrators can vocationally flourish while being good neighbors to one another and to those beyond their campus borders.

I offer seven pairs of values. There are surely more, and these seven are simply an invitation to hold conversations across NECU campuses about how a specifically Lutheran reframing of higher education values might lead to healthier, more sustainable campus cultures. There is overlap among these values which fall loosely into three themes, namely, how NECU campuses cultivate and assess institutional success, personal achievement, and campus culture.

### Metrics | GRACE

Higher education is an increasingly data-driven industry. When carefully collected, framed, and interpreted, data and metrics provide tremendous insight into a range of important factors, from student satisfaction and retention to campus climate and effective pedagogies. Data and metrics used well serve to keep campuses focused and accountable.

Not all things worthy of evaluation can be plugged into an Excel formula or an annual personnel review rubric however. Feverishly chasing numbers can impede effective teaching, positive relationships, and meaningful educational experiences for students and educators alike. Educators, like professionals in other contemporary industries, are regularly asked to do more work with fewer resources—while being reminded that one of the strongest predictors of student retention is having a positive relationship with at least one campus employee.

The Lutheran concept of grace establishes that human dignity and worth are beyond measure and cannot be earned. Beyond a more colloquial sense of giving one another grace in challenging circumstances, what would more grace-forward measures of institutional and professional “success” look like? How might a rubric of grace reshape institutional expectations of its educators, the rhythms workdays and workweeks, and even policies and procedures?

## **Growth | GROWTH**

In an era of declining enrollments, actual and potential, growth is paramount. When institutions can celebrate large entering classes, promising retention numbers, impressive job placement statistics, and new construction on campus, it is good news all around. These are signs of a secure institutional future.

“How are campuses and their people growing their intercultural competencies and nurturing communities of belonging?”

If the flourishing of all campus constituencies is a missional call for NECU institutions, measures of growth and development beyond the numbers is also vital. How are campuses and their people growing their intercultural competencies and nurturing communities of belonging? How are institutions preparing their students, not only for successful careers but for lives of meaning, purpose, and service? How are campuses contributing to the communities in which they are situated? How are campus personnel at all levels equipped for vocational growth and development?

## **Campus Role(s) | FREEDOM & CREATIVITY**

Indeed, people are drawn to work on college and university campuses because they want to contribute to a meaningful mission and to support those working toward their dreams. They arrive to their campus roles with unique experiences, expertise, and interests, eager to contribute to and benefit from an organization dedicated to human development. Ideally, they grow vocationally within their roles. Along the way, they may also come to wear many hats as student needs expand and resources shrink. Unfortunately, at some point, many educators find that institutional exigencies have overshadowed their own vocational development.

Lutheran theology celebrates freedom and creativity as hallmarks of humanity. How do the official campus roles of educators encourage this freedom and creativity and

celebrate the uniqueness of what each person brings? What messages are implicit in campus policies and practices? Where is true creativity and innovation welcome, and where are people expected to “just stick to their jobs”? Which people on campus are viewed as whole, creative persons, and which ones are seen merely as roles?

## **Student Success | WHOLE-PERSONS**

Similarly, even as the goal of campuses is to educate students, retention goals sometimes overshadow student needs. Student success as measured by retention and persistence toward graduation is vital. Empowering students to persist through academic and personal challenges not only gets them closer to an education and a degree, it builds their capacity for resilience and their self-confidence. It also ensures, for those who attend NECU schools at great financial cost, that they are receiving value in exchange for their investment. Educators are thus encouraged to do all they can retain students at their institutions.

But there are circumstances when the success or the health of a student means leaving the institution. The reasons are myriad: financial insecurity, family needs, mental health challenges, and even clearer vocational discernment. A Lutheran approach prioritizes student flourishing over student success. Given that, what are the most humane ways to support students as they juggle competing commitments or face crises? What concrete supports are in place to mitigate the personal challenges that impede academic progress? How do we balance encouragement to persist on their educational journey and honoring when they need to leave? How do such questions impact our transfer policies, not only into our schools but out of them? What are our policies around temporary withdrawal and readmission?

## **Silos | COMMUNITY**

“Silos” are a common complaint in higher education, yet they seem to be a persistent feature. The term speaks to the pervasive lived reality that even on small campuses, many areas do their work in isolation from others. The silo’ing of campus work, whether curricular or co-curricular, can lead at worst to turf wars and battles

over scarce resources and at best to miscommunication and duplication of efforts. The reality is that silos are the natural result of people working diligently to do their jobs well. Necessary collaboration may happen, but basic community can suffer. There are simply not enough hours in the day.

Although the term “community of belonging” is a recent one, it well describes a Lutheran understanding of common life together, one in which each person is welcome in all their complex fullness. Pockets of community naturally arise on campuses where there is a shared purpose or project. How is broader community built and encouraged? From physical spaces on campus to daily/weekly calendars to job expectations, what institutional structures encourage or impede community building? What are the key practices of hospitality? Who benefits from those, and who might be excluded? How do people come to feel that they belong?

## Efficiency | *KAIROS*

The challenge of community building is not unrelated to the value of efficiency that has permeated all industries, including higher education. It seems that everything has become urgent. The ideal time to degree is now less than four years. The teaching semester has been shortened. Admissions officers are constantly scrambling. Ever growing to-do lists demand daily efficiency. Efficiency has its rightful place. But it can leave little room for the human connection that presumably is at the heart of what draws educators to this work.

*Kairos* time, in contrast to *chronos* (or linear) time, expresses time as a season or a moment in history that carries significance; biblically, it refers to God’s time. Translated for NECU campuses, it offers a counterpoint to efficiency at all costs, namely the costs of reflective deliberation, meaningful personal connection, open and creative exploration, and other key elements of a liberal arts education. How can we balance the need for efficiency with rhythms and spaces shaped by a spirit of *kairos* rather than the dictates of clock and calendar? How can educators, for the sake of their students and themselves, slow the pace of education and formation?

## DEI | PRIESTHOOD of ALL BELIEVERS

This last pair is offered as a positive correlation rather than a dialectic contrast. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)—along with belonging and justice—are growing priorities on NECU campuses. While DEI is having a cultural moment (evidenced as much by the backlash against it as its advances), such commitments link directly to Lutheran convictions, including the dignity and worth of all people and in turn a vocation to common life, where all may flourish.

The notion that every person is created “in the image of God” is grounds for a commitment to DEI. But I do appreciate the critique offered by DEI strategic and higher education leader Dr. Monica Smith, that while this may be theologically true, we live in a world that frequently denies that wide swaths of people reflect the divine image due to their skin color, ability, first language, gender identity, citizenship status, religion, or more—and thus are not understood to have inherent dignity and worth. While NECU institutions have a mission to counter such denials with unqualified affirmation, the theological notion of the “priesthood of all believers” offers an additional robust value to the mix. The priesthood of all believers describes the church as a community in which all people are invited and expected to engage in ministry and service based upon their own unique gifts. What would happen if each person who walks on our campuses were understood to possess not only a certain universal human worth but also a precious particularity that enriches the community? How can NECU campuses live out the call to genuinely radical hospitality in which all people are welcome in their fullness, their gifts called out, nurtured, celebrated, and amplified?

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“All of our flourishing is mutual,” says Robin Wall Kimmerer, environmental biologist and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation (166). If they so choose, NECU institutions have an opportunity, rooted in their Lutheran missions, to meet the demands of this moment in higher education with some transformative countercultural values and practices. Campuses are ecosystems in which there is no genuine thriving of individuals without the thriving of the whole. What steps will we take so that educators, too, may flourish?

