Caught up in God

Early on, I got caught up in the logic of the Spirit—and in the steady beat of black life.

by Willie James Jennings in the June 3, 2020 issue

(Illustration by Tim Cook)

During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it's tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one's mind or heart can be difficult work. With this in mind, we have resumed a Century *series published at intervals since 1939, in which we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, "How my mind has changed." This essay is the first in the new series.*

In the fall of 1990, I stepped into the classroom at Duke University Divinity School and began teaching a course on race, white Christianity, and the black church. Before I had fully formed my ideas for a dissertation, before I would pass from anxious doctoral student to anxious assistant professor with PhD in hand, I stepped into a course that would be endlessly painful, not by intention or design but by necessity. It was painful because many of the students were resistant participants

who’d waited until their last year or final semester to take this required course. It was also painful for me because the course sat at the spear’s point of my thinking and struggles with both race and faith.

The course was set up to be a history of the black church that examined the pre-slavery, slavery, and post-slavery past and present of black Christianity. But given my own turmoil with race and faith, I needed this course to do more than history and do more than turn black Christians into cultural objects to be studied, understood, tolerated, or even celebrated. I needed the course to be a path through my turmoil. I needed the course to make sense of the racial world that I was first introduced to as a child in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

I grew up in a deeply Christian city, where almost everyone I knew—black, white, or Latinx—went to a church. This was the kind of Christianity that was intellectually engaged, for the most part. Doctrine mattered, the Bible was endlessly read and debated, and worship services were relentlessly evaluated for their spiritual power and biblical faithfulness. That city was also deeply racist and racially segregated down to the bone. This was not illegal segregation but the quiet kind that’s impervious to legality or legislation.

Every good teacher knows that you must make a required course your own course, which means that you must transgress its previous boundaries. This course on the black church had its boundaries formed around bodies and ideas.

The white students who resisted the course did so because they resented having to learn something about African American religious life. The course brushed up against their whiteness like sandpaper brushing up against tender skin. The black and Latinx students who resisted the course did so because they believed there was nothing I or anyone could teach them about the subject matter. They’d mastered their racial being long before they sat in the chairs of my classroom.

So I went about my teaching task aiming to slice through fleshly and cognitive boundaries by challenging the intellectual segregation and emotional bifurcation that characterized all the work on race and faith I had known up to that point. I dropped my class back into my life in Grand Rapids and went to war against all those who kept their faith, their theology, their sense of self, and their psychological comfort safely sealed inside their racial identity. I also went to war against the racial war itself, pressing students (and myself) into the implications of claiming the blood

and body of the Jewish Jesus as our shared home.

I didn’t know what I was doing, and I got punished for every mistake. But it was a familiar punishment. I had felt it from the moment my life journey turned into the academy and I began questioning whiteness in the presence of blackness and questioning blackness in the presence of whiteness. This dual questioning was the transgression that my students resisted.

Teaching a course on race and faith took a toll on me. It also changed me.

And boy did they resist. Over the years of teaching that course, I experienced stunning performances of refusal—students refusing in powerful, subtle, and ingenious ways to think with me about their racial being and its merger with their being Christian, about their deep segregationist habits of mind, and about their denial of the pain of the racial wound. Not all students resisted. Some did go with me as deeply as I asked them to go. But that was never the majority in any class.

I did not recognize it at the time, but teaching that course was taking a toll on me. Those who teach courses on race and faith may understand this toll. It reaches beyond mental exhaustion and into a melancholy over the state of Christian existence in the Western world in its inability to comprehend its own racial captivity. Teaching the race and faith course was also changing me.

It changed the way I understood theology. Throughout my theological training I had kept my turmoil about race and faith sealed off from my learning of theology, because none of my teachers—helpful though they were in guiding me through the intricacies of doctrine and continental philosophy—could begin to grasp my vexed condition.

