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Introduction

With a grant from the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE), Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary sought autobiographical reflections from scholars of color about their experiences of being mentored in graduate school.

The contributors are all either PhD candidates in the dissertation stage or recent graduates. They represent seven theological schools. In the interest of confidentiality, the narratives do not contain author attributions, and all internal references to persons and schools have been disguised. The short analytic narratives gathered in the book are full of keen insights and valuable discoveries about the highs and lows of mentoring relationships in doctoral theological education. These essays will be a rich guide to faculty seeking to enhance their mentoring of students of color.

The book has been divided into three sections:

» 1. Who Should Mentor?
» 2. Mentoring and Power
» 3. Create Conditions for Mentees to Thrive

While many of the reflections could appear in more than one section, and some in all three categories, we hope that focusing our attention on the core themes will put a spotlight on the good, the bad, and the ugly of mentoring.

For example, Who Should Mentor? showcases the importance of understanding who should and should not mentor. Good mentors are celebrated in this section.

The narratives also offer a cautionary tale of mentoring relationships that did more harm than good. We thought it was critical to offer a section on Mentoring and Power. Power is always present in the mentoring relationship. Both mentor and mentee should be aware of how it is used to advance or hinder the mentee’s vocational trajectory.

Create Conditions for Mentees to Thrive underscores the importance of emphasizing the mentee in the relationships, and how mentors can create opportunities and spaces for their students to grow and flourish.

The book concludes with two insightful responses to the narratives written by the Rev. Dr. Cristian De La Rosa of the Boston University School of Theology and by Dr. Brian Bantum of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. Both authors are faculty exemplars in mentoring. Their responses highlight the importance of accompaniment in mentoring.

Perhaps more importantly, Bantum and De La Rosa frame the starting place for mentoring with students and scholars of color. Quoting Benito Juarez, a Zapotec president of Mexico, “Among individuals, as among nations, respect for the rights of others is peace,” De La Rosa suggests his words “frames our struggles for dignity and justice within social, political, and religious institutions today as we face complex dynamics of globalization rooted in values and structures of power inherited from colonizing processes.”

This framing of the mentoring conversation is unlike any other in the academy, where the conversation typically starts from the relationship between mentor and mentee as if it is ahistorical. Popular reads like The Professor is In: The Essential Guide to Turning your PhD into a Job (2015), by Karen Kelskey, and Getting Mentored in Graduate School (2002), by W. Brad Johnson and Jennifer M. Huwe, barely hint at the challenge many students and scholars of color face.

By focusing on narratives, this publication highlights the unique challenges faced by doctoral students and faculty of color. These challenges are engrained into the colonial, racist, and violent systems both within the academy and in structures that pre-date its existence in North America.
percent. Gaining access to quality faculty mentors is a challenge for most students.

If theological educators want to advocate for and usher in a new, more diverse, and representative class of faculty, the stories and essays collected here represent the voices that need to be listened to. They are the future voices of the theological academy.

Finally, this work reflects FTE’s broader approach to mentoring. As Bantum clearly articulates in his essay, “Mentoring is about drawing a student into a communal space.”

What Dr. Charles Cosgrove has gathered here is a narrative approach to mentoring. Students who are connected and whose stories are valued thrive in the academy. Likewise, mentors who connect and listen to students create the meaningful mentoring relationships that will last a lifetime. We hope that these narratives provide the cornerstone for how we might all reimagine doctoral theological education with students of color in mind.

Mentoring the FTE Way

The Forum for Theological Exploration’s family reunion is something not to be missed. It brings together generations of scholars who were mentored into and through our family networks. It takes place at conferences, on campuses, on Sundays, over coffee, and online. The FTE family reunion has a long history, one steeped in the sacred relationship known as mentoring. For more than 50 years, FTE has been supporting scholars of color. The historic fellowship program, launched by then-director the Rev. Dr. Charles Shelby Rooks and board member Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, has financially supported scholars of color consistently since 1968. However, the funds provided to FTE Fellows, while necessary given the challenge of doctoral theological and religious education, is, by itself, insufficient to entirely support the mind, body, and soul of those in the network.

Mentorship is a staple of the academy. At FTE, mentorship has a different flavor. The hues that color FTE’s mentoring practice bring light to the darkest hallways in the academy. We help create space for shared moments and for the fragrance of shared meals, where the whispers of the pains and joys of this journey are shared as only a family can.

When we gather, the loudest silence can be heard across the vast divide of conference center rooms, as mentors exchange a head nod, eyebrow raise, or the occasional eye roll as ideas are shaped. Then there is that moment when a newly minted PhD feels the weight of the doctoral hood being placed on their shoulders by the mentor. The weight is much more than a journey complete. It is a recognition of shared struggle, the hopes and dreams of a community, and the passing on of the responsibility “to go and do likewise.”

The mentoring relationship that FTE is committed to is not just the cultivation of the emerging scholar. FTE sees mentoring as an important part of caring for and building the capacity of the village. Where traditional academic mentoring takes...
place between a mentee and a single mentor—one who is usually much older and further along in their vocational journey—FTE has emphasized that the mentoring is the responsibility of the community.

FTE believes that it takes a village. This community of mentors has shared values. These values guide FTE in our work supporting, retaining, and building the capacity of the next generation of academic leaders. It shapes our invitations to mentor, it defines who to celebrate with our annual mentoring award, and it focuses what practices to highlight. It helps FTE hold the community accountable to the purpose of mentoring: thriving mentees.

An FTE mentor values:

» Practicing mentoring and reflecting on their practice;
» Seeking better questions than answers;
» Time with mentees;
» Sharing their networks generously and informatively;
» Connecting mentees with other mentors;
» Respecting and maintaining boundaries; and,
» Placing student’s needs and aspirations first.

As you will see in these essays, good mentorship requires incredible self-awareness from mentors—a self-awareness that it takes the entire community to see a mentee into their flourishing.

The invitation to mentor from FTE is more akin to being invited to accompany someone at a family reunion for the first time. As you walk our new family member through the reunion, you have the honor and privilege to introduce the mentee to the family. You can help them navigate who makes the best food, when to eat (because you know your cousins are hungry), and how to help out. They can introduce you to the family members you need to know, and help you stay away from the troublemakers. These mentors throw horseshoes with you and make sure you get what you need. They tell you where they will be and to “come by the house sometime.” After they make sure you have a plate of food, and you know where everything is, they let you spend time with other elders, new friends, and find your own way at the fiesta.

Mentees who are mentored towards community are connected with a family who feed, nurture, guide, cry, and celebrate together. They know who and when to call on for mentorship. They show up for their appointments. A good mentee is not only taken care of by the family, but they look out for those who are coming behind. They mentor a new crop of family members, showing them how to navigate this world. And, as we have seen in just the last few years, great mentees show up for and care for our elders, our mentors. Mentees respect and honor their work and legacies. Mentees call mentors up to see how they are doing, to check-in. Not to seek advice or counsel, though those things are important. But as any good mentee knows, that relationship with the mentor needs to be cultivated, nurtured, and honored. As you will read from the essays in this publication, a good mentoring relationship is not something to take for granted. It is a blessing. It is something to be celebrated.

So welcome to an FTE family reunion of sorts. The essays compiled by our partners here celebrate the diverse narratives of scholars of color and their experiences with mentors. The hope is that from these narratives you glean insight into the conversations at the family cookout, learn how to participate in a way that brings life to the party, and at the end of the day, care for the family as so many generations have before. Welcome.

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The essays compiled by our partners here celebrate the diverse narratives of scholars of color and their experiences with mentors.
Who Should Mentor?

Great mentors are hard to find. Good mentoring practices are not.

In this section, a number of essays reflect on the question, “Who should mentor?” Though much of this book reflects that question, these first six essays look at the qualities of a mentor, and perhaps more importantly, the qualities of bad mentors.

These essays do not provide a step-by-step approach to determining if you are a good mentor, though No. 6 is direct about mentoring virtues. However, they do provide some good insights into the characteristics of a mentor. As expressed in these essays and in all of FTE’s mentoring work, the following characteristics reflect good mentors.

A Good Mentor has Time

A number of the essays reflect on the presence (or lack of presence) of their mentors. Good mentors make the time for students. They make time not just to provide professional feedback, but for intentional relationship building. This is best exemplified in essay No. 2: “They fed me, made me laugh, gave me shelter, and reminded me that the world of academe and the struggle for justice means nothing if it isn’t connected to a community of support and love. I’m grateful.” A good mentor is present. This seems like common sense, but lack of time and presence epitomizes bad mentoring. This bad mentoring exacerbates the toll to the mentee’s psychological well-being during a doctoral program.

A Good Mentor Listens

There are so many times when mentors interject their experience and salient wisdom. These essays make clear that a mentor’s wisdom does not always keep up with the changing landscape of higher education, nor the student’s reality. As No. 4 makes clear, “Admittedly, mentors cannot provide ‘a right answer’ to every possible
mentee encounter, but they can provide something akin to case studies, mock situations, or occasions for forethought before graduate students actually encounter these situations in the workplace.” Mentors who take time to slow down and listen, who prioritize the art of listening, and who ask deep questions are the mentors whose students thrive.

A Good Mentor Understands the Virtues of Mentoring

Essay No. 6 outlines the necessary virtues of a good mentor: responsivity, challenge, strategy, care, and humility. These virtues chart to the Mentoring Map provided by the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity. The Mentoring Map provides a useful framework to remind students that a mentor should not be responsible for all the things that come up in their doctoral journey. It takes a community of mentors who can all help doctoral students thrive. Those who understand the virtues and the roles of being a good mentor often have a sustained commitment to their mentees.

The essays in this first section provide a useful overview of the “who” in the mentoring relationship. It is clearly important for mentors and mentees to create the time and space that fuel a productive and authentic mentor-mentee relationship.

On the flipside, if you have neither the time nor the space, you should not commit to such a relationship.

Make time. Listen well. Know your role. Good mentors take all this into account.

A Mentoring Pro Tip from FTE

FTE encourages mentors to spend time with mentees outside of the office. Share a meal, go for a walk, play cards, do an activity together, talk on the phone, or play Words with Friends. In short, do something that strengthens the relationship. Great mentoring relationships are those that recognize the humanity of both the mentor and mentee.

No. 1: Showing Up

I offer the following reflection as a meditation on what I believe to be some of the challenges faced by doctoral students of color (specifically, within the humanities fields).

I also present challenges unique to my own experience and the ways in which faculty have engaged them all.

One thing that is critically important to me as a doctoral student of color is the realization that my research and writing, together, are sacred mechanisms by which I work out my own “soul salvation.” In other words, being an academic in the humanities yields itself to scholars who are tangibly working out, through their scholarship, some of the existential realities they face in their own life journeys. In my opinion, this is especially the case for scholars and budding scholars of color. This point is relevant. It reminds us that the professional environments in which scholars and budding scholars must work not only implicate the quality of their scholarship, but also the ways in which they are able to embody their work—indeed, how they embody themselves. Many of us understand the work that we do as a matter of life and death. And for many of us, oftentimes, the lives that hang in the balance are—among others—our very own.

I entered PhD study in the immediate wake of a moment that still remains the single most devastating moment of my personal life. It was a time when I lost several important people in my life, and it fundamentally shifted my understanding of how I relate to the world. It was a moment that, for me, required nothing less than a complete refashioning of my own identity—personally, spiritually, and professionally.

One of my assumptions coming into PhD study was that faculty would serve as professional coaches and mentors. I assumed they would be able to both cultivate
my intellectual dexterity and guide me through the personal and professional balancing act that I would no doubt face throughout the duration of my career. And given the personal context from which I arrived into PhD study, this type of dual faculty function was something that I was eager to receive.

In my early experience, however, these expectations were oftentimes amiss. PhD study is interesting insofar as it is principally geared toward professionalizing—that is, producing professional scholars who eventually track into higher education teaching jobs. But sometimes, as was the case in my early years of PhD study, this professionalizing and the unsavory dynamics that come along with it create severe impasses between a mentor and mentee.

During the early years of my PhD study, the academic culture within which I was situated very much felt like it privileged “academic production” over all else. In other words, the role of the doctoral student was, above all, to produce and perform “good scholarship”—write excellent essays, produce well-placed journal articles, and demonstrate academic dexterity in the classroom. And within an increasingly corporatized and bureaucratized higher education landscape in the United States, I think that the issue of education-as-business intensifies pressures to “produce” intellectual capital. This production—albeit academic production—becomes the currency by which graduate students, programs, departments, and seminaries live or die.

I’ve had an equally turbulent time navigating faculty egos within this space of production demand.