## Endnotes

1. Derek Thompson coined the term “workism,” convincingly proposing that “work has morphed into a religious identity—promising transcendence and community but failing to deliver” for the college-educated elite.

2. For this general dynamic, see Bryan Dik’s observations in “Understanding Work as a Calling: Contributions for Psychological Science,” *Christian Scholar’s Review*, Vol. 1.II: 4 (41). For how inequities exacerbate exploitation, see Ruchika Tulshyan’s *Inclusion on Purpose: An Intersectional Approach to Creating a Culture of Belonging at Work* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2022).

3. For wisdom on slowing the pace of higher education, see *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* by Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

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# Do One Thing: Academic Vocation in the Age of Burnout



IMAGE: SARAH WALL

I'll start with the bad news: You and I and everyone we work with and everyone we know is going to die. Sooner or later, and I hope it's later, each of our lives will run out. The British writer Oliver Burkeman's recent, excellent book on "time management for mortals" is titled *4,000 Weeks*. That's

a little less than 77 years, roughly the life expectancy of someone in the United States. Thinking about our lifespan in terms of weeks is clarifying and perhaps a bit jarring. You only have so many more Tuesdays left.

It's tempting to react to this grim realization by trying to cram as much as possible into those remaining weeks, to "seize the day," as they say.

Burkeman thinks this is the wrong lesson. The fact is, no matter how long we live, we will almost certainly die with things still on our to-do list. You simply cannot do everything you might like to do. There is no lifehack, no motivational mantra, no self-management habit that will make it possible to accomplish everything you want. Burkeman counsels readers to accept that they won't be able to cross every item off the "bucket list." Once you accept that, you're free to let go of the things you know you won't get to.

Here is much better news: Mortality is only half the reason we can't do all we might want to do. The other half is that we are desiring, imagining beings. The scope of what we can picture ourselves doing, what we might wish to do, is virtually limitless. And so we live forever in the contradiction between what we can imagine and what we can accomplish. You might see this condition as a tragedy, the source of endless frustration. But many thinkers have seen it as a great condition of possibility for human thought and action. The writer Annie Dillard, for instance, wrote that "Wherever we go, there seems to be only one business at hand—that of finding workable compromises between the sublimity of our ideas and the absurdity of the fact of us." That search for compromise is human life.

"The scope of what we can picture ourselves doing, what we might wish to do, is virtually limitless. And so we live forever in the contradiction between what we can imagine and what we can accomplish."

This tension between what we might like to do and what our limited nature will allow us to do also exists on

**Jonathan Malesic** is the author of *The End of Burnout: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives*. He holds a Ph.D. in religious studies from the University of Virginia. He teaches writing at Southern Methodist University. | jonathanmalesic@gmail.com

the smaller scale. I have taught at the college level for 25 years, in 14 or 15 week increments, each semester about four tenths of a percent of my allotted 4,000 weeks. There is so much my students don't know, so much I want to teach them. At the start of a semester, writing a syllabus is an exercise in cutting topics, readings, and assignments. By the end, we usually haven't even covered everything that was on the syllabus. And yet, the enterprise is still worthwhile. My students still learned something.

"There is so much my students don't know, so much I want to teach them. At the start of a semester, writing a syllabus is an exercise in cutting topics, readings, and assignments. By the end, we usually haven't even covered everything that was on the syllabus. And yet, the enterprise is still worthwhile. My students still learned something."

The fundamental contradiction between what we can imagine and what we can accomplish is true for colleges and universities, too. They typically have longer lifespans than we do—and, in fact, one reason people found universities and other institutions is to continue a project for longer than a single lifetime. But their lives do eventually end, too. Finlandia University, founded in 1896, was a member of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities, but it closed earlier this year. Several other small religious colleges have also recently shut their doors. More, unfortunately, are sure to follow.

Even a college that's in a stable position can only accomplish, year to year, what its budget, its strengths and weaknesses, its culture, and the time and talents of its employees will allow. And yet our institutions face tremendous pressure to do more and more. These pressures come from sources like enrollment trends, accreditation, public skepticism toward the value of higher education, and the continued disruption caused

by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the regions of the country facing the "demographic cliff" of smaller traditional-aged student cohorts, colleges are competing with each other to recruit and retain a shrinking population of prospective students at the same time as students are struggling with cost, mental health, and academic success. Often, institutions respond to such crises by chasing an untapped applicant pool, a grant, a donation, or national prestige. They start doing things they have never done before, that they don't know how to do, and that may either replicate or conflict with other work they are already doing. The education researchers Wendy Fischman and Howard Gardner named this expansive agenda "projectitis." It diffuses the college's mission, and it often doesn't even work to stabilize the institution. As I write this, West Virginia University is proposing deep cuts to longstanding academic programs—things the university had done well for decades—to cover losses incurred by an unrealistic, failed expansion begun in 2014.

All of these pressures, internal and external, are ultimately borne by employees. They are the ones who carry out a university's mission. If that mission expands without a corresponding expansion of the time and resources needed to carry it out, then university employees are highly susceptible to burnout.

Burnout is the experience of being chronically stretched across a gap between your ideals for work and the reality of your job. Ideals are the things workers feel they can expect from their work. These expectations often motivate workers to do their best. Key expectations can include explicit promises by an employer, including a reasonable schedule, salary, and benefits. Ideals also include implicit promises of dignity, or an opportunity to serve or express oneself in one's work. These implicit promises come as much from the culture as they do from an employer. Parents, pastors, and politicians help set our ideals for work. So do movies and TV. What did "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" say we should expect from work? What does a more recent show like Apple TV's "Severance"?

When someone's working conditions do not match their ideals over a long period of time, they undergo the stretching we call burnout. That mismatch might stem from unmet expectations for salary or promotion. Or from



suffering discrimination. Or from working in an institution whose values do not match one's own. It's important to remember that there are two sides to the gap that causes burnout: Unreasonable expectations contribute just as much to burnout as inadequate conditions. Burnout can result not only when a reasonable promise is not kept but also when an unreasonable promise should never have been made in the first place. Burnout, then, is a small-scale instance of the fundamental tension in human life between what we can imagine and the finitude of our lives. Burnout can perhaps never be entirely done away with, but it can certainly be mitigated.

The culture of academia contributes to burnout. Academic workers often have high ideals, and those ideals sometimes cover up poor working conditions. In religious academia especially, the ideals of work are often put in terms of vocation—the individual worker's calling to a specific line of work. Christian ideas of vocation can contribute to overwork and burnout as people persist in conditions that supposedly reflect God's calling for them. Martin Luther, for instance, wrote that every office, every "station" in life was ordained by God, from prince to tailor. "If he is a Christian tailor," Luther wrote, "he will say: I make these clothes because God has bidden me do so, so that I can earn a living, so that I can help and serve my neighbor." Vocational language can be inspiring. It elevates the work you do to a transcendent level. Your work matters; it matters to God.

But keep in mind: Burnout results when ideals depart from reality. The idea of vocation raises your ideals. At religious institutions, the appeal to mission or vocation can often seem like a way to get people to keep working, or work harder, in conditions where they don't have adequate support. "You're fulfilling your divine calling," a leader at such an institution might say. "You're doing God's work. Why can't you do a little extra? Why do you need a raise?"

