How Princeton Seminary's slavery audit created moments of unlikely intimacy

We need structural change. We also need to be willing to be personally undone.

by Keri L. Day in the June 16, 2021 issue

(Illustration by Daniel Richardson)

When I hear students and faculty of color in theological institutions remark that they do not trust White folks because of the structural trauma they have experienced, I lament. Not because I think they are villainous for feeling this way. Professional theological education in the United States was established in service to a White religious structure and order, and racial pain produces suspicion and distrust. I lament because the violence that produces racial distrust prevents the joining together of lives that the gospel envisions.

I also lament when I see White students and faculty develop indifferent or antagonistic responses to stories of racial pain because they fear the guilt and responsibility associated with acknowledging racism and their own privilege. This scene produces an emotional economy of fear in which new moments of radical

intimacy and belonging are impossible.

Still, I have hope. Not in the form of liberal optimism, but as a continual prayer for unlikely people to begin truly desiring each other.

I saw glimpses of this desire emerge during Princeton Theological Seminary's historical slavery audit, in which I participated as a task force member. The audit, which began in 2016 and was completed in 2018, reported on how the seminary benefited from the slave economy, and it initiated conversations about an agenda of reparations to implement. The aim was to empower the community to shape what these reparations should look like, particularly by listening to students and alumni of the African diaspora.

As the audit conversations unfolded, there were several surprising moments of intimacy. It was powerful to hear students (and even a few faculty members) talk about being vulnerable to each other. It was moving to hear Black students speak at length about how they felt when hearing their White colleagues engage with their complicity in ongoing structural racism.

I was especially moved when students called for seven days of public prayer on the steps of the administration building. I watched as this prayer group grew from fewer than ten people to well over 30 on some days. More and more, I saw White students join Black students to pray and talk about reparations as a Christian act of worship. One White student remarked to me that he was unsure about this call to reparations but was able to confess his own racial biases and White privilege as he witnessed the commitment to prayer that the Black seminarians facilitated.

I will never forget what I witnessed at a town hall meeting that offered students the opportunity to address the task force and trustees about the slavery audit report and the demand for reparations. The tension in the room was palpable. I could sense the anger and frustration of Black students, who were unsure whether the institutional agenda for reparations was merely a form of political expediency.

Our task force at Princeton aimed to empower the community to shape what reparations would look like.

Some members of the board of trustees attended this meeting as an act of good faith. They wanted to assure the students that they were being as transparent and accountable as possible. Some students and faculty believed that this meeting was

nothing more than managing growing concerns over the “next steps” of this audit. As soon as the meeting began, multiple students pressed the administration and board members on what institutional actions would be taken in light of Princeton’s history with slavery.

It was awkward at first. Students were demanding immediate, concrete actions—a comprehensive agenda that the board could talk about right then to assuage the students’ concerns. Board members spoke carefully, mindful of what they could and could not say in light of any legal implications. Some of their responses were slow and meticulous. Students interpreted this as cagey and insincere.

Then one board member stood up and cleared the air. She named the elephant in the room. She conceded that the board members’ responsibility is often the well-being and maintenance of the institution. Sometimes, certain institutional responsibilities and realities conflict with goals of justice and equity. Because board members must be vigilant about the legal ramifications of institutional decisions, transparency and vulnerability can be difficult. She stood up and named this. It struck me as a risky action, being vocally honest about this reality that often causes unending suspicion between administrations (often mostly White) and students of color.

But something else was at stake in her action. I could tell that her desire to respond to student cries for transparency arrested her at a deep emotional level. You could see it in her face. She was wrestling. You could see that this was an unanticipated moment for her—to offer a bit more transparency about the board’s process. You could see her being compelled by her desire to be vulnerable and open with students while maintaining her responsibility as a board member to be measured.

This wrestling was evident in the long, pregnant pauses between her words, a verbal tug-of-war between saying more than what she may have planned and pulling back after sharing certain bits of information. She was walking a tightrope. Her sighs between sentences and breaks from her own train of thought to check in with students caused this town meeting to become something more than a scripted dialogue. As the meeting concluded, faculty and students asked whether the community could talk a bit longer. A number of people left. She stayed.