PhD students are by no means exempt from the vicissitudes that constitute racialization in the U.S.

We spent the remaining 50 minutes or so, per my comfortability, talking about the headspace that I was in that led to my writing such a substandard essay.

My point for invoking this moment is this: Faculty caring for students, and not merely caring about the student’s academic output, can sometimes go quite a long way toward supporting a student’s success.

The realities of race-making and white supremacy in the United States are very real. They do not become any less real simply by virtue of persons of color enrolling in doctoral programs. PhD students are by no means exempt from the vicissitudes that constitute racialization in the U.S. Having faculty mentors who understand and take seriously how these realities implicate student presence and the ability to “show up” can truly make or break a doctoral program experience.

One of the most impactful moments of my graduate school career came during my first term of PhD study. Midterm essays had been turned in the previous week and I was sitting in a class that was getting ready to adjourn. The background noise of my personal situations at the time seemed to wreak havoc on my headspace and had profoundly impacted my academic work. I had not submitted the best writing for this particular class’s midterm. I was dreading and definitely not looking forward to receiving the graded paper that day. The professor did indeed hand our papers back, my own included. But when I turned to the final page, I saw no grade and only minimal comments. The professor asked if I could stay for a few moments after class; I knew that he was going to berate me for submitting sub-par work. To my surprise, I stayed in the classroom talking with this professor for 60 minutes. Even more surprising, only five or 10 minutes of our conversation were about my essay. He noted that he knew that it wasn’t my best work and that I should re-write the essay for resubmission.

I’ve had an equally turbulent time navigating faculty egos within this space of production demand.

These dynamics are relevant because they can severely impede the possibility of genuine faculty-student mentoring relationships. Furthermore, not only can these dynamics impede relationship-building, they in fact do complicate mentoring relationships with PhD students of color. And given the context of faculty mentorship of doctoral students of color being so important, such impasses in our relationships can be personally and professionally disillusioning and devastating.
“Malcolm X was my pastor.”

It was a bold statement for a seminary school application, but I figured, “What have I got to lose?” After all, I had already turned down a job with a $65,000 salary, the chance to live in a four-bedroom Victorian style home, and I wasn’t sure about getting a Master of Divinity degree—especially considering that those who preached about God and had a sizeable revenue-stream seemed to me plausible only for those who fashioned themselves as prosperity preachers.

Three months prior to my declarative Malcolm X statement, I had decided to move from Detroit to Atlanta to pursue my Master of Divinity degree. I quickly discovered that I desired to do further graduate work. After surveying the intellectual landscape of friends and scholars, however, I felt the school I was attending wasn’t adequately preparing me for the rigors of PhD work. I was not adept at theory from dead French and German scholars. I didn’t have a confident grasp of theological concepts because I was just starting to read the seminal texts assigned to me by some of my professors.

What I did have was curiosity, drive, and an insatiable desire to be challenged. So I decided to apply to a neighboring seminary with a track record of turning out some of the most well-prepared students who went on to complete their doctoral degrees.

When I sat down to write my personal statement for the application, the first line I wrote was “Malcolm X was my pastor.” When I told one of my professors that I had decided to transfer to another school, he expressed his understanding and disappointment. Then he asked me to show him my personal statement. This moment would define my intellectual journey for the next 12 years.

Three things occurred as a result of this request. First, my professor lauded me on my writing and insights. Second, I developed other relationships with professors. Third, my professor helped me suppress the desire to transfer, and he promised that he would mentor and guide me through the process if I stayed.

And so I stayed where I was.

For the next two years I developed important relationships with several mentors who desired to see me succeed on the next level. One of my mentors created a theory and methodology course that met two Saturdays a month. While the course was challenging and introduced me to dense texts, the most helpful elements were the feedback and my professor’s passion to challenge us. He taught us the importance of developing an argument, identifying the problem and, most importantly, instilled in us a sense of intellectual identity and confidence. He encouraged us to push each other. He would discuss with us the places where we fell short and he would laugh with us during breaks. As a result of this experience, word of my intellectual prowess and motivation spread among the faculty. Other professors started to hear about me.

I received an invitation to dinner from a professor at my school. Up to this point, we had never met, and I had not taken any of his classes. He simply informed me that he mentored a group of students and had them meet at his house every month for dinner and conversation. The only thing he asked was that we bring something to drink and assist with clean-up duty afterwards.

Upon arrival, seven other students and I began to engage in conversations. Topics included issues of justice, the latest texts we had read, our research interests, and banter about popular culture. By the end of the dinner, I formed several new relationships and had a renewed sense of energy and support for moving forward through my early graduate school career. With these monthly dinners, our professor provided a safe space for venting, intellectual engagement, and support. While this was definitely going above and beyond the call for a professor with several institutional responsibilities, his choice of providing mentoring has been invaluable. He is personally responsible for more than 25 students moving on to receive their degrees.

In my last year of graduate school, I had several conversations with a few of my favorite professors. I told them that I was interested in applying to graduate school
to receive my PhD, and they offered to help me in whatever ways they could. Over the course of the next nine months, they met with me, counseled me, gave me feedback on my writing, and wrote letters of recommendation for me. One professor invited me to sit in his class to serve as a graduate assistant. Another professor invited me to read his work and give a feedback talk after one of his lectures. Yet another professor invited me to an academic conference so that I could meet and break bread with other emerging and established scholars.

All of these professors provided short-term mentorship, but they gave me the tools I needed. Most importantly, they discussed with me the importance of centering my research in the lineage of Black intellectual life. They challenged me to be more inclusive of voices that are often excluded from the narratives in African American religious history. These conversations left a profound mark on my scholarship and on my current practice as a mentor to students.

The successes in my life as a student, scholar, and teacher are indelibly connected to the mentors who sacrificed their time and shared their expertise above and beyond their institutional responsibilities.

Malcolm X had people like his sister Ella, West Indian Archie, and Elijah Muhammad who mentored and guided him through the rough terrains of familial, street, and spiritual life. His legacy served as inspiration for the formative years of my life. When I was 14 years old and became curious about the life of the mind, Malcolm was there for me. He challenged me to think and to imagine creative possibilities.

In seminary I found mentors who were “Malcolm X” to me—men and women who made me reconsider transferring schools and then took me under their wing. They implored me to dissect sentences in books and helped me shape ideas into cogent arguments. They fed me, made me laugh, gave me shelter, and reminded me that the world of academe and the struggle for justice means nothing if it isn’t connected to a community of support and love. I’m grateful.

They challenged me to be more inclusive of voices that are often excluded.

As I sat in the room during my dissertation defense, several thoughts ran through my head.

Writing a dissertation and your subsequent defense of it is a unique experience. Listening to the critiques and questions of my three-person committee was both humbling and relieving. All of the years of coursework, examinations, the study of foreign languages, research, and writing came down to this moment.

At some institutions, the defense is perfunctory, and for many it’s a chance for students to reflect on one’s research and expertise. There were several memorable moments during my defense, but one moment stands out. A committee member gently chided me and said, “You must know that this is what scholars do.” Taken aback by the admonition I thought to myself, “So what do advisers do?”

One of my earlier experiences in graduate school had felt eerily similar. As a member of a fraternity, I had spent several months going through the initiation process. In many respects getting my PhD was like being hazed—an intellectual hazing.

The mentor-mentee relationship is complicated, but it doesn’t have to be. The intellectual journey is one that is rife with expectations by institutions that have particular cultures and rules, as well as expectations, both personal and academic. In order for students to be successful during the natural ebb and flow of the intellectual journey it is essential that two components are part of the picture: ethics and honesty.

No matter what stage of the journey the student is in, particularly for students of color, this is the first time they have had to negotiate the politics of academia. When I started my program it was very clear that much of my experience would be a lonely process. I sat in a room of 13 incoming PhD students. I was one of only two students of color in that group and was explicitly told by a Black faculty member that if the PhD process became too strenuous for any of us, then it would behoove us to “leave and allow someone else to become a scholar.”
While this may have served as a motivator for some students, for others, especially students of color, this was perplexing. We have a history of feeling unwelcome at predominately white institutions. So why say this to us, especially when it isn’t followed up with any expression of institutional or faculty support?

Three months later, the other student of color in my group dropped out of the program.

The declaration uttered by this faculty member continued to rear its ugly head during my time in graduate school. Things reached a boiling point during the defense of my dissertation, marking my entire graduate school experience as an unpleasant memory. It is true that I grew intellectually and personally, but this was in spite of the lack of healthy mentoring relationships and not because of them. I’ll briefly reflect three anecdotes from my experience that may help shed some light on the limitations and possibilities of mentoring.

I had the benefit of having several conversations with friends who were in the process of obtaining their degrees. They made sure to reinforce again and again that it is essential to select an adviser who you can work with—one who appreciates your work and can be challenging, yet supportive, of you writing a dissertation. I did my due diligence and selected an adviser who was Black and had expertise in my research area.

I noticed several problems early on. There was no clear direction on how often we should meet. There was no conversation about how I should structure my writing. There was no recommendation of well-written dissertations to study or to model. So I jumped into the writing experience with no direction, no clarity, and no essential understanding of how I should approach the writing process. Frustrated but not deterred, I wrote the first three chapters of my dissertation without any communication or conversation with my adviser.

My peers at other schools told me that their adviser/mentor relationships were quite different than mine. They would meet their advisers in their homes, in coffee shops, and they would even have Skype sessions. None of these things ever happened during my experience. There were no phone calls, no check ins, and no inquiries into my intellectual or personal well-being. When I did receive feedback, there were two problems: it was based on my request and the feedback wasn’t consistent. There were times that I would submit my work and my adviser would give me feedback seemingly unaware of the previous feedback he had already given to me. Our relationship grew increasingly strained as a result.

During my defense, my adviser said, “You did a good job on this section,” referring to one part of my dissertation. While I was pleasantly surprised and appreciated these words, I realized that during three years of receiving feedback from my adviser, not once had I ever received this type of feedback or encouragement. While I didn’t need or expect a cheerleader, there were times during the writing process when my adviser’s positive affirmation would have given me a boost of confidence.

I sat in that dissertation defense room understanding that I had to defend my work, but I never had the confidence or belief that I genuinely had a mentor/adviser who did their best to equip me with all of the tools to succeed.

It is often said that the life of a scholar is a lonely one.

It is true that scholars spend lots of time alone, thinking and reflecting on dense issues. It is true that emerging scholars should do the painstaking task of research, data collection, and wrestling with ideas. However, the path toward the PhD shouldn’t feel like it’s a hazing experience. While I came out on the other side with my PhD in hand, I don’t look at my overall experience as a pleasant one.

Due to the lack of communication, feedback, and encouragement, I didn’t leave my program with the confidence of a scholar excited about my foray into the world of research and pedagogy. I am hopeful that through my experience and the similar experiences of others, we can create healthy models for mentoring students in the academy, especially students of color.
No. 4: Good Mentors Can Be Better Mentors

My educational experience at Peace Seminary was a long and a pleasant academic journey. I felt supported and encouraged by professors across academic disciplines, genders, and ethnicities throughout my programs of study. Their compliments and their critiques made me a better scholar, a stronger writer, and a more attentive researcher. These professor-mentors shared books and advice over the years, encouraged active participation in conference associations, recommended me for honors and awards, and provided teaching assistant opportunities. They wrote numerous letters of recommendation for fellowships and employment, reviewed job application materials, and contacted their friends and colleagues on my behalf during the job search process to encourage a closer look at my materials. They also forewarned me about academy politics, prayed with and for me during medical and family emergencies, offered advice on salary and first-year work obligations, and celebrated milestone successes. Some of these professor-mentors have become friends as well as colleagues. The teaching and mentoring, and subsequent move to friendship and collegiality, have created invaluable and deeply treasured relationships.

While I was being prepared through the educational process to be a future leader who would influence the dialogue in my respective field through lecture and published works, I especially appreciated mentorship in regard to scholarly writing. I found the following feedback on written assignments and research particularly helpful:

- Theological writing requires precise language, which makes me attentive to word choice in order to minimize ambiguity in communication.
- One can offer both compliment as well as critique, which requires me to employ the hermeneutics of suspicion and of retrieval when offering a review of the works of others.
- Make sure the words in your head get onto the paper, which forces me to examine each sentence to ensure that each one logically follows the previous one.

In addition, I have appreciated mentor feedback and encouragement about teaching. Professors have reminded me that I know my discipline, and that I will be prepared for that student who undoubtedly will profess to know more, better, and differently than I do on the subject of the day. That student arrived—a 22-year-old professing to be able to mentor me because he knows things.