I was trying to make sense of the way racial reasoning and theological reflection existed inside of each other, mutually constituting each other in the modern world. The emerging work in the 1980s of black liberation theologians and black feminist theologians (soon to be called womanist theologians) was very helpful in locating some crucial aspects of the problem, corroborating what I had been learning through intensive reading in black studies. Yet the problem I sensed was wider, deeper, and more intricate than the maps they offered me to traverse that problem.

Now that I was in the midst of the intensity of teaching race and faith, I found that theology was something that had to be imagined freshly, something I’d not yet

achieved. It was as though I was constantly thrown back into the fundamental collision that formed Christian thought and life itself: the collision between exegesis and idolatry.

On one side, I was inside the living legacy of that Jewish man from Nazareth, the exegete of God who has brought us through the Spirit into the joyful work of his ongoing exegesis. On the other side was the living legacy of European Man who performed god and brought us into the torturous work of undoing that ongoing performance.

The idolatry of European Man was not just a reiteration of our human propensity to idolatry, it was also a specific historical reality moving heavily through the Western academy. Theology as my teachers had taught it to me was crumbling semester after semester in the southern heat of my classroom struggle as I pushed forward inside these legacies.

I wish someone at the start of my journey into theological studies would have prepared me for the struggle that I found in my classroom. But that would have been impossible, because you have to feel the collision of these legacies and the struggle it creates long before you are able to articulate it. And no one could articulate that collision for me.

I was trying to exegete something else that was inside of the exegesis of doctrine. I was trying to present the possibilities of unfolding our lives, marred as they are in racial logics, inside the unfolding of God’s life. I was trying to stretch exegesis like a firefighter stretching a hose to its absolute limit to put water on destructive flame. But my metaphor betrays me, because I was actually trying to start a fire, trying to burn away the ropes and chains that cover all of us, keeping us from thinking the one unfolding of life inside the other unfolding of life. I did not fully realize it at the time, but I was trying to articulate being caught up in God.

Everything about my life begins with the fact that I got caught up—caught up first in the Baptist and Pentecostal churches of my zealous youth where I learned the logic of the Spirit on the body through which God claims what is God’s own. I learned to yield to the Spirit in dance and song and music for the sake of life. This logic has never left me.

I also got caught up in the steady beat of black life. Black folks taught me to feel that beat and through it and in it to form a sound of hope inside inescapable racial

absurdity. Making the sound of hope remains my deepest instinct, and it drew me into a third catching up. I got caught up in the love of theology, this lifelong endeavor to think the life of God in and with the life of the creation and to think the life of the creation in and with the life of God.

I was trying to turn all my students into transgressive mystics. I began imagining theology as a transgressive mysticism that would break open racial identities and break through racial reasoning. As I lived in the struggle of this pedagogical quest, I was losing patience with the scholastic disposition exhibited in the teaching and writing and debating of theology, with its obsession with an analytical style that produced a very sterile vision of intellectual rigor.

I soon realized that theology's scholastic disposition served as the perfect cover for whiteness, allowing whiteness to form scholars in the image of the European Man. I also started to realize that the transgressive mystical theology I was grasping for would break open and break through gendered and sexual identities as well.

In the crucible of my teaching, I started to see theology as the unfolding of God's life with us, which was also the unfolding of our life in God. It is that unfolding that broke open racial, gendered, and sexual identities for me as a shared breaking open in the mystery that is the creature inside the mystery that is God. Yet even as I was coming to see this unfolding and the freedom of the creature to live in it, I was yet working out the dilemmas of life given to me from Grand Rapids.

I was the last child of 11 and the final son of five boys born to Mary and Ivory Jennings Sr. I was the smallest of the men and the one most suspect in my ways of being male in the world. My mother had a twin sister who also gave birth to several boys. Her final son was also held suspect and soon revealed himself to be gay. Together with my cousin, we were considered the soft sons, formed of a different substance than the other boys.

My mother and father felt the weight of the comparison that soon became too much for them to bear alone, so they shared that weight with me, placing it on my back day and night. Their anxieties merged with the anxieties of black male life in racist America refined in racist Grand Rapids, and soon I was navigating the vicissitudes of black masculinity and negotiating the economies of its performance under torturous conditions.