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The pressure on academic institutions just to survive is no excuse for them to allow the gap to widen between their ideals and the working conditions they provide. When enough of the faculty, staff, coaches, and administrators responsible for the college's mission burn out, the

institution will fail at its central purpose. And in that case, it may as well shut down, regardless of its financial health.

To overcome burnout, academia needs to narrow the gap between the ideals people bring to work and the reality they encounter on the job. Some ideals are individual, but many are drawn from the institutional and academic culture at large. Likewise, working conditions are largely set by employers. Because the causes of academic burnout are primarily institutional, the solutions need to be institutional, too.

"Burnout has three key dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of ineffectiveness."

Before any college can fix its burnout problem, it needs to understand not only how prevalent burnout is, but how its workers are experiencing burnout. Burnout has three key dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of ineffectiveness. In some workers, burnout will look like chronic weariness. In others, it will look like cynicism—antisocial behavior that could include anything from outbursts in meetings to gossip.

To get a sense of the patterns of burnout in its workforce, an institution could undertake a psychometric survey of its employees. But it can also gather useful information simply (and more cheaply) from interviews and conversations with employees. Through conversation, workers can give voice to their ideals and specify where those ideals are being met and where they are not. A benefit of holding such conversations is that they can enhance the sense of community on campus; that alone might begin to chip away at some burned-out workers' cynicism.

To become not just better places to work, but better colleges and universities, academic institutions also need to rethink what they mean by "vocation" and "mission." As I mentioned, these terms are too often used to justify doing more: "You need to do this new thing for the sake of the mission." But then the mission gets lost amid all these proliferating projects.

A mission should not be a mandate to do anything and everything that seems financially expedient. Rather, a mission should be *one thing*. I'm borrowing this idea from the Danish Lutheran writer Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote a book in 1846 called *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. For Kierkegaard, the "one thing" is the Good. "There is only one end: the genuine Good," he writes, "and only one means: this, to be willing only to use those means which genuinely are good." A pure heart, Kierkegaard argues, will subordinate all other things to the Good and desire it for its own sake. If you desire something other than the Good for its own sake—even something relatively good like honor or wealth—then your will is divided, your heart impure.

If we apply Kierkegaard's notion to colleges and universities, then we might say academic workers should think of mission as the *one thing* that matters most to their institution, department, or office. Perhaps that mission will be the *one thing* they can do better than anyone else. "Ideally,"

Fischman and Gardner write in *The Real World of College*, "any significant program should clearly reflect—indeed, embody—the school's announced purpose and mission." An institution should be clear about the one thing it is best positioned to do, and then make sure that the things it undertakes for the sake of the mission do not become ends in themselves. That will involve sacrificing some quite worthy activities that nevertheless distract from the one thing that matters above all others.

As Burkeman argued in relation to our individual lives, there will always be more good things we might wish to do than we ever could do. If we tried to do them all, we would fail anyway. Letting go of some of those things in order to focus on a few of the very most important may be painful. But it's also a necessary step to do the one thing that matters most in academia: the transformational education of students, undertaken in a way consonant with the university's values.

# Cultivating Staff Flourishing in Lutheran Higher Education: A Framework for Advocacy and Engagement



In the realm of higher education, the concepts of thriving and flourishing are gaining increasing recognition as essential facets of institutional vocation and community well-being. In the following essay, we delve into the notion of staff flourishing within the context of Lutheran Higher

Education (LHE), exploring its significance, challenges, and persistent questions. Drawing from our experiences and insights, we aim to suggest multiple frameworks situated within different university contexts for advocating and actively fostering staff flourishing within LHE institutions. We approach this opportunity with gratitude as we bring attention to this vital conversation. We believe it to be not just a relevant and timely topic but one that is essential with respect to the vocation of our institutions.

Specifically we want to suggest that one vocation of LHE is to support the development, vocational discernment, and well being of the university community. Certainly for our students but also faculty and staff. In fact, every institution represented here, not only has this vocation or calling but

a vast array of tools furnished by the Lutheran tradition with which to answer that call. LHE stands apart from other educational models due to the depth of its tradition and the values it espouses. At its core, LHE embodies a commitment to vocation, emphasizing meaning and purpose in one's work rather than mere performance or passion. Moreover, LHE celebrates diversity and unique contributions within the shared context of humanity and the pursuit of the common good. These foundational principles are what captivate educators, administrators, and staff members like ourselves and draw us into a profound relationship with LHE. This deep commitment is akin to a long-lasting love affair, one that we believe should endure the test of time.

Two years ago, in June of 2021, I had the opportunity to attend and present at a virtual conference for ELCA schools. Because I did not grow up Lutheran, folks were interested in how and why I became such a champion for vocation and Lutheran Higher Education. I was asked to share a bit of my story with a group of clergy, scholars, and colleagues in response to the prompt: how I caught LHE. We were still in the midst of the pandemic, and I didn't want to think about LHE as a disease to be caught so I opted for something rather unconventional. I reframed the prompt to read: how I fell in love with LHE. I shared my response

**Laree Winer** is the Managing Director of the Wild Hope Center for Vocation and has been involved with the work of vocational reflection and discernment at Pacific Lutheran University (PLU) for 14 years. One of her greatest joys as an educator has been to co-create and facilitate the only paid professional development opportunity open to all staff at PLU – The Wild Hope Staff Seminar.

using the metaphor of a romance. I talked about how it wasn't love at first sight but that it started as a schoolgirl crush. One full of curiosity that gave way to a slow smoldering kind of attraction that led eventually to a full blown passionate love affair. I talked about how being a staff member and a student helped foster this growing interest in LHE. How my faculty were like matchmakers setting me up on a series of dates that nurtured my curiosity and this budding romance. For the sake of time and space, I am sparing you many of the details. I not only fell in love but I made a deep commitment to LHE. The "to death do us part" kind of commitment.

You might be asking me what was it that attracted me? Was it LHE's smile, intellect, good hair, learning outcomes or assessment data? Well, it was actually LHE's heart. I fell in love with the heart of the tradition. Once again, it is the heart that I think contains the keys and the tools to advocate for staff flourishing. In addition to the commitments to meaning, purpose, diversity and the common good, this tradition also rejects hierarchical structures, recognizing the intrinsic value of every individual's contribution to the mission of LHE. Although I am deeply committed to LHE, I recognize the very real challenges in cultivating and maintaining a flourishing relationship.

However, just as any enduring relationship can face challenges, the relationship between staff and LHE is not without its complexities. In some instances, staff members may feel undervalued, neglected, or left behind in favor of newer, seemingly more "relevant" models. External factors, such as financial difficulties or unforeseen events, can further strain this relationship. It is in these moments of doubt and frustration that our commitment to LHE and its tradition is put to the test. However, if you really commit to something you don't give up. You continue to engage, study, reflect, and reform. You remind your love of *their* commitment. You remind them of who they *are* and who they are to *you*. You remind LHE, and those that represent its mission and values, that they come from something. Specifically a tradition:

- A tradition that has a deep history of reforming, accessibility, and innovation. Students are not the only ones who are changing. We must meet our staff members where they are too.

- A tradition that emphasizes vocation—the "third way" is not a way of performance or passion but rather of meaning and purpose. Meaningful work that serves the neighbor is a vocation or in the university context—meaningful work that serves the students and the mission of LHE is a vocation.
- A tradition that de-emphasized hierarchy—**everyone** has a vocation and everyone's vocation is essential to the purpose of our institutions.
- A tradition that recognizes our differences and unique contributions through the lens of our shared humanity and our shared purpose to influence the common good.