On the flip side, professor-mentors and the doctoral program itself left some gaps in my preparedness for an academic career (e.g., the job search process, syllabus preparation, online course creation, and how to handle academy politics).

While mentors individually reviewed potential interview questions and possible responses with me, I believe that I would have been better served had some time been devoted to a fuller engagement of the job search process. This could have included holding a mock interview with multiple faculty serving as a search committee, asking me questions, and giving me feedback on my presentation style and unconscious habits or projections that may have been hampering my ability to secure employment.

While working as a teaching assistant, I often graded papers, occasionally lectured in class, and even reviewed the syllabus for typos. But I don’t recall being asked for my input on course content (e.g., the latest recommended books) or being given any insight as to how the professor created the syllabus, selected books, or determined assignments for measuring student mastery of objectives (e.g., assessment).
One mentor did expose me to Bloom’s Taxonomy for determining course objectives, so I was not totally without the necessary language for this purpose in syllabus creation. However, I was not further instructed in giving sufficient attention to assessing student mastery of subject matter. I suggest that any graduate school’s courses in teaching method should give some attention to this aspect of educating in the academy. This would be in addition to studying the various pedagogies for educating clergy, and/or the ways that the teaching-assistant relationship could expand to take on a more mentoring nature—one that includes discussion of course development, syllabus creation, objective determination, book selection, and student assessment.

Online and hybrid courses have become essential to most school curriculums. Before I graduated, however, obtaining knowledge of online technology required additional time commitments beyond coursework. Now I would hope that such knowledge becomes foundational to doctoral studies programming. Incorporating online technology could be added to and/or replaced by the research methods course (the contents of which should be a part of orientation) and/or the online technology professor must mentor every doctoral student.

Finally, I recognize and appreciate that every corporate and academic entity has its own political vibe. Thus, there is only so much advice or warning a professor-mentor can provide in anticipation of future mentee employment experiences.

Although many of my mentors shared stories of their teaching experiences, they mostly talked about the changes in their approaches over the course of their careers, especially what they didn’t do anymore. In retrospect, it would have been more helpful if professor-mentors shared more of their early teaching mistakes and mishaps—and how they have learned to do things differently in light of changing seminary demographics, student preparedness for graduate study resulting from the no-child-left-behind approach to education, and student inability to communicate orally and in writing as a result of the social media (texting and tweeting) phenomenon.

It would be helpful also for mentors to share how to diplomatically say “no” to projects requested by a student, colleague, or superior that wrongly infringe upon our time. These types of projects are late requests, require us to take sides in a fight that is not our own, or hamper our ability to complete the other tasks required to advance our careers.

Admittedly, mentors cannot provide a “right answer” to every possible mentee encounter, but they can provide something akin to case studies, mock situations, or occasions for forethought before graduate students actually encounter these situations in the workplace.

To reiterate, I absolutely loved my time at Peace Seminary—the courses, the professors, and even some classmates. With few exceptions, the professor-mentors prepared me well for an academic career. I can only hope to carry forward their best examples of mentoring into the next generation.
During my second year of doctoral work, I became increasingly aware of my desire and need for academic mentors who would come alongside me as a person of color in navigating the world of theological education.

I had observed other colleagues both inside and outside of my institution working to build relationships with senior scholars. I coveted those burgeoning relationships, watching as seasoned faculty members took my colleagues under their wing and strategized with them about their coursework, exams, and ways of gaining future employment after they completed their programs.

Eventually, I set out to cultivate my own relationships, and I initially approached a professor in my own institution. I knew right away who I wanted to work with, and I was fairly direct in my request to this scholar, asking if they would be interested in building a mentor-mentee relationship with me. To my surprise, they were incredibly receptive. In the beginning I had high hopes of what this relationship could become; this was a scholar for whom I had the utmost respect, both personally and professionally.

Reality soon failed to live up to the high hopes I cultivated in the beginning. As time went along, it became increasingly clear that this scholar had little interest in being a mentor. Rather than serving as a support for me, they quickly became a stumbling block, adding to my stress and self-doubt. One of the primary problems that contributed to the breakdown of our mentor-mentee relationship was their lack of responsiveness to any and all forms of correspondence. Simple questions and requests—in addition to more important inquiries about essential things like the make-up of my dissertation committee—went unheeded.

Weeks would go by as follow-up email after follow-up email would be ignored. Even requests for feedback on papers, written both for courses and for publications, went unanswered. On occasion my hoped-for mentor would respond and say that they would look at the paper in due time, which sadly never happened.

There seems to be a type of unspoken justification for this behavior in academia. Scholars shrug off the necessity of responding to correspondence under the guise of, “I’m too busy,” “I’m too important,” or “My mentors and advisers never responded to me, so get used to it.”

This behavior communicates to students who are already vulnerable and struggling with myriad forms of self-doubt and stress that they and their work aren’t valued. To reach out to a person who committed to be your mentor, only to be ignored, eventually becomes devastating as you learn that they cannot be depended on or trusted to be a support when you need it. Part of the tragedy of this scenario is that this mentor truly believes that they are a positive presence in my life, and that they are essential to my future as a scholar. Sadly, this couldn’t be further from the truth. Ironically, this mentor takes pride in being a support for young scholars, particularly young scholars of color and women. However, they would likely be shocked if they were to learn of the reputation they’ve cultivated among the very scholars they claim to advocate for.

Sadly, this mentor-mentee relationship is now virtually non-existent. I’ve ceased requesting their help, recommendations, or advice on my academic work.

What I learned from this situation is that true mentors are difficult to come by. Thankfully I found a mentor-mentee relationship among other scholars in my institution and elsewhere.

The primary piece of advice I would offer to those serving or seeking to serve as mentors would be to respond. Understandably, academia is a brutal environment.

To reach out to a person who committed to be your mentor, only to be ignored, eventually becomes devastating.
It does not allow for much time to respond to the vast amount of inquiries one receives on a daily basis. I acknowledge that many student requests, possibly even some of my own, do not warrant a timely response (or possibly any response). I’m referring to those emails from students that could easily be resolved with a little effort on the part of the student. Students should also be patient with their mentors, knowing that the pressures of life, coursework, and research often mean that responses will be slow in coming.

But I cannot stress enough how important and sometimes life-giving each and every response I received was. This is particularly true when these mentors are the individuals you believe have your best interests in mind and keep your survival in academia at the top of their priority list.

Advisers are responsible for walking alongside doctoral students as they chart their course toward completing their PhD programs. Mentors take a more personal interest in the professional life of young scholars, aiding them in networking and strategizing about potential employment and publishing opportunities, and checking in on the health and wellness of mentees as they struggle through the grueling world of academia.

Upon entering my doctoral program I found this distinction between the role of adviser and mentor to be a false dichotomy. I was fortunate to have a doctoral adviser who made it their personal mission to both advise and mentor me in my doctoral work. My mentor-mentee relationship with my doctoral adviser has proven to be one of the most fruitful and life-giving relationships I’ve had the pleasure of cultivating in academia. I will discuss the relationship through an exploration of what I understand to be the primary strengths of their distinct brand of mentorship—responsivity, challenge, strategy, care, and humility.

Responsivity: When gathered together, it is not uncommon for doctoral students to lament their inability to get timely responses to their inquiries, whether from professors, editors, or advisers. One of the most important and reliable facets of my relationship to my adviser/mentor is knowing that they will always respond to me, never taking more than 48 hours to answer an inquiry, even if just to say that they need more time and will get back to me.

The rigors of doctoral work are real, and the difficulties of completing projects and managing stress are only compounded when faced with a faculty member or others

No. 6: Virtues of a Good Mentor

I’ve often heard it said that being a doctoral adviser and a mentor are two very different roles—roles which can and perhaps should be kept separate.

My mentor-mentee relationship with my doctoral adviser has proven to be one of the most fruitful and life-giving relationships I’ve had.
who fail to take your inquiries as a student seriously, sometimes allowing weeks to go by before responding or often not responding at all. The responsivity of my mentor not only eased the process of completing my work, it also served as an important reminder that they respected both my time and my scholarship.

**Challenge:** Another important facet of my relationship to my adviser/mentor is the substance and rigor of their critique of my work and formation as a scholar. Although it was incredibly difficult to accept at the time, some of the harshest criticism I received in my doctoral work came from my adviser. They demanded excellence. They were not afraid to take and smash even some of my most deeply held ideas and theories. It is a rare thing to receive substantive and helpful criticism, and the challenges I received from my adviser have served to sharpen my analytical skills in myriad ways.

**Strategy:** During our first meeting at the beginning of my doctoral program, I can remember my adviser asking, “What type of institution do you envision yourself in and what type of student do you want to teach?” My adviser repeated this question throughout the course of my program, as they worked hard to strategize with me on how to best position myself professionally and personally to bring that end-goal to fruition. We spent many hours both in person and via email discussing various persons, conferences, and institutions that I should intersect with. Whether it was something as small as a subtle push toward which receptions I should attend at the American Academy of Religion conference, or an explicit suggestion about who I should approach to read and engage my dissertation, my adviser/mentor has been intentional in helping me shape my professional future.

**Care:** Even at this stage of my program (all but dissertation), no more than a week or two will pass without an email from my adviser, often accompanied by an inquiry into how I am doing, how my family is faring, and the state of my mental, physical, and emotional health. Personal mental and physical struggles have never been outside of the purview of what is shared between us. To be clear, my mentor has never pried or asked for personal information in an inappropriate way, but they have always been receptive and gracious when they learned of various challenges that arose during my program. So in those moments of intense isolation and despair that often accompany the process of PhD work, I am comforted by the fact that I have an advocate in my adviser/mentor.

**Humility:** Although humility isn’t a character trait often referenced in relation to scholars of religion, the intellectual humility of my adviser has proven an incredible asset in our relationship. The scholarship of advisers and advisees diverges in substantive ways. My adviser/mentor made it clear that my scholarship was moving outside the purview of their own work. However, rather than view this as a threat or as an occasion to grandstand in an attempt to hide the limits of their knowledge, they took it as an opportunity to put me in conversation with scholars and institutions more closely aligned with my interests. Not only that, but in the midst of their teaching load, research, and personal life they made special effort to begin filling in holes in their own knowledge pertaining to my project, revealing how seriously they took their role of advising and mentoring me.

In the end, I cannot imagine a more helpful model for future mentors to adopt than that offered by my adviser/mentor. Students from marginalized communities would be fortunate to have a mentor like my own, who nurtured a relationship based on responsivity, challenge, strategy, care, and humility.
Mentoring and Power

Power dynamics within the mentoring relationship are always at play.

That power comes from a number of contributing factors—socioeconomic, gender, racial, ethnic, institutional and discipline association, and educational background. Power is most often perceived based on the differences between the mentor and mentee.

The mentor is typically fully employed and living into their call. The mentee is striving to achieve similar success (No. 16). Power is implicit in the networks each party brings to the relationship (Nos. 18 and 19).

Good Mentors Know How to Navigate Power

Power also has to do with the strange beast that is the academy, where mentors and mentees alike are learning to navigate professional guilds, publishing houses, tenure review committees, faculty meetings, and curriculum standards.

While these power structures are critical to any scholar’s career, mentors are rarely formally trained on how to navigate the political, institutional, or social networks that can define one’s success or failure. Mentors who have experience in navigating power structures can offer salient knowledge that has an impact on the success of mentees. On the flip side, a lack of understanding about power structures has consequences if the mentor struggles to navigate—and cannot guide others to navigate—the structures and systems of the academy.

Power Comes in Many Forms

The voices of the mentored here all reflect on the various powers at play, and how mentors hold that power over their mentees.

The essays reflect on the power of money (No. 8) and the lack of institutional financial support for some mentees. Of particular interest, two essays (Nos. 17 and 20) take on the unique power dynamics experienced by international students in doctoral theological education. These power dynamics extend beyond the mentor-
mentee relationship to the peer-mentoring relationships with other PhD colleagues. Some essays reflect the sustained impact of power in the mentor-mentee relationship, and four of them (Nos. 7, 9, 11, and 14) focus on how power—tethered to longer histories of injustices toward racialized and minoritized students—can destroy a mentee’s chance of succeeding. Or as essay No. 12 is clear to point out, power can absolutely make all the difference in the world. This mentee reflects on being guided by a group of Black women at an academic guild meeting:

Being a “strong” Black woman meant that admitting illness or fatigue was not a weakness or an option. Having the subject discussed as being important to completion of the degree placed self-care as a priority. That single conversation about self-care has served me well throughout my post-degree career.

When mentors wield their power to liberate, make space for the mentee, and connect them to networks, mentees can truly thrive.