I was warned to stay away from my gay cousin (and away from the gay organist at our church, the gay deacon who sang in the choir, and the lesbian who directed the choir). I was encouraged not to spend so much time with my four sisters who I adored and whose company I preferred. My shy, quirky, and effeminate ways could be mitigated through hard work, sports, judo, and jobs that would draw out the man in me, the one necessary to survive in a racist world.

If all else failed, my parents surmised, then they would simply pray and hope for the best, which was in fact one of the best things my parents did for me. But my tender years exposed the wonder of the tentativeness of being—racial, gendered, sexual—inside the horror of the fevered need to turn a liquid into a solid and thereby create what should clearly be seen, a black man, even if that seeing would surely bring troubles.

I entered the academy, therefore, already deeply suspicious of anyone who wanted to form me into anything—while desperately wanting to be formed into a scholar and a minister. This I learned to recognize as the irony that flows thickly through not only theological education but also higher education. I felt this irony as I taught a course on race and faith that sought to resist a power of formation while invoking another power of formation. I found myself in my classroom in the contradictory position of trying to cultivate both suspicion and trust at the same time, and floundering for language as a teacher to signal a way forward. I was becoming aware of how deeply I was inside the problems of whiteness, with its relentless ways of contorting the world into its image.

These were the problems that bound me to Grand Rapids and its Christian world, within which my black Christian world formed and was forming. Like picking sharp bones out of delicate fish meat, I lived always trying to separate white Christianity, its sensibilities and blood stains, from my faith and my dreams. But trying not to dream white dreams is very difficult, especially when they invade your faith like subtle nightmares that are revealed as such only as you enter morning consciousness.

During the 1980s my black Christianity had been invaded: first by the charismatic movement, with its endlessly monotonous praise music, and then by the prosperity gospel, with its endlessly mercantile theology—as well as by the blinding visions of patriarchy, masculinity, and capitalism that both movements commended. Trying to separate a peaceable faith from a faith tormented by this stuff was a new form of

forced labor—like picking fresh cotton. I entered my classroom with a decent enough success rate at separation, but not strong enough to mark a clear path between suspicion for my students and trust of them. I felt their frustration.

I wanted to cultivate a suspicion disciplined by the desire for a shared freedom, that is, a suspicion of any identity or way of life that would imprison not just me but us together in the pull toward white death. But I also wanted to cultivate a productive trust, one that would build new lines of connection between those formed to be racial enemies. My students struggled where I struggled—the white students struggling with how to envision life beyond the desires of whiteness and the students of color struggling with how to envision white students who desired life beyond the desires of whiteness. But the academy is not the easiest place to envision a new way of life or to imagine how to become a new people.

I learned this the hard way as I moved into academic administration. There the contradiction between suspicion and trust became epic. In 1997, before I'd achieved the safety of tenure or had my scholarly identity fully established in writing, I became an academic dean. As a dean, I saw on a larger scale students and faculty struggling to name precisely what they were struggling against and struggling toward in our shared work.

It's hard not to dream white dreams when they invade your faith like subtle nightmares.

Being an academic dean forever changed the way I saw the academy and my own life in it. I no longer saw institutions as impersonal machines dispensing bureaucratic operation like a car assembly line. As an administrator I was in the midst of a vibrantly sensitive ecology, sitting at the nexus of the feeling, thinking, hoping, and hurting of a lot of people, all of whom (including me) rarely understood that they were in this shared web of thought and feeling. I began to see myself as someone tasked with trying to align the feeling and the thinking, and the hoping and the hurting, of my colleagues so as to make possible a new way of being in the academy and maybe the world.