It's because of this tradition that I am optimistic that my love will stand the test of time. That we will make it LHE and I. Together forever. And yet, we must continue to work on our relationship.

In this work, advocacy plays a pivotal role. Advocacy implies actively supporting the development, vocational discernment, and overall well-being of not only students but also staff. This kind of advocacy seeks to bridge the gap between the institution's mission and the daily experiences of its staff members. To that end, I still have a few lingering questions regarding our future together:

1. **What does it take for staff to flourish?** Do we know? If not, how will we know? Who will ask? Who will listen? Who will act? Our institutions get data on everything else. Collecting data on staff flourishing is imperative. In an era where institutions meticulously track various metrics, it is crucial to understand the well-being and satisfaction of staff members. This data can inform targeted initiatives and policies to address areas of concern and enhance overall staff experience.
2. **Why are staff often viewed differently than other members of the university community?** We all agree that we are here to serve the students and the educational mission. Our leadership has stated—"We are all educators". So why are we viewed differently? Why have the hierarchies been reinstated?

3. **How can those of us with resources and Centers focused on the work of vocation reflection and discernment, advocate for and contribute to staff flourishing?** To truly cultivate flourishing, institutions must also invest in professional development opportunities for staff members. Traditionally, these opportunities have been more accessible to certain roles and departments, leaving others overlooked.

In the next chapter of this love story my hope is that staff flourishing in Lutheran Higher Education is

not merely a theoretical concept; it is a calling deeply rooted in the tradition and values of LHE. By embracing advocacy, investing in professional development, and collecting data, LHE institutions can ensure that staff members not only serve the mission but also flourish within the vibrant community of the institutions. We invite our colleagues in the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU) to join us in this endeavor to nurture and support staff flourishing as an essential component of our institutional and community well-being.

## CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS



The theme for *Intersections* in Spring 2024 is “Vocation as Action in the Affirmative.” We invite written or artistic pieces from any perspective within the university that emphasize the importance of acting on the vocations we hear, cultivate, and/or espouse in our various mission statements. We are especially interested in including Lutheran theological, educational, and sociological perspectives related to “Affirmative Action.” See more about this specific call on p. 26. Contributions are due February 15, 2024. If you would like to be in conversation about an idea that is brewing, please be in touch with the editor, Colleen Windham-Hughes: [windhamh@callutheran.edu](mailto:windhamh@callutheran.edu)

DON EZRA CRUZ PLEMONS

# Staff Governance at St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN

At the end of Summer, just as the academic year was unleashing its usual cannonade of events, excitement and stress, I was gifted an opportunity to unplug. While campus was engulfed by move-in weekend, student orientation, the hustle to find twin-XL sheets and door-mounted full-length mirrors, I escaped to the north shore of Minnesota and the wild coast of Lake Superior. I slept by waves beneath a cliff. I reflected on glaciers, granite, greenstone, greywacke. I sorted rocks and hunted agate. And since I can't really unplug: I thought about Staff Governance.

Staff Governance at St. Olaf does not exist. At least, not formally. But, as it does exist, it is a lot like the rocky beach up north: many individual pieces, composed of various layers and materials, set under extreme pressure and conditions over a long period of time. Some are worn smooth by the water, weather and currents. Others are younger breaks, still jagged and sharp at the edges.

Our work on Staff Governance began, as likely is the case on many campuses, as a reaction to trauma. For St. Olaf staff, we'd felt a steady decade of difficult events; In the past 10 years the community has directly experienced Title IX conflicts, anti-racism student protests, departmental reallocations, public departures of prominent staff and faculty. A global pandemic. The murder of George Floyd. And meanwhile, the balance between personal lives and work as staff were asked to stretch further than

ever to support connection and belonging and the worthy outcomes of student success.

It has been a convergence of many efforts, made crystal-line through common struggles and a shared vision: that staff would have a voice and seat at the table, alongside Faculty and Students, with the deciding leadership of the college. Affinity groups began providing spaces where staff could unite and speak freely. The Council for Equity and Inclusion investigated methods to improve promotion, retention and arbitration of complaints. The Task Force to Confront Structural Racism at St. Olaf unearthed the gaps in staff representation within the college and researched models of governance at peer institutions.

In 2022, facilitated by HR, members of these groups, plus others from across all divisions of the college, met in earnest to draft potential bylaws and committee structures. This new group consisted of hourly and exempt staff. The draft was completed and given to St. Olaf's new president, Dr. Susan Rundell Singer. After an early meeting with her we were encouraged to continue working as a community. This year we'll be communicating with staff to gather feedback and interest. We'll work with Faculty allies and



**Don Ezra Cruz Plemons** is Assistant Director of Creative Experience and manages the Digital Scholarship Center at St. Olaf (DiSCO) and the library makerspace. He is a member of the Library and IT DEI group, and staff advisor to the Game Design and Animation Club on campus, as well as the Role-playing club, Suddenly, Wizards! He holds an MFA in poetry and a BFA in painting and owns far too much LEGO. | [ecp@stolaf.edu](mailto:ecp@stolaf.edu)

learn from our peers who have also recently taken these paths. We wish to bring our work to the surface.

It no longer feels accurate to say that our development of a Staff Governance model is simply *work in progress* and instead is, with the power of a glacier, advancing steadily forward. I've been honored to work alongside so many dedicated people at this institution. What has

been a sustained effort by the staff community, now over 3 years, is a demonstration of some of the best qualities you would hope to see in any workforce: thoughtful in their approaches, resilient through difficulties, and possessing an intentional compassion for the most marginalized voices and underrepresented members of their body. It feels we can move, albeit slowly, and reshape the landscape of our work.

CHARLENE RACHUY COX

# Vocare: A Spiritual Practice for the Spaces Between

I am writing this article looking out my home office window onto a canopy of old-growth trees. It is 8:00 p.m. on a late August day, and I am struck by two things. One, nighttime is rapidly falling, and two, there is a single patch of yellow near the crown of a sea of green. It is still summer, though there are no longer 15 hours of daylight in Minnesota. It is not yet autumn, though there are hints of it everywhere. The view from my window reminds me of what I already know: we live our lives in the spaces “between no longer and not yet.”<sup>1</sup>

I first came across this idea of the “space between” several years ago in a blog post by Nancy Levin. She writes, “Honor the space between no longer and not yet.”

Of the host of *spaces between* that existentially mark this present time, given my work at St. Olaf College as the Director of Programming, Engagement, and Innovation for Congregational Thriving, a few are critical to me: the space between no longer flourishing denominational churches and a *not yet* determined post-Christian church; the space between a no longer pre-George Floyd world and a *not yet* realized world of racial justice; the space between a no longer binary worldview and a *not yet* accomplished non-binary way of

being. Equally significant are the personal *spaces between* that mark all of our lives—spaces between jobs, relationships, and stages of life, spaces between joy and sorrow, history, and hope.

Levin reminds, however, that it is not just about recognizing these spaces between, but *honoring* them. One way to do this is to engage in spiritual practices that “deepen...relationships with the sacred and the world around”<sup>2</sup> us in ways that open us to the unique, creative possibilities that a particular *space between* affords. Such honoring is the purpose of the *Vocare* spiritual practice.

Developed as a part of the Nourishing Vocation Project, *Vocare* is a six-word spiritual practice designed to help individuals, small groups, and whole communities discern and live more fully into their various callings—personal and professional, public and private—so that life in the present can be lived more intentionally on purpose for the common good.