A Mentoring Pro Tip from FTE
FTE encourages mentors to consider that they have “five fingers” on each hand. After every mentoring conversation, your student should be connected to at least five new people, resources, or questions that advance their vocational discernment. We find in all of our work that students who have more connections, largely supported by mentors, are more satisfied in their call, confident in their vocational choice, and have higher achievement rates in traditional academic benchmarking.

Mentors hold the power to ensure a mentee’s success literally in their hands.
and practical theology). I am aware that only a few Black men are afforded the opportunity to study theology in a doctoral capacity. While knowing this, I found I was not treated with full respect by a few of the theology professors. My question is, “Why?”

Was I mistreated because I am a Black man? Was I mistreated out of jealousy because I was one of Dr. Z’s theological first fruits? Was I mistreated because I was studying theology? Was I mistreated because I came to the Jordan PhD program with years of pastoral experience under my belt? Was I mistreated because the theology professors disagreed with my methodology and philosophy? Was I mistreated because of my socioeconomic status? Was I mistreated because of the gossipy baggage associated with my previous institution? Was I mistreated because my professors felt that my work was not up to par? Was I mistreated because they themselves were mistreated by the professors who developed them in their own journey toward the PhD?

Whatever the reason for the way I was treated, I learned that mentorship and professorship were not their priorities in terms of the way they dealt with the Black male PhD student.

When I use the word mistreat, I refer to the way I was talked to in school offices, talked about to other students and professors, the words used in the professors' emails, the way I was treated in the classroom, and the way certain professors approached me in conversation.

It was almost as if I was the local whipping boy in the PhD program because I was a Black man studying theology. One professor made it a point to insult me in her classroom, in her email messages, and in face-to-face conversations with me in her office. The insults always felt personal and picky. Every time I would open my email, she always had something insulting to say about me, my work, and my theological worldview. Because I was badly bothered emotionally, broke financially, and stressed over the ever-increasing altitude of the PhD work, I stopped using the Jordan email to communicate with others, and then I stopped logging into my Jordan email at all.

The same goes for another theology professor who I thought would be a good mentor for me. Even as we shared the same skin color and he helped me to develop my theology, he disagreed with my displeasure with American capitalism and tagged me as a theological socialist. That hurt my feelings. I turned in five drafts of my final seminar paper to this particular theology professor. As the result of our constant clashing, he did not send my final grade until the very last minute before I was officially preparing for my qualifying exams.

I also experienced negative mentorship throughout the course of preparing for my exams, and while answering the questions in each of my four sections (systematic theology, historical theology, historical studies and my dissertation question). One professor in particular was certain that I would not pass my exams because of what she thought I was lacking in the areas of historical theology/early church/patristics. While I was writing the papers for each subject area and sending her copies, I realized that this particular professor was not an advocate or mentor for me. I just could not figure out the reason why!

Rather than put my name out there on campus in a negative way, she could have set up a time to discuss her concerns with me in person and in private. Out of respect, she could have provided some form of mentorship and guidance. Instead, I had to experience insult after insult because she simply did not believe that I had the ability to complete the very difficult and rigorous PhD in theology, history, and ethics.

Certainly, the mistreatment I experienced as a human being and as a PhD student was wrong. Faculty could have done things better and more effectively. Instead of receiving insults and hardships, I could have grown even more if I had been surrounded by a spirit of encouragement and respect.
No. 8: The Power of Money

Looking back over my journey of completing the PhD in theology and ethics at Faith School of Theology at Big University, I now understand that I needed financial mentoring and guidance just as badly as I needed theological and developmental mentoring.

I needed to be in conversation with someone who cared about my financial situation. Throughout the course of completing the PhD, money was a sore spot for me. I struggled to keep gas in my car. I struggled to buy books. I struggled sometimes to eat. I struggled with computers, cartridges, paper, and having the right Word program needed to write my papers. I struggled with the upkeep of car maintenance.

I struggled with being financially broke during the times I needed money just to make ends meet. I needed more funding from Faith School of Theology. I needed more financial aid money. I needed more financial assistance from the church of my upbringing. I needed to work another job while I was completing the PhD.

I needed money. Period.

Faith School of Theology gave me as much funding as they thought they could, helping with tuition in the models of coursework, exams, and dissertation writing. The truth is that I struggled with the knowledge that less-talented students who were accepted at other institutions received 100 percent plus funding to complete their PhD.

I was commuting hundreds of miles from home to school every single week over the course of three academic years and living on campus in a condo or in university apartments. The combination of commuting and housing costs proved to be too much for me as someone who had a family and kids to take care of. If I had been working a full-time job somewhere, I would never have finished the PhD. And as I did not work a full-time job, I struggled to pay my bills and take care of my family. These realities—working a job and not being able to focus on finishing my PhD work and not working and still having bills that went unpaid—made my PhD experience a living hell. It was extremely difficult. I needed financial mentoring from someone who cared about me as a human being beyond seeing me as a PhD student.

It took me nine years to complete my program, and I ran out of financial aid capacity after my fifth year of studies. Over the last four years, I struggled mightily to make payments to Faith for my tuition and to just live life from one month to the next—not to mention trying my best to finish testing out of the German language, finish my qualifying exams, and write my dissertation.

The truth is that the lack of money to pay my bills and eat was more of a worrisome barrier than the difficulty of the academic work itself.

Being financially broke and being a PhD student at Faith were difficult pills to swallow when I felt like I was being picked on because of the color of my skin. There were several occasions when I had to contact the financial aid officer for an emergency loan of $500. I needed the emergency loan to either eat, pay my bills, or complete an academic assignment. It was always one of the three.

In order for me to be the best student I could be, I needed more funding from a variety of sources. The year that I was told that I could not borrow any more money or receive any more financial aid was the year I almost died. Not only was I told that I had run out of financial-aid capacity, I was also told that Faith could not and would not give me an emergency loan. Both the Financial Aid office and the Business office closed the door on helping me with my money issues. And to make matters worse, they were downright rude about the prospects of me not having any financial resources to finish the PhD. This was very similar to the discouraging way I was treated by a few of the theology professors. I was talked to unkindly and treated rudely by school administrators as well. I was broke and poor in my everyday life, and I desperately needed more funds to finish my work.
I literally dreamed of receiving the prestigious FTE fellowships for students of color who need financial help to finish their PhD. I attempted to plan my qualifying exams around the deadline to have all the paperwork turned in to apply for the FTE award specifically for those who need funding to research and write their dissertations.

To my dismay, things did not work out. I ended up writing a 400-page dissertation on a $35 shoestring budget. While I was not able to purchase many new texts online, I was able to check out books from various libraries that carried theological and historical texts. Again, I was silently jealous that some of my colleagues, local and distant, had received the funding needed to finish their academic work. And I remained broke and poor.

Sadly, while studying theology for nine years at Faith School of Theology, I never received any positive financial mentoring from anyone associated with this great academic institution. I struggled way more with the lack of money than I ever did to complete the academic work at the highest of levels. I remained broke and poor as I finished my PhD.

Now that I have finished the academic work and successfully defended my dissertation, I am now warning potential PhD students to think long and hard about jumping into a doctoral program without the promise or guarantee of 100 percent funding.

Obviously, the reward of finishing the PhD at any academic institution and in any field of study is great. But the trials and tribulations of not having money to both fund the degree and pay your bills while you matriculate though the program can be much greater.
This definitely helped to boost my self-esteem and to establish my role in the classroom. In the middle of the course, there was a project in which the professor and I alternately instructed the students in two teams for weeks.

One week we swapped the teams and guided; the next week when I returned to the team I used to instruct, I could feel the different atmosphere. Students often prefer to learn from a professor rather than a teaching assistant. You can sense it. Yet, students participated in the class with a more serious and trusting attitude. After class, one of students whom I’ve known personally told me that the professor, when he came to class the previous week, had shared lots of compliments about me and told students how lucky they were to have me as their TA. This was not just to praise me, but to do his best to help me build my leadership. I am also very well aware that this is one of the positive results of our weekly mentor-mentee conversation.

I don’t want to forget this experience. It has helped me to face challenges and possibilities and to overcome my personal anxieties and limitations. Whenever I lose my confidence and get afraid of leading and teaching as a solo teacher in a class, I remember this faculty member and the TA experience with him. I trust his evaluation of me.

Sometimes I doubt whether white faculty or faculty with any kinds of privilege could understand my situation properly. From my standpoint, their statements, stories and advice—such as “I know where you are”—do not reach my heart. I sometimes long for a faculty mentor of color who has similar experiences and understanding as an ethnic minority. Ironically, however, my positive experiences have happened regardless of my race. In other words, a professor’s race or ethnicity is not necessarily a problem in guiding students of color well. Their integrity and a willing attitude to work through difficult moments matter the most. Of course, it is ideal when there is a professor of color who has such a heart and attitude.

In my case, it was more destructive when a faculty member of color behaved with a double standard (between people in the majority and people of color). They forced students of the same color into one group, and used them as their foundational network, but did not mentor the students to help them grow as scholars. I am still struggling with this experience.

This struggle may be a part of my future when I start my teaching career. I may also feel insecure and lonely in mainstream society. Yet now as a student, particularly as a student with an international background, I need somebody, an adviser, who is willing to listen and support me. I need a faculty member who is open to sharing their authority and privilege with me and won’t treat me as a potential threat to their status, or as a disposable object of the workforce.

This doesn’t mean I have no hope. There is a faculty of color member here at my school that I want to trust and engage to ask some advice. But I will not rush through it. I will be slow in opening my heart.
entered graduate school after being an architectural electrical engineer for a consulting engineering firm for fourteen years. I worked on many major city projects in the United States and around the world. I heard the call of God to leave this behind and start seminary.

Stepping out on faith, I quit my full-time job and entered seminary. I was the only African American woman in my incoming class and in the majority of my courses. There was only one African American male faculty member until two years later, when an African American female joined the faculty. This is not an anomaly in higher education for some students of color attending predominantly white institutions (PWI). In this reflection I will share the challenges and benefits of mentorship I received within and outside of my institution while in graduate school.

As a student of color who completed three master’s degree programs and a doctoral program, I had the pleasure of having a great mentor who went above and beyond just being a faculty member. After taking a few classes with this faculty member, I became his teaching assistant. This is where the mentorship began. We met once a week to discuss the development of the course, but what was essential was his spiritual and professional guidance. Both of us being urban ministers and having a love for the church and the community allowed us to find a commonality between each other. During our weekly meetings we discovered that before entering seminary we had both been engineers and had made similar decisions to change careers for full-time ministry and teaching in the academy.

This mentor (for both of my master’s degree programs and my doctoral program) was very key to my success in completing both programs. Good mentorship involves long-term caring toward a mentee’s personal and professional development.1 Hence, great mentoring goes beyond helping students to graduate; it involves helping students to develop their confidence, teaching, networks, and long-term career ambitions.

On paper, my mentor was considered my co-adviser for my graduate thesis, but I call him a mentor for several reasons. As I mentioned, he went above and beyond advising me during the research interview process, data collection and analysis, and writing my dissertation. He provided support that gave me the confidence to not give up when it became a lonely process. His weekly check-in meetings required that I have a task completed to discuss and receive his feedback. Our meetings were not just in his office; we found ourselves meeting at a bookstore coffee shop, which made the process not as intimidating because we were in public and it provided a safe space.

Because we were both married, we made sure to have boundaries for our weekly meetings. This is essential when mentorship is between different genders. Mentoring often involves career socialization, inspiration, belief in each other, and promoting excellence and passion for work through guidance, protection, support, and networking. It also typically involves taking an interest in each other as human beings as well as supporting professional practices.2

While I was already a junior faculty member at a liberal-arts college program, my mentor gave me advice on navigating academia as a person of color and what was required to enhance my career in higher education. He shared his experience of being one of three faculty members of color at his previous and current PWI. He encouraged me to submit articles and book reviews for publication, and to present my work at local and national conferences. He talked about the importance of making sure my voice was heard, seeing that I was invited to the table to share my thoughts around scholarly topics, and being a voice for students of color.

As I transitioned into my doctoral program, my mentor was no longer at my institution. Someone else was my adviser, but my mentor remained instrumental in my academic, personal, spiritual, and professional development. I credit him for my success of completing my doctoral program because he continued to mentor me through the arduous process of comprehensive exams, Internal Review Board


Minority graduate students often experience more isolation and less access to mentors and role models.

Sometimes it is assumed or even expected that during a doctoral program, effective mentoring will take place between graduate students and their major professors and advisers. However, minority graduate students often experience more isolation and less access to mentors and role models than their non-minority peers.3

Mentorship has been classically defined as a “process by which persons of superior rank, special achievements, and prestige instruct, counsel, guide, and facilitate the intellectual or career development of persons identified as proteges or mentees.”4 As I offer this definition of mentorship, I want to also offer suggestions for faculty and program administrators to enhance mentoring at their institutions.