And a new way of being was greatly needed. I saw that in my own life as I journeyed through theological education and the punishing effects whiteness and the pressures to conform to European Man had on me as a professor, scholar, and administrator. By the time I was deep into administrative work, I was coming to a surprising

realization: I truly loved these people. I loved my students, from those first ones in my very first class to the ones I was teaching now, and I loved my faculty and administrative colleagues, and I loved the academy and the promise it held out for change in people and in the world. That love had always been there, but I could not sense it well because of the strange mixture of fighting and shadowboxing that comprised my efforts to survive in an academic world forested by racial microaggressions, a place where I never felt safe.

I ended my tenure as an academic dean in a place familiar to many academic deans: burnout. Too many years throwing myself into the daily operations of a school until I could feel in my body those operations as distinctly as my own breathing, too many years of pouring all my hopes and dreams into the collective hoping and dreaming of an institution, and too many years pushing against a formation process energized by whiteness. The deanship took more from me than it should, leaving me with the difficult work of reassembling my life. It also brought me to the realization that theological education needs fundamental reframing.

I have been trying to articulate that reframing in recent years. Some of those efforts can be found in my book *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, which Eerdmans will publish in October. I want to reframe theological education and theology itself inside a question that has always haunted me. It is a question that connects all the places of my theological odyssey, from Grand Rapids to Pasadena, California, to Durham, North Carolina, and now to New Haven, Connecticut.

The question concerns the dirt, the land, and the realities of spatial segregation. What is the relationship between the ongoing formation of our lives inside the privatization of place and the multiple inequalities this privatization engenders through the nurture of racial reasoning, class distinctions, and violence, especially against women?

I felt this question long before I could articulate it. As I grew up in Grand Rapids, the boundaries of my life were mapped by the racial geography of my city. My predetermined movements not only marked racial existence; they created it.

Riding my bike through city streets, I knew that once I crossed a particular street into a white neighborhood I would be followed by police cars. I knew that certain areas of town were forbidden to me if I wanted to stay safe beyond the reach of handcuffs or racial slurs. I knew also that around almost every corner I would find a

church or some place of worship, seemingly the glue that held the racial geographical order in place. I was surrounded by an infrastructure that did the very work of regenerating race.

Back in my neighborhood I found safe space in alleys and backyards connected by fences and gardens where my displaced southern folks shared the secrets of growing crops and lives. There I learned from my parents and my people the power of the dirt—and how that power was being violated by racial segregation concealed and streamlined through real estate.

These days I am trying to understand how to be Christian in the dirt. Which means I am trying to think theologically from dirt and trees, sky and water, ocean and animals—not as background to life but as the reality of connection that prepares us for the living of life together. I believe theology and theological education must be reframed inside a more expansive and invasive ecological awareness, one that magnifies the sinews of our connectivity—to plants, animals, the built environment, and each other—to the level of pedagogy, that is, to the level of guiding our teaching and learning. I have been helped by a number of indigenous thinkers over the years who have marked this path forward.

This fall, I will offer a course on race and theology, my first one at Yale Divinity School since my arrival in 2015. I have waited a few years before entering again into this painful work, because to do it right requires that I accept the anguish it provokes in me and my students. This anguish is not without hope. But it is costly hope, formed through working hard at thinking and feeling our way through the racial condition of the West. I continue to be amazed at the resistance of people—especially Christians, and especially some scholars, Christian or not—to this hard work. Such avoidance is understandable but not acceptable given the constant machinations of a white supremacy that now enjoys the sunlight of its unmasking.

Only by remembering the dirt can we challenge this avoidance, with its constellation of mental and emotional stratagems of refusal. This remembering brings us to the work of seeing connections between the places we've lived and what those places teach us about race and faith—and between how we need to live on the ground in place now and who we want to be in this world.

I carry Grand Rapids with me every day. I carry the love and the anger, the longing and the frustration for a fellowship that has not yet come but I know must come if

we will be made whole, if we will give witness to the triune God who unfolds life in a shared freedom. I also carry an abiding gratefulness for those Grand Rapids folks who offered me transgressing love, ignoring the boundaries that dictated we dream segregated dreams, and who refused limited love, choosing instead to see that we are joined to the dirt and to the water and by the Holy Spirit.

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