**Charlene Rachuy Cox, DMin, MDiv**, is the Director of Programming, Engagement, and Innovation for Congregational Thriving at St. Olaf College. An ELCA Pastor, she oversees the Nourishing Vocation Project and the Nourishing Vocation with Children Project. Her research interests include spirituality, narrative identity, and worship and homiletics. Continued conversation is always welcome: [cox11@stolaf.edu](mailto:cox11@stolaf.edu)



In its most basic form, VOCARE invites reflection upon the following questions:

- V:** What do I **value**, and how am I living my values?
- O:** To what am I being asked to be **open**? How do I respond?
- C:** What voices, literal and metaphorical, are **calling** to me? Which ones do I listen to, and why? Which ones can I silence?
- A:** Where am I investing my attention? Does my **attention** align with my values?
- R:** What are my **regrets**? What insight do I gain from them, and how are they calling me to something new or different?
- E:** When, where, and how have I **experienced the presence of the sacred** in my everyday life? What does that experience say to me? What will I carry with me from this reflection?

Designed to be used across religious traditions, perspectives and worldviews, there are a variety of established *Vocare* experiences. These include guided meditations, Sing *Vocare!*, and Christian worship liturgies. Users of *Vocare* are encouraged to adapt its language to their worldview, make it their own, and engage it in a way that nourishes their own unique *spaces between no longer and not yet*.

More information can be found in the *Vocare* section of the Nourishing Vocation Project website: <https://tinyurl.com/288zenuh>

## Endnotes

1. Levin, Nancy. "Is It Time for a Graceful Exit? - Nancy Levin." *The Practice*, 24 June 2015, [nancylevin.com/is-it-time-for-a-graceful-exit/](http://nancylevin.com/is-it-time-for-a-graceful-exit/).
2. Brussat, Frederic and Mary Ann. "Spirituality & Practice." *What Are Spiritual Practices?*, Spirituality and Practice: Resources for Spiritual Journeys, 2006, [www.spiritualityandpractice.com/about/what-are-spiritual-practices](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/about/what-are-spiritual-practices).

# The Importance of Connection

I once had the opportunity to serve under a great administrator at my institution that valued and encouraged me to speak up when moved. I definitely felt moved to write this personal insight at the end of the 2023 VOLHE Conference.

The “So that We, Too, May Flourish” Conference, was a refreshing and necessary event for my own vocational flourishing. This opportunity to allow those that support the NECU’s common calling of “Called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish” is one of the first opportunities for me to interact with others outside my institution, since the COVID-19 pandemic, and everything that came with it. It allowed me the opportunity to sit among many that value the desire to dismantle systems of oppression that are so entrenched in our society, and even among some of our dear Lutheran institutions. Yes! We do need to be “real” with each other and recognize that those systems are present, even in our own well-meaning institutions. An example of this came up while listening to how some of the attendees shared their own views and definitions about some of our students. No need to get defensive, if we are truly committed to assisting our students, and ourselves, in serving our neighbors so we may flourish with them. This being my second time attending this conference, allowed me the opportunity to recharge my soul and create new connections with other well-meaning folks across our great institutions.

The topics covered during the conference were inspiring and provided hope for a weary DEI advocate. The thought-provoking plenary sessions reminded me that the

desire to speak up for others, students and those working with them, is important. I will say that the discernment about burnout, reminded me that this very important topic is probably one that many of our institutions may not be willing to look into. This may be because the concept of asking staff and faculty to do more without looking into what other duties can be stopped, is a tough one. The conversations I had with several attendees demonstrated that this may be an important discussion to have on each campus to minimize burnout and support what we really want to achieve—flourishment for all.

There were other great sessions such as the Talking Circle on Indigenous Issues presented by the Luther College in Regina, Canada, and the Racial Healing Circle presented by Dr. Monica Smith. These sessions allowed participants to dive deep into issues of racial and diversity identity and how they continue to affect us. I felt that these discussions and the burnout issue hit a cord with many attendees. At the end of this gathering, the question is, whether we want to take on the challenges to create significant change or just leave it all on Augsburg’s beautiful campus? What are we really willing to do to enhance true flourishing?

One last thought, authentic connections to others are necessary for all of us to continue to do the hard work that



**Alex Piedras**, is the Director of Multicultural and Community Outreach at Grand View University, where he focuses on issues of diversity, equity and inclusion. He has over 25 years of experience working in the Des Moines community for different non-profits and currently serves on several boards and community organizations in Central Iowa. | [apiedras@grandview.edu](mailto:apiedras@grandview.edu)

we are doing. It was refreshing to see two of our NECU's Presidents be present to hear the importance of the topics discussed. Again, the reality is that dismantling systems of oppression and engaging in caring, tough conversations is

serious hard work but having gatherings such as this, allow for us to build valuable connections to recharge the soul for this long journey.

## CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

### Spring 2024 “Vocation as Action in the Affirmative”

#### Focus: Affirmative Action and Lutheran Higher Education

The legacy and continuing practice of Lutheran reforms related to education include expanding access, opportunity, and inclusion across all populations in society. In the Spring 2024 issue we are especially interested in including Lutheran theological, educational, and sociological perspectives related to “Affirmative Action.”

In its recent decisions—*SFFA v. Harvard* and *SFFA v. UNC*—the Supreme Court overturned an established equal protection law and effectively eliminated the use of affirmative action in college admissions. The court's decision disregards prior precedent, as well as the societal realities of race discrimination and inequality. How are colleges and universities in the Network of Lutheran Higher Education (NECU) called to grapple with the concrete implications of these SCOTUS decisions?

We invite people working in different disciplinary perspectives and departments to contribute short

pieces of 500 words or extended essays of 1500-2500 words on topics related to affirmative action. If you would like to be in conversation about an idea that is brewing, please be in touch with Rev. Lamont Anthony Wells, Executive Director of NECU or the editor of *Intersections*, Colleen Windham-Hughes: [windhamh@callutheran.edu](mailto:windhamh@callutheran.edu)

#### Possible content:

- A brief insight from your research, teaching, or advocacy
- Your perspective based on your campus/position/location
- Review/update/commentary on the 2007 ELCA Social Statement on Our Calling in Education
- Student perspectives on any of the above—art, posters, essays, blogs

# “A Decolonizing Conversation”: Indigenous Engagement at Luther College at the University of Regina

It was an honour and a delight to be able to participate in the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education conference in Minneapolis this past summer. It was also a privilege for us to be able to share the stage with Dr. Monica Smith, presenting on the subject of “Reconciliation, Restorative Justice, and the Flourishing of Black, Indigenous, and Other People of Color.” As people of White European Settler descent, we were very cognizant of both the challenges and responsibilities of presenting on this subject. We hoped, with this presentation and the following workshop, both to centre Indigenous stories and voices, and to use our positions and platforms to do the anti-racist work of naming systemic injustices that benefit us.

In our Canadian context, the lasting legacy of European colonization is still creating and contributing to challenges for BIPOC members of our communities across all sectors, including education. A particular aspect of our Canadian history that contributes to this legacy is the former Indian Residential School System. From 2009-2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) worked across Canada, gathering and sharing stories of the experiences

thousands of Indigenous children, their families, and communities had during the years of the Residential School System. In 2015, the TRC published 94 *Calls to Action* for all levels of government in Canada to make strides towards

righting these historic and persistent systemic wrongs.

The *Calls to Action* are informed by the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Given the terrible legacy of the Residential School System, several of the *Calls to Action* pertain directly to education, in both the “Addressing the Legacy,” and “Towards Reconciliation” sections of the document. Luther College, on both its high school and university campuses, is striving to be attentive to these education-based calls to restorative justice initiatives.