Another moment of intimacy between this board member and a group of students followed. After the event, as I watched her talking with students about their

anxieties and concerns, what caught my attention was how they reacted to her. Their body language—standing in close proximity to her, walking with her around the room while she engaged other students—communicated that they felt a sense of safety and belonging with her. They felt desired by her.

So many institutional leaders center their desires on the institution itself: maintaining its social status or increasing its financial wealth. This reality leaves students feeling excluded from the leaders' desires and practices of care. When every conversation feels as if the institution is privileging its bureaucratic affairs in ways that do not make clear students' value and significance, a community of desire and belonging is lost. When students feel they are numbers in the utilitarian calculus of an institution's bottom line, caring and just community escape us.

I saw some students exchanging emails with this board member. This was something different from what I had witnessed before. A new moment was being made possible; burgeoning feelings of belonging were being forged—something we desperately need in order to be a different kind of community.

This exchange does not speak in any way to the larger structural dimensions of power and authority among boards, or to the ways in which the institutional decision making of such bodies so often fails to serve people of color. One town hall scene of yearning and desire between a board member and students does not solve the dilemma of broken institutions and inequitable systems inside theological education.

But this moment exemplifies how countercultural desires can be born through the breaking open of our hearts, minds, and bodies as we wrestle inside surprising moments of intimacy, vulnerability, and transparency. These moments are unexpected, outside of our control, and even unimagined. Yet we find ourselves in them, experiencing new modes of relating to people we neither desire nor feel like we belong to.

These are profound, significant moments that hold the power to reshape who we are together. These moments of radical intimacy need not be pitted against the requirement of material and structural change. We need both.

Addressing racial pain is costly, uncomfortable work, but it can lead to moments of radical intimacy.

I witnessed another moment of desire at the same town hall meeting. One student, a young White woman, walked to the microphone to address the board members and administration. She stated that she was willing for some of her academic funding—which is quite generous for Presbyterian students like her—to be redistributed to Black students, who disproportionately carry loads of debt after graduation. She asserted that her White privilege meant acknowledging the systemic ways in which she has benefited economically from Princeton's history of wealth creation, which has been on the backs of the enslaved.

It wasn't so much what she said but how she said it that caught my attention. She said it as if this were a new moment for her, an awakening and realization of the racist nature of things. She was wrestling. She spoke with a slow cadence of conviction and with heartbreak in her eyes of the toll Whiteness takes on everyone, including herself. I couldn't help but wonder if her statement felt like a rebirth for her, as a White student and as a future White ally.

The room was absolutely still, bone quiet. You could not even hear the breathing of the hundred people in attendance. I watched the facial expressions and body language of some White students, faculty, and administrators. Some of them were wrestling with such a sweeping pronouncement.

Those in the room, for the most part, supported some sort of reparations agenda. They were clear that previous and present African Americans experienced disenfranchisement at Princeton. Yet I could also see the power of this student's statement, of being in solidarity with Black students in this way. Solidarity has costs.

Some White students were unclear if they could take this kind of risk; after all, seminary debt is a common experience for White students, too. Her statement produced anxiety and admiration, affirmation and fear, all at once. Is one not a White ally if one cannot live out this statement?

I was also hoping that her assertion would not be seen as merely performative, with White allies making grand pronouncements that everyone knows could never be approved by the board or administration. I think her offer was genuine. I hoped it would be seen as an invitation into a new kind of conversation about the courage, risk-taking, and vulnerability necessary to inaugurate real intimacy and belonging in theological institutions in light of gross histories of racial pain and trauma.

I also believe that her statement reminded White students and faculty that their role in addressing racial pain is costly, uncomfortable work. It is uncomfortable to talk about the financial, social, and institutional privileges that White people have in these spaces. It's even more shocking to rethink the sharing of these institutional resources and privileges with previously subjugated people, which means that one will have less institutional privilege to move in unilateral ways that ignore or dismiss the needs of racialized others.

Building communities of intimacy and belonging happens through the work of the Spirit. But that town hall meeting reminded me that we participate in this work too, through our courage, transparency, and willingness to risk our own comfort. We enable the creation of new communities by counting the costs and following Jesus, as he reminded his disciples throughout the Gospels.

Some Black students showed that they experienced this White student's words as an invitation to create belonging. When she finished speaking, some of the Black students immediately engaged her. Others needed time to process what was being said. Some were pulled into silent reflection after she spoke.