Schools should evaluate mentoring.5

Faculty advisers who feel they are not equipped to mentor a student should suggest others who can help students if there is a need they cannot meet. Faculty can provide a space for graduate students to have regular meetings and get-togethers, as well as to work on scholarly projects together, which can provide a sense of community among graduate students. Faculty should introduce graduate students to other faculty to learn about their discipline through informal and formal discussions, either within or outside of the institution.

These actions can help faculty provide a positive mentoring relationship with students of color who sometimes feel they are isolated.

right path for you?” My doctoral-student colleagues have narrated stories of seeing faculty notes and letters in their personal student files which read, “Might not be fit for PhD study” or “Needs to be in a different vocational field.” In my experience and professional estimation, we would be unwise to understand these moments as somehow unbound to or outside of the ways in which racialization works within imperial spaces of power such as institutions of higher learning.

In doctoral studies, if students only needed to be concerned with the intellectual production (“the work,” as it were), the PhD journey would be simpler. But in fact, it isn’t. Institutional racism (explicit or not) and microaggressions (among other things) are important factors that doctoral students of color often engage.

One question becomes, “What ought to be the role of the teacher/mentor when they are faculty of color?” Another way to phrase this question could be, “How can faculty mentors of color better support doctoral students of color, particularly in light of the specific realities of internal institutional race-, gender- and sexuality-based oppression?”

I have profoundly appreciated candid moments in which professors were comfortable enough with me—and invested enough in me as a student-colleague—to be honest about the fact that these dynamics exist within university life. This candor helped remind me that my experience wasn’t merely an aberration.

I recall a moment during PhD study in which a professor whom I very much trust noted to me, “Remember…the fact that somebody has brown skin never necessarily means that you can count on them to be in your corner.” This was a simple moment, but one that nevertheless comforted me in knowing that there were faculty mentors whom I could trust to “keep it real” with me and tip me off to the lay of the landscape on navigating specific institutional politics.

Along with this point, I have had a few experiences with faculty of color who were appropriately transparent about their own subjectivity within the academy. Here’s what I mean: At present, many junior and senior scholars of color within the theological academy have tasked themselves with the important work of producing anti-oppression scholarship. But insofar as they are doing that very work as full-time academicians, they themselves—by virtue of their vocational positions of power and privilege—are implicated by structures of power that belie the anti-oppression ethos that their scholarship implies.

For instance, what does it mean to produce theological scholarship “in service to the marginalized, poor, and oppressed” while one is an employee of an institution of higher learning that at best creates space for a certain type of class performance (e.g., the cultural cachet that comes along with being a professor) and at worst creates the conditions by which persons continue to be made marginalized and oppressed (e.g., institutions of higher learning participating in land grabs or gentrification in pursuit of campus expansion)?

We are all implicated. However, some of the most positive and impactful experiences that I have had have come from relationships built upon my respect for the faculty member’s acknowledgement of their complicity in the complicatedness of this type of work. I have heard a professor say in class that their “position as professor puts [them] in less of a precarious position than that of the students” and that “students are vulnerable in ways that professors are not.” Another professor has noted to me that their position as tenured faculty “insulates” them from much of the “hell that Black and Brown folks are catching all around this country.” For me, this type of transparency goes a long way. It is a helpful tool for trust-building in a space of higher education that can sometimes feel like everyone has insider information except you, the student.

Another helpful step in the faculty-student mentorship relationship could be faculty taking the initiative to create collaborative faculty/student spaces for mentorship and solidarity. Institutions of higher learning can be places of threat for persons at every level, not the least of which is the graduate student level. Creating a space of faculty support could help remind students that the successful completion of their doctoral work is a collaborative effort, one in which their faculty mentors would always and unconditionally advocate on their behalf.

Their position as tenured faculty “insulates” them from much of the “hell that black and brown folks are catching all around this country.”
I often think of the years I spent at Christ Divinity School and the ways that the experience became a critical component of my spiritual formation. A major part of the PhD program for me was the mentoring I received from my adviser, course professors, and support staff.

I include the various staff because I still feel that they were a part of the team giving advice and cautions when necessary. They helped me to navigate the maze that was the PhD program. They included the librarians and the professionals in the different offices that I interacted with. Having come out of a somewhat disadvantaged urban public school system, I have often felt the need to catch-up or to learn how to use resources and acquire learning strategies that appeared to be a given for other students. The staff at Christ Divinity School helped me feel comfortable in saying that I don’t have to know everything, but I do need to know where and how to look it up.

At the very beginning of the program, a feminist scholar who was about to retire gave me the most helpful advice about approaching my dissertation and choosing coursework. She said that I should begin early to identify a topic and take courses that support that focus. This indeed gave me a strong start on subject material, and an understanding of the work being done in the field and on the topic. It also allowed me to spend time discussing different approaches to the subject with the course professor and with my classmates from a cross-cultural perspective.

The diversity of both professors and students was rich and rewarding. My professors challenged me to see beyond my own worldview in critical thought and understanding. I was also encouraged to speak up when issues of gender, race, class, or sexuality were omitted from the discussion. They also taught me to embrace an objective view of the material being presented so that I could fully hear the writer’s theories.

At my first seminary one of the professors and her family invited me and other pastors and educators of color to a weekly dinner at her home. Laughter, tears, food, and a movie were shared. In that place we discussed our issues, difficulties, joys, and learning experiences as clergy and educators of color. In that seminary all of the professors ate with the students (there was a central cafeteria) and made close bonding relationships with the student body. After twenty-five years a powerful application of breaking bread together has not been lost on me.

My Christ Divinity School adviser took me to a conference in our field, where I had the opportunity to meet many foundational scholars. They literally wrote the books that I was studying and pushed the accepted academic norms. I also felt blessed to meet and learn from other PhD students who were nearly done with their coursework or were in the process of writing their dissertations. Their advice and support were insightful. Most important was their advice on self-care. Being a “strong” Black woman meant that admitting illness or fatigue was neither
That single conversation about self-care has served me well. A weakness nor an option. Having the subject discussed as being important to completion of the degree placed self-care as a priority. That single conversation about self-care has served me well throughout my post-degree career.

No. 13: A Mentor Who Trusted Me More Than I Trusted Myself

I first came to know Dr. H when I took his class as a master’s student. Dr. H was scholarly, demanding, and I often had difficulties understanding his jokes. I do not recall conversing with Dr. H, but I probably thanked him for the class when I turned in my exam paper in the last period. I had my favorite professors and classes back then, but neither Dr. H nor his course made the list. It would be better for me, an Asian female student, to appreciate Dr. H’s intelligence from afar.

Or so I thought.

Dr. H was one of the two instructors for my first doctoral seminar. He approached me at the end of term and invited me to become his teaching assistant (TA) for one of his master’s level classes. He let me know that I had done extremely well—I was one of his top three students, in fact—when I had taken his class some years ago. I was astonished and felt proud of my performance, but it did not convince me that I was capable enough for the job.

Seriously? An Asian student being a TA to American students in the field of history? Something did not look quite right. Fortunately the decision was not difficult to make. Having a job on top of my PhD program was already wearing me out. I simply was not able to take on another responsibility. I told Dr. H that he could approach me again the next year, as I was considering quitting my job to focus on my studies.

Dr. H remembered. A few months later, he asked me whether I was available to join his TA team. I had resigned from my job by then, yet concerns about being a TA abounded. Dr. H assured me that I would do more than okay as a TA, and he encouraged me that being his TA would provide me with some necessary teaching experiences. Since Dr. H was so ready to take me under his wing, which gave me the safety that I needed, I hesitated no more and said to him, “I am in,” although I also added, “You are really brave to have me as your TA.”

Like other TAs, I led small group discussions and graded students’ papers. While facilitating discussion can sometimes be challenging for an introvert like me, it
I discovered that I did in fact have more to offer than I had thought.

What is Dr. H’s role in all this? A seasoned professor, Dr. H gives TAs plenty of space to explore what can then become theirs. He arranges the grading of papers in a way that he reads behind several papers that each TA has graded. As he reads behind us, he not only reads students’ works, but also our comments. By changing the style of TAs’ comments into something that we had agreed upon (e.g., italicize certain words), Dr. H communicates to TAs in secret codes that he concurs with something that we said, or that he believes that some things could be expressed differently.

Being able to find my voice and place in the teaching experience as a TA has been tremendously empowering.

As I worked with him closely, I came to know a side of Dr. H that I had never known. Always available through email, Dr. H’s support for TAs is constant and prompt. He is always ready and willing to discuss any challenges TAs face. This includes sharing some of his difficult experiences and how he navigated them in the past, while pointing us to the right place. TAs to him are no “cheap labor,” but are precious assets in which he invests. In a smaller institution where funds are limited, there is a set number of hours TAs are allowed to work in each class. To ensure that TAs get fairly paid for the hours we put in, Dr. H uses his discretionary account for TAs to supplement the institution’s lack of compensation.

Once I shared with Dr. H how the TA experience has been life-changing for me. His response moved me to tears as he recognized the qualities of scholarship, integrity, and pedagogy that are forming within me. In a recent email exchange—and this is my third year as his TA—Dr. H affirms that my aptitude and insight as a teacher and grader have grown, and so have my confidence and discernment. I can recognize that these are no fabricated compliments, not only because I know Dr. H well enough, but more importantly because I can acknowledge that what he describes has indeed been my experience. I know well that my growth is due in no small part to Dr. H’s looking beyond my gender and ethnicity and recognizing my potential in the first place, trusting me more than I trusted myself, providing me with a safe space to explore and be, occasionally redirecting me, and rooting for me all along.

I still find it difficult to follow his jokes at times, but today Dr. H is so much more than scholarly, demanding, and intelligent. Compassionate, wise, fair, perceptive, sincere, generous with time and resources, an excellent communicator, committed to others’ success, and a man of integrity, Dr. H possesses the greatest qualities a mentor could have.

It would have been a great loss for me if had I insisted on appreciating Dr. H’s intelligence from afar and not come to know personally this incredible person and his heart.
No. 14: When I Can Simply Be Without Noticing My Being

Accessible, knowledgeable, and full of stamina was my impression of the white-haired Dr. K when I took his class as a master's student. I was enamored by the course materials that I was exposed to for the first time in life, and the experience was as if I, like Lucy in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, had discovered a brand-new world through a magic portal. Only in my case, the portal was Dr. K. So fascinated was I by Dr. K’s lecture that a desire to look more closely into a particular part of the course welled up in me near the end of term. It was this desire, and a great respect for Dr. K, that led me to invite him to be my doctoral mentor a few years later.

As an international female student of color, I struggled to belong in the seminars I took during the first two years of the doctoral program. Male students outnumbered female students in most of my seminars, and more than once I was the only woman in the class. Professors and my fellow colleagues have always been kind, but it hardly eased my angst as I struggled on many different levels and wrestled with the feeling of being out of place.

The first two years of coursework did not require us to have much interaction with our mentor, thus I only touched base with Dr. K when I had to. I did not notice it until later, but I eventually realized that ever since my first conversation as a nervous master's student with Dr. K, I have always been so comfortable with myself when around Dr. K.

I like all the professors with whom I have studied in doctoral seminars—they all happen to have been male—yet as encouraging as they are, I somehow feel slightly “less than” when I am around them. But not with Dr. K. Perhaps it is because he is very accessible (but most others are, too), or because he is the only professor who insists on being called by his first name (whereas others welcome this, but do not insist) and that unconsciously reduced the hierarchical gap between the two of us, who have unequal power.

Even with an analytical mind, I still cannot explain what is so different about Dr. K. I can only say from experience that as a woman who does not always feel comfortable with her body in a male-dominated world, I can simply be without even noticing my being when I am with Dr. K. Even when he had to tell me in my first year that one of my papers was not up to standard (due mainly to physical illness at the time), it did not change my comfort level with him.

Dr. K possesses many great qualities of a professor, but he is not as skilled at dissertation supervision in helping students sharpen their ideas and hypotheses, advising students on the dissertation’s organization and presentation, and other needs. Nonetheless, I have come to learn that instead of focusing on his limitations, it is better for me to rely on Dr. K’s strengths. Since he is always available through email or to meet in person if so scheduled, I bring Dr. K my very specific questions to discuss with him. Even though there were times when I needed to find some other resources, my mentor-mentee relationship with Dr. K has worked well for me.