As is becoming more and more common in our area of the country, both our campuses are making conscious



**Rev. Dr. Marc Jerry** is the President of Luther College at the University of Regina, and Economics professor, and an ordained Lutheran pastor with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada. Dr. Jerry holds two degrees in economics, as well as two graduate degrees in theology. He can be reached at [marc.jerry@luthercollege.edu](mailto:marc.jerry@luthercollege.edu) or follow him on Linked In @Dr. Marc Jerry.

**Rev. Dr. Sarah Dymund** is the Interim Chaplain at Luther College at the University of Regina and the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Regina. Pastor Sarah is a recent graduate from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. She can be reached at [sarah.dymund@luthercollege.edu](mailto:sarah.dymund@luthercollege.edu) or follow her on Facebook @sarah.dymund.

efforts to begin gatherings with Land Acknowledgments which name the peoples whose first home we are on, as well as naming the need for all people to embrace and embody our shared responsibilities as Treaty People. Our presentation at the VLHE conference this year incorporated such acknowledgments for both our home in Regina, Saskatchewan, and Minneapolis, where we gathered for the conference.

Some concrete activities and steps towards reconciliation have taken place recently on our high school campus including the direct involvement, initiation, and leadership of our Indigenous students. One such activity was the removal of banners from our gymnasium which bear names and logos of sports teams which are derogatory or appropriative. This removal was done with due respect and ceremony, and accompanied by sacred drumming. This past year's graduation celebration at Luther College High School also included the addition of a Starblanket ceremony to the proceedings. Each Indigenous graduate from our high school received a beautiful handcrafted Starblanket to mark this milestone in their life, and local Indigenous community leaders facilitated this event and provided a drum circle to accompany the ceremony.

On our campus at the University of Regina, Luther has an active committee working towards elements of Indigenous Engagement, or "Indigenization." This committee has collected resources for faculty and staff on guidelines for appropriate and respectful protocols in seeking input from Indigenous Elders, and other scholarly resources for various aspects of Indigenous engagement. Our university campus has also sponsored and supported an award-winning initiative called *Project of Heart*, which invites participants to engage with and learn from the stories of specific children who attended the Residential School System. To help guide our committee, and to provide an opportunity for students, staff and faculty to truly learn from Indigenous wisdom, Luther College at the University of Regina has contracted an Elder in Residence for this year.

Sharing the words and wisdom of Elder Lorna Standingready was the heart of our presentation at the NECU VLHE conference this summer. Preparing for this conference presentation opportunity with the desire to

centre Indigenous voices from our White settler perspective was a challenge we wrestled with alongside our Indigenization committee, and Elder Lorna. The central questions for us, as we discerned our path for this keynote address, became, "What is our work to do in this area? How can we use the privilege of this opportunity to centre an Indigenous voice, rather than our own? And, perhaps most importantly, "How can we seek and centre Indigenous guidance without simultaneously asking the person we ask to teach us to take responsibility for our learning?"

One significant challenge in learning and listening to voices from the margins of our society is that the central, dominant culture often expects, or even demands, that marginalized voices conform to the dominant norms of address and delivery in order for their contributions to be recognized as valid and worthy of attention and consideration. This is a particularly relevant concern when considering bringing Indigenous teachings into colonial academic systems.

An area where we can face obstacles in making space for Indigenous teachings in academic settings centers on how we view and manage time from our cultural perspectives. European-influenced academia is very strongly structured to run by the clock, and punctuality and brevity are valued attributes, which are often cited as examples of being respectful of another person's time. In many Indigenous cultures, placing time limits or constraints on communication is, in contrast, seen as a mark of disrespect, especially when considering the wisdom of an Elder. A challenge some of our staff and faculty face at Luther is how to navigate the desire to bring the voice, stories, and teachings of an Indigenous Elder into their classroom settings, when to do so inevitably involves asking the Elder to conform to the time constraints of the class structure.

This challenge was at the forefront of our minds as we prepared to join the VLHE conference this year. How, we wondered, could we use our privilege and platform to allow Elder Lorna to bring her own teachings to the conference without asking her to make her own story small enough to fit into the allotted time for the presentation? In other words, how could we do the work of making a respectful space in which Elder Lorna's voice could share her own story in her own way?

What we brought to the conference was a video entitled *A Decolonizing Conversation*. With Elder Lorna's permission and consent we recorded a video of a conversation between her and Rev. Dr. Sarah Dymund, Luther's interim chaplain. This conversation had no time constraints placed upon it, and Elder Lorna was invited to share whatever teachings and medicine she felt moved to bring to the conference. Elder Lorna's Cree name means *Old Woman Who Brings Good Medicine*, and the teachings and wisdom she bestows on those blest to hear her are indeed healing. This conversation between Elder Lorna and Pastor Sarah took about an hour. From this hour-long conversation, Pastor Sarah created an edited version of the video that fit into the 20-minute time allotted for this portion of the presentation.

The video that we shared as *A Decolonizing Conversation* followed the story of Elder Lorna's name as it has changed and evolved throughout the stages of her life, including conforming to colonial naming conventions, traditional Indigenous naming, changing names with marriage, and being known only by a number in Residential Schools. As moving and powerful as many in the audience found this story to be, perhaps the most important learning from this experience and the message we hoped to convey in the presentation is how much we were not able to share. Approximately two-thirds of what Elder Lorna gave as a gift to Pastor Sarah and our student videographer has been unheard by anyone else. How much do we miss out on learning from the margins when there is no time and space in the centre for those who can't or won't conform to the norm?

# Beyond Deep Gladness: Coming to Terms with Vocations We Don't Choose



Those of you attending this conference know well that our Lutheran-affiliated colleges and universities encourage students, staff, and faculty to reflect on the topic of vocation in ways that encompass many of the really big questions of life—questions of meaning, purpose, and calling. Many of

you also likely know that one of the definitions of vocation that has become ubiquitous at our institutions comes from the writings of theologian, minister, and novelist Frederick Buechner. According to Buechner, the kind of work to which we tend to be called is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. So vocation, according to Buechner, is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Buechner's definition has become synonymous with the word "vocation" for so many over the past several decades: our vocation is located at the intersection of our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger. I imagine it has been a sweet spot for many of us—our calling being the place where our passions, our joy, our gifts can be put to work in service of the suffering and needs of the world. And when all of these converge, we flourish.

Lutheran scholars have applauded the ways in which Buechner's definition of vocation is not just focused on the self. In Lutheran thought, vocation is never just about you—or me. It's always about who we are—and who we are becoming—in and through our relationships. But scholars have also pointed out that the focus on vocational gladness may sometimes be in tension with the Lutheran vocational commitment to "serve the neighbor in love." In other words, sometimes we're called to vocations we'd rather not do. Sometimes being accountable to our students and our colleagues does not result in gladness. Living out our vocations is not just about gladness but can involve challenge, deep sadness, and vocations we didn't choose. My talk this morning will be focused on a more expansive definition of vocation that includes sadness as well as gladness.

"Living out our vocations is not just about gladness but can involve challenge, deep sadness, and vocations we didn't choose."