After the event, a few Black students told me how shocked they were to hear the young White student say this. One student admitted that it was hard for him to trust White students and that this moment had created a real opening in his heart. He sought the woman out after the town hall, introduced himself, and talked to her. What if a new, unlikely relationship was born?

What captivated me was the desire he felt for her. His suspicions of White students are certainly justified, given racist histories at Princeton and in the United States. Yet this moment invited him into a new kind of desire to engage this White student.

Similarly, I could tell that the White student also felt the initiation of desire to be with and for Black students on their terms. She was willing to enter into the worlds of Black individuals who experience daily racist assault. Her call to action showed that she understood the ethic of risk that should be part of any White community's desire to be allies. The Black student I spoke to was undone by this moment. It created intimacy between the two of them.

We need space to imagine a community of healing and belonging.

Such witnessing and risk-taking are necessary to forge a new kind of community marked by trust and reciprocity. I am not suggesting that the White woman saved the day. But her act of naming the privilege from which she benefits and the risk she felt called to take opened up a new space. Several other White and Black students later reported that they began unlikely relationships after the town hall meeting precisely because of these kinds of moments—moments where possibilities of intimacy and belonging emerged in ways that shocked and surprised.

Is it naive to imagine that being undone, or experiencing the explosion of deep desire for another who previously felt alien, is possible within theological education? Might theological education create more moments that gesture toward an economy of desire different from the one we have now, in which students tolerate, fear, or put up with each other for the sake of a degree?

For a number of theologians and Christian leaders, the impulse is to reject the notion of being undone by one another, imagining profound transformation instead as an occurrence that happens simply within the self. There are indeed many accounts of Christian mystics and others who are undone by God’s presence in an individual encounter. Although I find these accounts powerful, this is not the form of being undone that I believe theological education needs to cultivate.

For others, being undone has negative connotations. Being undone by someone might mean to be wounded and disoriented. I could name many instances in the academy where Black women such as me have felt wounded, completely robbed of affirmation and support. Being wounded is undesirable. It is the result of trauma and pain. Wounding is a deep reality through which theological institutions are experienced as sites of spiritual and moral injury. But this description is not what I mean by being undone, either.

For me, being undone is a vulnerable space in which to reside as you lose control of your ability to dictate and determine an affective encounter. It requires others: other bodies, other narratives, other stories, different lives. Practices of witnessing. Mutual vulnerability that resists control. Inside these fleshly encounters, something happens to you. In you, around you, through you.

Being undone requires a space where people encounter each other face to face, where the substance of our different and sometimes conflicting lives collide, where one not only thinks about others but feels others on their own terms, where stories

are told that shock and surprise us and pull us out of our presuppositions, where vulnerability emerges from practices of witness.

Being undone is risky. It invites new modes of being that refuse to let enmity have the last say. Black feminist June Jordan reminds us that when we participate in witnessing, we are saying “nobody mean more to me than you” in this moment. We become vulnerable with and for another, and this “kind of vulnerability helps us constitute ourselves as agents in the world.”

We typically run from vulnerability, and I understand why. In our society, vulnerability is exploited. It is weaponized. Being undone in a society that is marked by an instrumentalizing ethos is scary. For certain, any call for vulnerability must simultaneously acknowledge and dismantle exploitative power.

But as much as we need structural transformation, we also need new social spaces where we can imagine creative communities characterized by healing and belonging. I am invested in schools of theological education becoming sites where such spaces—sites of witnessing—emerge and flourish.

Witnessing takes many forms. Often people of color want to witness to the violence to which they are subjected by social structures and practices within theological schools, churches, and society. It is important to be able to name forms of violence that others cannot see or refuse to acknowledge. But people also want to be able to witness to their longing for hope, to envision something new and different, to name forms of joy and world-making possibilities.

What would it mean to embrace the possibility of our potential undoing and not retreat from it? I don’t have any final answers, but I am a witness to the power of radical intimacy and belonging among unlikely people, which can reshape the relational ecology of theological education. We need to experience the transformation of our desires to be with and for others. Without this desire, this yearning for something different than what we have, we are lost.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Being undone.” This article is adapted from Keri Day's new book, Notes of a Native Daughter: Testifying in Theological Education*, published this month by Eerdmans.*