The formation of doctoral education is more than completing a dissertation. While I have not been able to gain certain support that I would have liked from my mentor, Dr. K has played a more than significant role. He bridged the academic world for me in and outside of the institution by encouraging me to attend professional meetings, he connected me with relevant groups and people, and he invited me to participate in projects that he is a part of which would not have come my way otherwise.

Consequently, I have the privilege of standing on a giant’s shoulders, absorbing his knowledge and wisdom. Dr. K chats with me as a friend about his career experience without pretense and without a mask. Transferring knowledge while having a natural, non-orchestrated conversation is probably one of Dr. K’s greatest gifts.

A few years ago I was provided an opportunity to help sort thousands of papers in Dr. K’s office. These papers had accumulated over decades and organizing them...
was long overdue. Candidly Dr. K said to me that I was welcome to read anything in his office that might interest me. Intending to take a break from reading for coursework, I only paid attention to the documents’ contents insofar as I knew how to file them. But to this day, I am still stunned by a professor in the third act of life who can say to his student, whom he trusts, that she could read anything in his office should she wish to. Perhaps the reason that I can be so comfortable with myself around Dr. K is because he is very comfortable with himself to begin with.

In those years when I was wrestling with the feeling of being out of place in a male-dominated world, I had a mentor whose being allowed me to simply be.

My sense of belonging took a turn for the better in my third year into the program, and there are increasing moments that I feel that I am on a par with my colleagues. Still, I am a woman of color in a white world, and I do not know if it is realistic to hope that there will be a day when I can simply be without having to notice my being. Even so, I am eternally grateful that in those years when I was wrestling with the feeling of being out of place in a male-dominated world, I had a mentor whose being allowed me to simply be, with total ease.

The mentoring process for my pursuit of a PhD began before I started the program. That was the year the school and the research center that supervised PhD students went through a transition.

In addition to working with my mentor who was a faculty member, the school was searching for a new dean and the director of the research center was looking for another job. A new dean was appointed in 2012 and a new research director came onboard in 2014.

Mentor One, my first mentor, was one of the key persons who—with his insights into contextual theology and his pastoral heart for students—inspired me to pursue a PhD. However, a gap emerged between his expertise on Latin American contexts and my pursuit of biblical dialogue with Confucian traditions.

Mentor One has rich experience with directing PhD students. He suggested a path for my research and introduced me to a Chinese scholar. But neither of these professionals matched my special interests in Confucian traditions and Chinese church history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This gap tore me apart. I sensed that I needed a mentor with knowledge in Asian Christianity. When the new dean arrived with his years of teaching experience in Southeast Asia, I sought his mentorship. He graciously took me under his wing and became my second mentor. A year later, Mentor Two connected me with a professor who specialized in Confucian studies, and he became Mentor Three.

What I did not expect was that, as a new dean, Mentor Two prioritized his deanship over mentoring me. I learned this at the mid-term defense of my PhD research proposal. The week prior to the defense date, Mentor Two’s schedule was packed with meetings. He complained that I did not turn in my proposal early enough for his review. During the defense, he left me to face
difficult questions by myself. This experience was quite different from the defense of my fellow PhD student, which I attended as a student committee member. In that defense, the student’s mentor spoke well of her work and in some instances defended her.

One of the comments from my committee regarding my research stated that I received insufficient guidance. I think the comment referred to both of my first two mentors.

Mentor Three became my boss for two years after I completed my last research project on Confucianism under her guidance and passed my comprehensive exam. Her mentoring during my research project and working with her were the best mentor-mentee experiences I have had, so much so that I wished that Mentor Three could have been my mentor from the beginning. I could not ask for a switch because he was my supervisor, and I was at the last stage of my PhD program of dissertation writing. It made no sense to switch mentors at this point. Meanwhile, Mentor Two tried to spend more time mentoring me.

Due to my full-time job, my dissertation writing lagged behind. Mentor Two started scheduling monthly 30-minute meetings with his PhD students, including me. Due to work and scheduling issues, a few of our monthly meetings were canceled or rescheduled. I had three meetings with Mentor Two. I would turn in about thirty pages of writing in advance of each meeting. Mentor Two would read the first fifteen to twenty pages of my writing. His succinct feedback proved to be very helpful. The problem was that he would never get to the rest of my writing as he promised.

In summer 2017 I realized that I must concentrate on my dissertation writing in order to complete it in 2018. Mentor Two had scheduled a four-month sabbatical during that critical time. As a result, I received no input, beginning at the point when I fully dedicated myself to dissertation writing. When Mentor Two returned to campus in January 2018, I was working on my last chapter before the conclusion. His feedback on my dissertation at that time was so insightful that I wished I had received it earlier.

Learning from past experiences of promised but undelivered feedback, I worked with the research center to follow up with Mentor Two on all the deadlines needing his input for my graduation. In addition, I scheduled appointments with committee members to seek their input about areas of my work needing attention prior to my dissertation defense. These are skills and steps I learned from other PhD students, not from the instruction or suggestions of the research center.

I offer the following reflection points.

First, usually students are learning how to narrow down their research topic in the first year of their PhD program. Mentors can introduce students to other professors to broaden students’ perspectives on their research at that pivotal point in time.

Second, every student has unique needs. I recognize that Mentor Two has a high quality of scholarship, and I learned much from his feedback. He seems to interact better with students who are advanced in their research ability. I wish mentors would recognize students’ unique learning curves and give guidance according to their varying levels of expertise. For example, I needed more encouragement and detailed guidance. When I asked Mentor Two for bibliography suggestions, I received little help.

Third, mentors need to show respect to students. Due to Mentor Two’s busy schedule, sometimes our meetings began late and ended early without much advance notice. It was hurtful to be treated this way. When I communicated to Mentor Two’s administrative assistant that I did not want my meetings cut short, the behavior later improved.

Fourth, mentors’ follow-through on their promises makes for reliable mentorship and healthy relationship. If Mentor Two had a good record of delivering feedback according to his promise, it would have saved me much anxiety and energy spent following up with him.
No. 16: Negotiating with the Elders

Negotiating the committee for my qualifying exams and dissertation was the most stress-inducing part of the doctoral process for me. It sounds weird to say, because dissertation writing was also stressful. But the process of deciding who would be on my committee went against so much of what I was taught about how to approach and relate to my elders.

At my institution, there is an exam committee of at least four professors and a dissertation committee of at least three professors (for the most part, all three members of the dissertation committee were on the exam committee). One of those professors, in each committee, must be from another institution.

Each doctoral student adviser approaches the selection of the various committees differently. Some advisers create the committee themselves, with varying levels of input from their students. My adviser gave me more agency. Together my adviser and I figured out the exam subjects that made the most sense for me, and then it was left up to me to find two professors who would work with me.

At first, I appreciated the agency. I much prefer to create a path that works for me than to follow a cookie-cutter path. I valued the flexibility to pick exam areas that would work for the kind of scholar I wanted to be. Yet, when it came time to decide which professors would sit on the committee, it became very uncomfortable. I felt like I was auditioning them, and it was especially uncomfortable with the Black faculty. I was a Black student speaking and negotiating with Black faculty whom I respected, but the process felt very disrespectful.

I do not think that any of them would say that I was disrespectful. They were aware of the process that students in my department usually followed. They were happy to meet with me and to sit on my committee. They were also happy to not have the work of reading an extra exam or dissertation. And of course, they could say “no” if they had enough students of their own and did not want to participate in the process. Still, I felt like I was being asked to approach people who were not my peers and to treat them as such.

I read her questions as objections I needed to rebut. I did not think it was my place to convince her to be on the committee. I thought that would be pretentious and presumptuous. I told my adviser that this went against my upbringing and felt very unnatural. He coached me on how to approach the professor. I told him about her hesitance and he told me to not to take it personally. She was acting in her self-interest and I would have to act in mine. I asked him to approach her for me as one peer to another. He said that he would do it if he had to, but he wanted to teach me how to advocate for myself.

While my adviser understood my cultural upbringing and the deference that is given to elders, he knew that advocating and negotiating for myself would be an extremely important part of my career. I was preparing to enter an academy that is still mostly white and mostly male. While the demographics are changing, many of the current structures and expectations throughout the academy still assume that professors are privileged men with stay-at-home wives.
Navigating the academy as a Black woman takes particular skills, and one of those skills is negotiating. As my adviser mentored me through this process, I learned the importance of negotiation. I learned that it is not rude or disrespectful to ask for what I need in order to be successful. I learned that negotiating does not have to be hostile—it does not have to be done in the style of the alpha white male jerk that is portrayed in television and film.

My adviser taught me that I could be respectful of my elders while doing what is best for me. I also learned that if great people want to mentor me, I should let them. I now realize that many of the elders I did not want to bother actually take pride in mentoring new scholars. My adviser also taught me that I was acting as if I were a burden or not worthy. Even if I had no interest in approaching the professors the way that some of my white peers did, it did not mean that I had no right to approach them at all. I could negotiate in a manner that honored both my upbringing and my future.

No. 17: English as a Second or Third Language

As an international student who aspires to be a scholar, I tried my best to follow the standard of academia in the United States. I have published several articles in journals of good reputation and I have taught several courses. However, I am still struggling with some fundamental issues pertaining to a non-native English speaker, such as writing and speaking eloquently in English and finding my place in a space which is predominantly occupied by white people.

In the midst of my struggle, I find the mentoring process from faculty in my area, especially my academic adviser, very helpful. Besides the monthly area colloquium, where faculties and PhD students meet regularly and discuss each other’s works or new books in the field, my academic adviser in particular has given me tremendous support. I want to highlight three things from my mentor-mentee experience: (1) trust from my academic adviser, (2) space to grow at my pace, and (3) help with English grammar.

My adviser is a very thoughtful person. From the beginning, he never imposes his will and view on me. Instead, he listens to my thoughts and plans and gives useful insights. During my coursework stage, I was able to take courses related to my academic interests. It is evident that he does not instruct me to become like him and is comfortable with who I am. He trusts my discerning capability not only in matters related to the completion of the program, but also to those related to personal development and future careers, such as presenting a paper in a conference and teaching courses.

When I became his teaching assistant for a year-long core course, he provided a chance for me to accumulate experience as a teacher by assigning me to one of the two discussion sessions, which prompted me to teach weekly. Afterward, I felt
I need other jobs in order to cover the living costs of my family, and my adviser understands this well.

Learning other languages is quite a herculean feat for me because I have to translate them into English. I failed the French exam two times during the coursework stage because I didn’t have enough time to study for it. At that time, I had four courses plus a teaching assistantship for a class.

After completing the coursework at the end of the second year, I decided to take a summer intensive class for French to satisfy the requirement, which I did successfully. However, I still had to meet the Arabic requirement for comprehensive exams. Another failure would delay the completion of the comprehensive exams up to one year.

My adviser knew my struggle well. Instead of giving me a test, he let me join his class for several months to assess my Arabic proficiency. I took the offer and joined the class, which read Arabic texts every week. After completing all language requirements, I managed to finish the comprehensive exams and wrote a dissertation proposal. The following summer I enrolled in an intensive Arabic course to polish my proficiency in reading Arabic. Learning languages has never been my forte, so I am glad for the chance of developing them at my own pace.

I also want to delineate my experience of dealing with English grammar. I came from a country in Asia where English is not the first or even the second language. Although my current school has better facilities and funding opportunities, I am not very comfortable with its writing center. (When I enrolled in a master’s program at a seminary, it had a better writing consultant—one who had a theology and religious studies background.)

I only used the writing center a few times during the first semester. During the coursework stage, I got some help from some colleagues—especially from a friend who is an Asian American PhD student elsewhere—to polish my final papers. Some professors, including my adviser, were willing to offer not only insights regarding the content, but also some improvements to the paper regarding the grammar. However, since entering the dissertation stage I have been more reluctant to ask my colleagues because I know they are all very busy.

While the teaching experience has been helpful in improving my written and spoken English, I still could not entirely ease my anxiety with the grammar when I started writing the research proposal. Fortunately, my adviser focused more on giving constructive comments about the content, which really comforted me. Not only that, he was also willing to fix the grammatical mistakes even though that was not his responsibility.

Surprisingly, after I sent the revised proposal to two faculty members on my dissertation committee, both of them posted not only constructive comments about the content but also some corrections of the grammar. As an international student, this kind of support is precious, and I really appreciate it.

Knowing that I have the support of all faculty on my dissertation committee (my adviser is a Caucasian male, while the two readers are a Caucasian female and an African American female) eases my anxiety about writing in English, and I can focus more on the content. I want to respond to their support by improving my English even more.
My mentor and I have had some hits and misses over the past few years. His area of expertise is not completely the same as mine, so we have been learning some things along the way as we have gotten to know each other better.