But isn't a focus on vocation and sadness kind of a downer for the last keynote of a conference about staff and

**Deanna A. Thompson** is Director of the Lutheran Center for Faith, Values and Community and Martin E. Marty Regents Chair in Religion and the Academy. Thompson's work at St. Olaf focuses on advancing the mission and programming of the Lutheran Center and promoting inter-faith dialogue both within and beyond St. Olaf.

faculty flourishing? Fair question. Here's my response: if we don't make space for the sadness that's part of our lives and our vocations, it can be difficult if not impossible to get to gladness, to joy, to flourishing. And even more, often it is in sharing one another's sadness where gladness, joy, and flourishing begin to emerge.

I didn't encounter Buechner's definition of vocation until I was a professor of religion in the 1990s, but if I had encountered it as an undergraduate in the 1980s, it likely would have become my mantra. As a student at St. Olaf I enrolled in the Paracollege, a college-within-the-college where students designed their own majors and were asked to explain how becoming generally and liberally educated in this particular way was going to set us up for a meaningful vocation beyond college. After graduation I served for a year with Lutheran Volunteer Corps, running an after-school program in Baltimore where my passion for teaching was put to work in service of students whose lives sometimes made it difficult for them to learn. Doing a Ph.D. in theology led me to a career in teaching and writing, where my deep gladness around being immersed in the really big questions of life with college students felt like a great vocational match.

But in 2008 the world I knew and loved turned upside down. The mysterious breaking of two vertebrae in my back led to a stage IV cancer diagnosis shortly before Christmas. 2009 began with me resigning from virtually every aspect of my full and wonderful life. Once I was weaned off the oxycodone and fentanyl, I had a recurring vision of taking a file folder labeled "cancer diagnosis" and handing it to the receptionist at the oncology clinic where I spent much of my time, telling her firmly but politely that I had tried incurable cancer on for size, but unfortunately, it didn't fit into the vocational path I was on, so I was returning it. This lousy diagnosis didn't relate in any way to my deep gladness. Instead of meeting the world's deep need; my life had become a bucket-full of needs that relied on a small army to help me keep going.

I taught what I thought was going to be my last class ever in spring 2009 and went on sabbatical the following fall. I initially approached sabbatical as a time to try and bring closure to my life before it ended. Instead of dying, however, I went into my first remission. I'm not naturally an

anxious person, but life-threatening illness can mess with your equilibrium. As my sabbatical came to an end, I didn't know if I could handle returning to teaching. What if I sign back up for life only to have to resign from it all again?

Some of you may have read Paul Kalanathi's heartbreakingly beautiful book, *When Breath Becomes Air*. He's the Stanford neurosurgeon who was diagnosed with incurable cancer in his thirties and lived just a few years with the diagnosis. But in that short period of time he, too, went into remission and gained back much of his strength. His oncologist suggested he go back to working as a neurosurgeon. He reminded his doctor he was dying, and her response was this: "True. But you're not dying today." Kalanathi observes that of course we're all dying. But some of us know this more acutely than others. And when that's the case, it can be really hard to opt back into the life you've already had to opt out of once before. But supported by his family, his faith, and his friends and his co-workers, he found strength to put on his scrubs and return to work until the cancer spread once again.

"What does it mean to integrate deep sadness into our lives, even to make it part of our vocation, to figure out ways to go on?"

Even as I find myself in my fourth remission of living with incurable cancer and continue to resonate with Buechner's vision of vocation as our deep gladness meeting the world's deep need, my journey with cancer has led me to realize that our conversations about vocation also need to make space for the deep sadnesses that fill our lives. What does it mean to integrate deep sadness into our lives, even to make it part of our vocation, to figure out ways to go on?

One of my vocations is to be an academic, a theologian. In describing the vocation of a theologian, Yale professor Willie James Jennings has said that among other things, "theologians write as fragile bodies even as we write about fragile bodies." Jennings calls on academics like me to never forget that we are "fully body." Since my diagnosis I have tried to write and speak in ways that



honestly acknowledge bodily pain and suffering, writing and speaking to and on behalf of those who struggle to find words for similar kinds of suffering. Many days I really wish I had a different vocation—that I didn't see describing the anatomy of life with serious illness as part of what I'm called to do as a theologian in this particular fragile body.

It's also been hard work putting words to my own journey with advanced-stage cancer. Immediately after the diagnosis, words went away. Arthur Frank, whose work as a sociologist includes investigating the stories we tell one another about illness, says that those of us who are seriously ill "need to become storytellers in order to recover the voices that illness and its treatment often take away." Frank proposes that rather than imposing a limited set of stories that often get told about illness (that he fought valiantly, that they were always so positive), what is needed is to let our stories breathe, allowing them to take a more capacious form. I think all of us who work on and talk about vocation should take a cue from Arthur Frank and create more spacious definitions of vocation, encourage more discussion, more stories about our deep sadness as well as our deep gladness and how both intersect with the world's deep need.

My vocational quest to locate words to talk more about the deep sadness with which so many of us live was helped significantly when I was invited by a friend of mine from Boston University, Shelly Rambo, to be part of a project that became *Post-Traumatic Public Theology*, a collection of essays witnessing to the breadth and depth of traumatic experiences we humans endure, and offering theological reflections on how we as individuals and communities might better support those living with trauma. Rambo's definition of trauma is "the suffering that remains." Trauma is most often caused by an event—war, forced migration, natural disaster, sexual assault, racial violence, and "living in a pandemic" that has claimed millions of lives worldwide.

Through my participation in the post-traumatic public theology project, I learned about the ways in which traumatic experiences rob people of language to talk about what they've been through and how our bodies respond in divergent ways to traumatic events. We can feel numb, sad, depressed, exhausted. We can be combative and

disagreeable, tired and disconnected. People living with trauma often try to hide these emotions, retreating from relationships in attempts to protect themselves. "Trauma affects our brains, but it has a lasting effect on our bodies."

"How do we deal with the trauma, suffering, and sadness that are part of our lives?"

How do we deal with the trauma, suffering, and sadness that are part of our lives? Many of you (like me) have likely engaged in important therapeutic practices that help address these issues. As a scholar of religion I'm also interested in ways that religion, as its best, can help people address our trauma and sadness. One practice I've spent lots of time thinking about recently is the practice of lament. Many of you are familiar with the book of Psalms in the Bible, which is an ancient collection of hymns and prayers. The translation of the Hebrew title of the book of Psalms is "Book of Praises." Perhaps the most famous of these is Psalm 23, which begins with the words, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." A hymn meant to comfort. What's fascinating, though, is that out of the 150 psalms in the book of praises, 60 of them are what we call "lament psalms." This means that almost half of the book of praises is full of testimonies of coming undone, of crying out for help, of not knowing how to go on. What would happen if, in addition to Psalm 23, we also paid attention to the one before it, Psalm 22, a hymn that includes the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (I tell my students a more contemporary translation is, "My God, my God, where the hell are you?"). "I cry out but you are silent." Most lament psalms also contain a word of hope, that God hears the cries of those who are suffering, that God responds with healing. But the strong accent on lament in religious practice offers insight into this profound truth about our lives: that sorrow is a close companion.

One more important point about religious practices of lament—they tend to be public in nature. While it is certainly important to lament in private about our sadness,

religious traditions strongly recommend the practice of collective lamentation. Of speaking and hearing the cries of others. Of offering reassurance to the sufferers that they are not suffering alone.

While my initial impetus for expanding talk of vocation to make space for deep sadness emerged from my own experience with illness and working with students with increasing mental and physical health challenges, the past three years of living through a global pandemic has upped the urgency that we make space for deep sadness in our conversations about vocation. Like me, you may still find it difficult to put words to how living through the pandemic's global upheaval has impacted us. That so many aspects of our lives that bring gladness, joy, and help us flourish were postponed or done virtually. And while our institutions and our lives have opened back up, there's a persistent uncertainty about what practices may be gone for good and what new ones are taking their place.