The relationship with my mentor has been different from what I expected.

For some reason, I imagined being taken under someone’s wing. I envisioned my mentor introducing me to people at various conferences who might be interested in my research. I imagined doing writing projects for and with my mentor. I imagined my mentor setting me up for a new life in academia. However, none of this came to pass.

To be fair, my mentor did a great job making sure I was on track with the doctoral process. He helped me think of people I could work with to help build my research. In short, my mentor did what I needed to get through my program.

I think there are a few factors that have contributed to the dynamics of our relationship. One factor is that we are fairly close in age. At times our meetings with one another feel more peer-related than mentoring. Also, I am an Asian American female and he is a white male. These factors are important because of the way we view the mentor-mentee relationship. It took a couple of years for me to realize that my Asian upbringing still leads me to see him as my formal mentor. This means I have expectations of hearing approval and disapproval from him the way I would from a supervisor or professor. However, he seems to have viewed our relationship as more peer-related.

This dynamic came into conflict at a time of crisis when I needed to hear some approval from my mentor. I needed to hear encouragement from him about the quality of work I was producing. When we talked about this, he admitted he didn’t realize I was looking for this kind of feedback, pointing to our more equal relationship. I can’t help but see this through a cultural lens. He saw us as friends and I saw him as my mentor. To tease out the nuances even more, he thought he was honoring me more by treating me as an equal and, while I appreciated that, I still had a need for my supervisor to operate in the mentor-mentee hierarchy a little.

I also needed my mentor to be present. When I first started the program, my mentor was on sabbatical. He said his PhD students were a priority, but I also knew he was busy working on some other projects during this sabbatical. This was a difficult way to start a working relationship. Over the course of the first year I found it frustrating that he was available for quick meetings to discuss the next step of my program, but not much more.

I assumed this was how all mentor-mentee relationships operated until I started seeing other professors offering research projects, book chapters, and teaching assistant opportunities to their mentees. It often ran through my mind that perhaps my mentor was not meeting with me because of my gender. I had no idea how to approach this subject. He was meeting with me to do what was required, but I didn’t feel any particular mentoring going on between us.

As a woman of color, it’s hard to tell if microaggressions are due to my gender or heritage or both. And as an underling, I did not feel comfortable bringing up the subject. So I stayed silent, all the while feeling like I was left alone to find out how to develop my own scholarship and professional formation.

As I met with professors of color and found different mentors at conferences with women of color, I saw the distinct differences in my relationship with my own mentor. The professors of color were connecting me to scholarship and guilds that were much closer to my own context. They gave me advice on which groups to work with, who I should get to know, and what I should expect when I start applying for positions. These were the conversations I had been needing, but could not find from my own mentor or school in general.

The professors of color were connecting me to scholarship and guilds that were much closer to my own context.
When my mentor asked a white master’s student to help him with a book proposal, I realized I needed to say something. We talked about how frustrated I had been feeling over the years. I admitted how much I was hoping he would give me more opportunities for writing and research. He realized he thought he was protecting me from being overworked. What I had to point out was that as a woman of color, I have to show that I have much more competence in my field than my white male colleagues—that I have published more, taught more, and generally done more—because the favor still leans their way in Christian higher education. Without knowing it, my mentor was “protecting me,” while my white male colleagues were being asked to write chapters in books and head research projects.

What I realized from this time was that I need a mentor who will not only champion me but also encourage me and help me connect with opportunities to publish, lead, and teach. I can’t afford to be “protected,” because it means that I will stay invisible. This is the difficulty in being an Asian American female in a white, male-dominated system.

I believe that networking and opportunities are some of the greatest things a mentor can help their mentees with. Yes, we do need help with our scholarship and our research skills. We do need feedback on our teaching methods and presentation skills. But in a tight market like the one students are facing today, we also need mentors who can help us navigate the new face of academia today. We need mentors who will connect us with other professors of color if they cannot help us with certain aspects of our professional development. We need mentors who can see us.

My experience as an Asian American female in a doctoral program at a Christian seminary has been more difficult than I originally expected. I was ready to sacrifice time and funds to pursue this degree. I was not prepared to sacrifice my mental well-being as well.

I did not know how difficult it would be to sit in a doctoral seminar with 20 men and three women, most of whom are white. I did not know how often I would have to confront my colleagues after I reached a tipping-point from the constant barrage of microaggressions. I did not know how much I needed a female Asian American adviser.

My mentor is a white female. Our relationship has been helpful in many ways and a bit constricted in other ways. She told me that about 20 years ago there was a big push for women in the PhD program as well as for female professors. Since then it seems that the institution has become lackadaisical in its efforts, and these standards have fallen to the wayside.

For the past three years of my program, I have noticed each entering PhD class has had only one woman. Another thing I notice is that while my program has a fair number of women professors, there are no women of color among the regular full-time faculty. This particular fact has since been a sore point for me as I have been looking for mentorship that can address the intersectionality of my context as a woman of color.

This is not just a problem in my program, but in my school at large. There are very few women of color who are considered full-time and/or tenured professors. While I have been asked by administrators how to invite more women into the PhD program, it is difficult for me to fathom inviting any women to a place where they will be underrepresented not just in their classes, but by their faculty as well.

The normalization of white men in my school, along with the severe lack of
women of color, has caused me great pain for the past two years of my program. I have experienced microaggressions from my colleagues on a regular basis and have developed depression and inflated insecurities as a result. While my mentor has been helpful to walk with me in some of this pain to some degree, her lack of intersectional context limits her understanding of the ways I experience these microaggressions. I find myself editing what I say to her as a result of ways that she has responded to me without fully understanding my experience as an Asian American woman.

As a female professor, my mentor has been supportive in helping me navigate some of the gendered norms in Christian academia. She has encouraged me to network and to find others who have similar interests. But I have realized that because we come from different cultural contexts, she cannot connect me to other Asian Americans. Her networks are limited to her own areas of research interest. While this is generally true of all professors, the lack of diversity among our faculty school-wide exacerbates this problem. There are no other women of color on the faculty to whom I can turn, so I must settle for getting all that I can from what my mentor can give in terms of networks, contextual understanding, and encouragement. Please note that I am very much appreciative of her and all that she has helped me with. However, since meeting other Asian American women faculty in other schools, I have become aware of how much I have been missing in terms of mentorship.

When I met other Asian American female faculty, they talked to me in very different terms, which I had not heard from anyone in my school. They talked to me about using my voice, speaking my narrative, taking up space, and not making myself smaller physically and metaphorically. They understood the nuances of what it is as an Asian American woman to be sitting in a seminar with all white men. They told me how to stand at the podium when presenting a paper. They told me about guilds to join and other Asian American professors I should know about in my field. A whole new world of advising opened up to me that I did not know existed. This is what I was missing because of the homogenous faculty at my school.

I have missed opportunities for scholarship, fellowships, and networking because my mentor is not aware of the networks provided for doctoral students of color. As I’ve met students from other schools, I have realized their mentors were able to help them with fellowship applications for students of color, such as FTE fellowships. My mentor does not know very much, if anything, about the FTE fellowships. Additionally, she does not know the networks for Asian American scholars that I could have accessed earlier in my program. This has been a great disadvantage to me.

Over the past few months, I have taken a more proactive approach to seeking mentorships from female faculty of color. I have reached out to faculty from other schools via social media. This has taken extra research on my part. It seems that very few if any faculty from my school have any knowledge about how to connect their Asian American doctoral students to the range of academic networks that could serve them and where they could begin to make their own contributions. I believe that I am currently the only female Asian American doctoral student in any of our programs.

My mentor has given me some great opportunities to lecture and research with her. She has checked in on my personal well-being, my family’s well-being, and my relationships with other faculty and students. I do feel supported by her, but I also know that I need more diversity among the faculty. I am grateful to have a woman as my mentor, but with the current climate around race in the United States, a woman of color would have also been helpful to me as I navigate patriarchal, white academia.
No. 20: Challenges Faced by International Students

I am a PhD candidate from East Asia. I would like to share my story of struggling and being mentored by my adviser and other faculty and staff from the beginning of my PhD program to recent days. I am indebted to not only my adviser, but to other professors in my field, the director of the writing center, and to our school chaplain for my surviving as an international student.

I had completed a master’s program in the United States before I started my PhD program. One of the reasons why I chose my school was the relationship between my master’s program adviser and my current adviser—and my master’s program adviser’s strong recommendation to attend my current school. I now have the privilege of having a great adviser who has mothered me despite her extremely busy schedule and my slow growth.

When I started my PhD program, I struggled for various reasons. First, the level of academic rigor and the required quality of papers was very different from master’s programs where I had performed successfully in both my country and in the United States.

After finishing my first semester, I expected some ‘A’ grades because I self-confidently wrote doctoral papers which were much better than the ‘A’ papers in my master’s program. However, I received only a few ‘B+’ grades and an ‘A-’, and this made me frustrated and disappointed.

It was clear that I needed time to enhance my academic skills and to learn about American academic cultures. Fortunately, my adviser had great patience with me and paid greater attention to my strengths than to my weaknesses. I have since given some academic presentations at conferences and have published articles in a peer-review journal and in an edited volume. I realize that if my adviser did not have patience with me during my first two to three years, my 3.5 grade point average could have disturbed the continuation of my PhD program.

One of my challenges was skill in writing and speaking. Writing and speaking styles in the United States and the Western world are different from those of East Asia.

For example, U.S. faculty standards demand me to put the thesis statement at the front of the paper and paragraph. However, courteous and polite manners in my culture of writing and speaking required me to put my argument and proposal at the end. In my country, if I put my argument and thesis at the beginning of a written piece or an oral presentation, I would have been thought impolite! Some of my white American professors did not have the patience to wait until reading the end of my essays. I had to overcome strange feelings of putting thesis statements and suggestions at the front in both my writing and talks.

My adviser had a good heart and understanding of international students who come from different cultures. She kindly explained the difference between Western academic writing and my writing style. The director of the writing center helped me, too. If faculty and staff wish to create a better educational environment for students of color and students of languages other than English, I suggest having a quality writing center and staff. I have heard that some so-called top university and seminary programs are too proud to have a writing center or equivalent support for their students. But the writing center sometimes serves as a community center for international students and students of color.

In an earlier stage of my program, one of my parents in my home country had some medical issues. I was very concerned and I needed care. My adviser was extremely busy, but she engaged another professor in my field and the school chaplain, and they provided care for me.

Thanks to their emotional and administrative support (such as counseling and help with finding some on-campus work), I was able to overcome that difficult time. Students of color are sometimes in a vulnerable condition (financially, emotionally, and administratively), but they are shy and often do not share their issues with faculty and staff other than their adviser. If information about students who need help is shared among faculty, it would support students of color in a better way.

I also want to share the academic mentoring and training patterns of my adviser. I
know that there are many different styles of advisers. Some want to control every aspect of students’ research, while others give students freedom within a well-designed boundary.

My adviser received her PhD from a school where students’ independent research is encouraged. Instead of controlling my research, she encouraged me to work independently. This mentoring style has both strengths and weaknesses. If my adviser controlled me at an earlier stage of my program, I could have saved time and energy in finding my research topic. On the other hand, working independently gave me chances to enhance my own skills and manage my research with minimal checkups and guides. My skills and ability to work independently may be constructive in my future research and job opportunities. For this, I give thanks to my adviser for her style of mentoring and teaching.
Create Conditions for Mentees to Thrive

Foundational to the grant activities with the Institutional Doctoral Network—the group of 10 institutions who receive grants from FTE—was the question, “How do we create conditions for students and scholars of color to thrive?” This section answers that question.

CARE Practices Offer Support and Safety

Following decades of working with doctoral students, FTE’s President Stephen Lewis, President of the Interdenominational Theological Center and FTE’s former Vice President Matthew Wesley Williams, and Senior Fellow Dori Baker write about “CARE practices” in their book, Another Way: Living and Leading Change on Purpose. These practices are core vocational discernment practices with doctoral students and young adults. They are the foundational principles of FTE’s work, and also expressions of decades of learning from mentoring initiatives.

CARE is an acronym for:

» Create hospitable space
» Ask self-awakening questions
» Reflect theologically together
» Enact the next most faithful step

The essays in this section reflect and map onto this approach. Central to the narratives (essay Nos. 21, 22, and 23), is the value of creating hospitable space and asking deep questions. It is perhaps best expressed in No. 23 when the author says, “As I looked around at all the Asian women’s faces in the room, I felt for the first time that I belonged. I felt safe.”