"What's fascinating, though, is that out of the 150 psalms in the book of praises, 60 of them are what we call 'lament psalms.' This means that almost half of the book of praises is full of testimonies of coming undone, of crying out for help, of not knowing how to go on."

Another critical cause of deep sadness I want to lift up today is the intergenerational trauma around systemic racism in the U.S. Three years ago, just a few miles from here, George Floyd was murdered. His killing was neither the first nor the last police killing of a Black person, but teenager Darnella Frazier's courageous recording of the murder injected the language of (collective, historical) trauma into national conversations about what it means to be a person of color in America.

In her work on trauma and its embodied effects, Lutheran womanist and pastoral care professor Rev. Dr. Beverly Wallace draws on Resmaa Menaken's powerful book, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway*

*to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, and his discussion of how bodies have a form of knowledge that is different from our cognitive brains. Dr. Wallace uses the story of Moses and the characters involved in the dramatic attempt to preserve his life as an infant to reflect on the trauma she and other Black Americans experienced during the aftermath of Floyd's murder. For those of you unfamiliar with the story of Moses' birth as told in the Jewish Torah and Christian Old Testament, a brief recap: The Israelites are enslaved in Egypt, and the Egyptians have issued a decree that all baby boys born to Israelite women will be killed. Moses' mother, Jochebed, gives birth to a son, and the midwives defy the Pharaoh's order and leave Moses in the riverbed for him to be discovered by Pharaoh's daughter.

In her meditation on Moses' birth in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, Wallace writes:

Since we are all children of God, then within our bodies, within our DNA are also the experiences of those who have come before us. Our very bodies house the unhealed dissonance and trauma of our ancestors—intergenerational transmission of trauma, trauma passed on in the expression of our DNA. Might we still be living with the traumatic experience of Jochebed, the mother of the liberator of God's people? Might we have within us the experiences of Moses and his sister, Miriam? Might we respond as [midwives] Shiphrah and Puah with the resiliency to resist engaging in activities that are harmful to our community?

Wallace's question of how we respond to traumatic situations is a question about vocation. And she insists that we pay attention to the deep sadness, to the toll that systemic injustice takes on Black bodies and spirits and asks us where we find ourselves in the Moses' story, in the story of intergenerational trauma.

It's important that Wallace zeros in on the roles of Shiphrah and Puah in the story, the midwives who refused to heed Pharaoh's demands. "When faced with a stress as great as the order to end newborn lives," Wallace notes, "the midwives chose to fight back by not following this order and doing their part to protect the lives of babies

such as Moses.” We see here that protest is also a form of public, collective lament. With this description of the actions of Shiprah and Puah, perhaps we’ve returned to Buechner’s definition of vocation as the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep need meet. The midwives continued to practice the vocation to which they were called—bringing new life into the world—in ways that resisted the dominant death-dealing forces of their day.

“A key reason for making space for sadness, for lament, is that when we do so, we make more possible space for the gladness, joy, and even flourishing.”

As I mentioned earlier, a key reason for making space for sadness, for lament, is that when we do so, we make more possible space for the gladness, joy, and even flourishing. Some of you may be familiar with Ross Gay, poet and author of—most recently—*Inciting Joy*. Gay opens the text with a meditation on how his focus on joy is often taken by others as a problematically transgressive act. He recounts how at readings people often challenge him: *how can you as a Black male educator, who cares about justice and the state of the planet, write about joy given all the awful?* Gay responds to these questions with a question of his own: “What if joy, instead of refuge or relief from heartbreak, is what flows from us when we help each other carry our heartbreaks?”

One last story before I invite you talk at your tables. Some of you likely know that a St. Olaf student was arrested this past spring for terroristic threats after officials found great amounts of ammunition and notebooks describing plans to shoot people on campus. St. Olaf describes itself as an “intensely residential campus,” where almost all of our 3000 students live in on campus housing. The campus is a place where students leave their keys and laptops out on tables, where post office boxes do not have any locks.

The arrest deeply unsettled all of us at St. Olaf, and prompted the administration to declare the following

Thursday after the arrest a “day of healing,” where all classes and events were canceled, and opportunities for yoga, conversation, games allowed students, faculty, and staff additional time to pause and process what had happened.

Some of you may also know that an honored tradition at St. Olaf is Friday Flowers, where every Friday a local florist comes to campus to sell flowers—mostly to students but also, sometimes, to faculty and staff. The main reason for the student post office boxes being unlocked is so that students can place a flower in another student’s mailbox for them to pick up later that day.

On the Friday after the day of healing, just over a week after the student’s arrest, a small group of staff worked with the local florist to place a flower in every student’s P.O. box. My colleague and I were walking from our offices to chapel just as classes were getting out and students were flooding into the P.O. box area, and it was a sight I’ll never forget. One of my favorite students (not that we have favorites), saw me before I saw the flowers, and yelled, “Deanna, *THE FLOWERS!!!!*” Students were gasping, crying, shrieking in disbelief and delight, taking photos.

The rest of the day the campus was alit with a different kind of energy. Everywhere you went, there were students with flowers sticking out of their backpacks. Whenever I’d run into students I couldn’t help but exclaim, *The flowers!* and the students would grin and respond, *Can you believe it?* “Joy” isn’t too big a word to describe what those Friday flowers brought to those who encountered them that day.

Back to Ross Gay again on “inciting joy”: What does joy incite?—I should say, I have a hunch, and it’s why I think this discussion of joy is so important. My hunch is that joy is an ember for our precursor to wild and unpredictable and transgressive unbounded solidarity. And that that solidarity might incite further joy. Which might incite further solidarity. And on and on. My hunch is that joy, emerging from our common sorrow—which does not necessarily mean we have the same sorrows, but that we, in common, sorrow—might draw us together. It might depolarize us and de-atomize us enough that we can consider what, in common we love.

Before I turn it over to conversation at your tables, I want to be clear that I’m not suggesting that everyone should be sharing all of their sadness and trauma with others. In the first class I taught after my diagnosis, I had a speech

prepared about how I was sick but was looking forward to the course and that we'd all carry on as best we could. But on that first day, unsteady on my feet, I couldn't talk about my illness at all. That semester the classroom became the one cancer-free space in my life, and what a gift that was. I have also heard from colleagues and friends of color that talking about race-based trauma in predominantly White spaces can at times feel exploitative and unsafe. So it's tricky and messy, and we want to respect where each person is at when we're invited to share our sadness.

And finally, a blessing from Kate Bowler:

Blessed are you who don't have  
all the right answers.  
You who realize that "I don't know"  
is the best response and posture for now.  
You who lean in, unafraid to learn  
and change and be wrong along the way.

Blessed are you,  
stretched and pressed and pulled  
by the uncertainty,  
deciding to not stay the same  
because we are not who we were.

We have been pulled into the unknown  
without our permission.  
But the challenge is the same:  
reveal truth in love in the midst of seeming chaos.

Blessed are you who realize that  
community can help see truth more fully  
even if your chin has to be turned gently toward it.

Being fragile amid a world of hammers  
takes courage  
to be wrong,  
to learn something new,  
to choose humility and kindness  
over being right.

May we be a people who don't have it all together  
(and who are done posturing).  
Curious, hopeful, courageous.

Amen.

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# Intersections

Augustana College  
639 38th Street  
Rock Island, IL 61201-2296

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