Essay No. 24, written as a letter to a mentor, could have been placed in the previous section on power, but is found here because it is a reminder to the mentees that they should ask better questions and ask for what they need.

The author issues a challenge to future mentors: “Please check your own assumptions and process your own sense of being. In other words, do as much of the work you are calling us to do. After all, we both are more than pages read, chapters written, or years served.”

This call to ask deeper questions—and to act on them—is reflected in essay Nos. 25 and 26.

Reflecting on Reality

Reminders for all to mentor in community, and to reflect together, are highlighted in essay Nos. 27, 28, and 29. This is clear in No. 27 when the author says:

Together, I have had to work with faculty members of color to undermine and resist patriarchy and white supremacy for the benefit of both the professor and student. I am trying to underscore that the mentoring relationship should not be only one-way, with one person giving and pouring so much into another individual’s life and the other only receiving. The exchange can and should go both ways.

This section could not conclude with a better voice than the writer of essay No. 30. She tells the story about how the mentoring relationship was navigating the realities of the academy. At the same time, it is about learning to value, trust, and know that we are enough:

The committee agreed that I did not need a white male scholar to validate my work when I had the likes of Delores Williams and Katie Cannon in my work. They were classical enough. Neither whiteness nor maleness was needed to validate the voice of a Black woman who was writing about the lived experiences of Black females.

When mentees are encouraged and empowered to contribute to the scholarly discourse with their voices, narratives, histories, traditions, theologies, values, and names—and to call on the ancestors by name—that is always a “unique contribution to the field.”

The academy has yet to recognize that work in its full capacity. To enact one’s next most faithful step, just writing, surviving, and thriving is enough. Mentors who
facilitate that work are the mentors who create conditions for students and scholars of color to thrive.

A Mentoring Pro Tip from FTE
FTE encourages mentors to see their work as creating the conditions for their mentees to thrive. To do this work well, we encourage mentors to expand the mentees’ imagination by helping them ask better questions, not just of their research.

No. 21: Creating a Favorable Atmosphere

I am an East African theologian who came to the United States of America a few years ago to do my doctoral studies. The doctoral program for theological studies has been a great journey, helping me to grow theologically and shape my whole person in diverse ways.

The experiences I have had with my mentor had significant bearings on my academic achievement, as well as on my personality and scholarly development. I will briefly discuss some positive experiences I had with my mentor and how they played a significant role in my doctoral studies.

The PhD program in the seminary has two stages. The first stage allows the student to complete major seminar works, directed readings, and comprehensive exams. In the second stage, the student defends a writing proposal and completes the dissertation. Although the student works with a mentor primarily during the second stage of the program, the mentor plays a crucial role in determining the path that the student takes and the appropriate coursework that needs to be completed before taking the comprehensive exams.

Although I began my studies with a mentor assigned by the school, our relationship did not last. Within a short period of time, I learned that the professor did not have the expertise I needed in my area of research. This and the fact that he was not available during the initial stage of my program, together with some personal issues, brought an end to our short-lived academic relationship. That was one of my most unpleasant experiences in the doctoral program, and it taught me the importance of mentor selection before pursuing a PhD.

During the breakup with my previous mentor, I was taking a seminar with a professor who later became my new mentor. This seminar was decisive in helping me observe the professor and consider him to be my mentor. He already had a full load of doctoral students, but I am so thankful that he was willing to take me on.

The mentor plays a crucial role in determining the path that the student takes.
That was one of the best decisions I made, and I am glad that things worked out for me to become his student. Our first meeting was inspirational. It helped us get to know each other and stirred up initial thoughts about the topic that interested me for dissertation work.

One of the things that my mentor did to help his mentees was to hold regular weekly book-reading meetings at his home on diverse issues based on our research interests. Since most of the students he was mentoring were in the initial phase of the program, this provision allowed us to maintain regular contact with him. We also learned from one another as we worked through the first stage. Moreover, as an international student, these meetings made it easier for me to engage with students from this culture and other parts of the world.

When I started the second stage of the program, I began to work closely with my mentor on the dissertation proposal. That was a critical moment for me to shape my research project. My mentor, along with my second reader, was invaluable throughout the development of my dissertation, midterm evaluation, and the final defense.

I would say accessibility is the most important component in the mentor-mentee relationship. Obviously the mentor's availability makes a vital contribution to the success of a doctoral student, especially for a student of color like me. My mentor made himself available even more than he was required. Meeting with him once every two or three weeks no matter what progress I made in writing gave me positive energy to thrive. Our meetings were like breathing oxygen into my work and sparked creative ideas that motivated me to write more.

I liked my mentor's determination not to spoon-feed me even when I was really desperate and got frustrated in dealing with research issues. I appreciated his encouragement to do more research of my own. His approach made me stay aware of new advances in the field, and he shared information to help me go in the right direction. Accountability was another key area. My mentor helped me by setting clear and achievable goals—and he made sure that I was meeting them.

On a personal level, my mentor's approach has been remarkable. It enabled me to grow in confidence and provided the necessary emotional support to keep me going. I have appreciated his honest and gentle feedback when something was not working or I needed to change direction.

For the most part, I was lucky enough to enjoy a positive mentoring experience. The personality and deliberate actions of my mentor have played a crucial part in creating this positive experience. The role of mentors is more than providing professional advice and supervision. It also involves creating a favorable atmosphere, especially for students who come from a different culture. Students of color deal with cultural issues as much as they deal with the need for academic excellence.

Faculty members who are responsible for mentoring students of color need to learn how to engage them to be successful in their theological studies and develop competence in diverse ways.
Mentoring, in my experience, has been akin to speaking something into being—like uttering the words, “Let there be…” into creation.

An important mentoring relationship began during my undergraduate studies, and it led me to graduate education. A white female religion professor strongly recommended that I apply to a Master of Divinity program that eventually opened up my small world and changed the course of my life. The professor saw my academic potential and publicly recognized my achievements in front of the class. Her recognition and special interest energized me to do better. When my non-American parents had no idea how to guide me regarding graduate school, she provided the mentoring I needed by suggesting different options for my future. I doubted that I could even get into the one school that she recommended, but she persisted and expressed faith that I could make it in with my grades. Her encouragement, faith, and practical guidance ended up changing my life and vocation.

I applied only to the one school since that was all I knew. I was accepted and took a huge leap of faith to attend graduate school. At seminary I excelled in my coursework and tried to succeed by being as white as possible. I did not know that I was trying to conform to whiteness back then, but looking back, that was what I was doing. I never questioned the racial divide, the Eurocentric curriculum, and the poor treatment of students of color.

Mentoring was largely absent as it felt intimidating to me to approach professors. I was miserable and depressed, overworking myself, and in need of help. But the actions of a few professors stand out in my mind.

One white professor commented several times on my paper that he saw my potential in doctoral studies. This was during my senior year, and I was burnt out. I also felt that the Eurocentric education I had received felt mostly irrelevant to the ministerial contexts of people of color. The prospect of five years of doctoral studies did not appeal to me at the time.

But the seeds of his words stayed planted in my mind. Many years later, after I experienced the limits of my knowledge and skills in ministry, I revisited the professor for advice on doctoral programs. He listened carefully and gave me practical guidance.

I also consulted with a white female professor, who invited me into her home and listened to me for a long time. She helped me edit my purpose statement because she had faith in my academic potential and the heart behind my studies. Knowing that I did not know the academic language to express my scholarly interests and motives in a way that would get me into the system, she helped me sharpen my writing skills. If it were not for her help, I would never have entered a doctoral program. I feel so grateful for her patient and compassionate mentoring.

While these two professors helped me significantly, I still needed mentoring in other areas, which I did not know until I went through the process of interviewing for doctoral studies. I was very naïve about preparing for interviews and the need to read up on faculty and the intersections between their interests and mine. No one told me about the importance of funding and how the lack of funding might impact my studies and career. Looking back, I wish someone had advised me on these practical matters. Mentors helping me walk through every part of this process would have made a world of difference.

Professors’ recognition, detailed comments, and encouragement functioned as important mentoring activities that helped me find my gifts. Some professors took extra steps to suggest possible ways to advance my career or to pursue higher education. These small suggestions ended up changing my life and vocational direction.

Professors can speak and teach students’ futures into being, and that is a powerful thing. Particularly with students of color from low socioeconomic backgrounds, professors should take extra steps to mentor them in basic things that they never learned. Simply pointing to the need to prepare for interviews or to learn basic information about codeswitching, etiquette, and writing style in graduate institutions can open up greater opportunities.
When I entered doctoral studies, I did not know how to be more proactive in a huge university setting. Previously, professors had noticed me and encouraged me to take advantage of certain opportunities. Now my adviser was available only when I sought him out.

If I had known more when I first started the program, I would have advised my first-year self that no one is going to look out for you. You have to create your own opportunities and seek out mentoring relationships.

This was especially hard when none of the professors at my school looked like me. I never felt like I belonged. There was a white professor who was close to certain international students, but we noticed a strange cultural power dynamic. To be close to that professor, the international students tended to shower the professor with gifts and ingratiate themselves in ways that felt disingenuous and humiliating. When we noticed that the professor favored those students, we resented that mentoring relationships often came with an invisible price tag—groveling to the professor in the very ways we hated to see in unethical power dynamics back in our home country. Since I was so awkward at currying favor with professors, the school felt lonely. It was hard to find a mentor.

Then I found a group of Asian American women scholars. In that space, senior women scholars built mentoring relationships with younger women scholars through table fellowship, workshops, and seminars. These addressed graduate student needs such as feedback on dissertation proposals, advice for early career professors, or teaching young scholars how to publish their writing.

At my first meeting with these women, we did something cheesy like hold hands in a circle and sing a song. While I was very aware of the cheesy nature of this activity, I was surprised to find myself overcome with emotion. As I looked around at all the Asian women’s faces in the room, I felt for the first time that I belonged. I felt safe.

I was surprised by a longing fulfilled that I had not even known existed. The space was an invaluable form of communal mentorship. It affirmed my body and partly healed my weary soul.

Through this mentoring space, I was exposed to Asian American scholars and their important work, which were often left out of the curriculum. It also modeled to me the kind of mentor that I wanted to be for the scholars who will look up to me.

One thing that I found different about many Asian American women mentors was the level of hospitality and generosity with their financial, emotional, and intellectual resources. Never had a white professor bought me a meal or coffee, but faculty of color frequently invited us to meals. One professor went out with the students, spent a few hours listening to our concerns, and shared her personal stories—like the development of her academic journey and how she handled motherhood and teaching. Then she paid for the whole table. Needless to say, all of us poor graduate students were floored. This same professor later helped me edit a cover letter for a job, which led to several interviews.

Another professor from the same group invited us students into her home several times and cooked for us, creating a space where we could talk about anything from dissertations and publishing to life concerns. She invited me over for a celebratory meal when I passed my qualifying exams and then showed up to important life events like my marriage and ordination. Her professor husband and she always checked in about my dissertation and dangled the carrot in front of my eyes, saying, “You know, it’s really good to be on the other side.” They are my mentors—who have also become friends.

These mentors probably do not know the depth of impact they have made in my academic journey. They encouraged me to apply to positions and pushed my fears away by saying that it never hurts to apply. They mirrored to me the scholar that I was not yet confident enough to see in myself. They brought me closer to a world that seemed far from my reach and said, “You can do it. You should do it.”

They mirrored to me the scholar that I was not yet confident enough to see in myself.
Their encouragement and faith in me became fuel for me to keep going. After struggling physically and emotionally in the dissertation process, their presence pushed me to get to the library 12 hours a day every day, chipping away at my dissertation, prepping for presentations. They gave me a tangible goal and fed my motivation.

These positive encounters offered a very different experience than a certain economy of mentorship that I was observing at my institution. The professors that I call my mentors reached out generously with no price tag attached. They only asked that when I myself become a professor, I do not forget to mentor in the same way.

Sometimes, it feels as if white institutions are so afraid of blurring boundaries with their students that professors seem cold and withdrawn. I also hated the dynamic where students of color were vying for mentorship by offering special and deferential treatment to white professors. The mentorship that touched my life came instead from professors who practiced generosity and hospitality by opening up their hearts and homes to listen to my stories without imposing their own experiences. Most of all, they looked for many ways to encourage me and to see me with faith and hope through the dark valleys of graduate education.

I am grateful for the generous and unconditional seeds of hope that these mentors have planted in my life. Their mentorship has mainly come to me in subtle, small acts of hospitality and care that have grown over time—and continue to nourish my soul and strengthen my growth as a scholar.

No. 24: “Dear Faculty Mentor of Color…”

Author’s Note: This essay is written in the form of a letter. Where text is in italics, the context is specific to my experience with my primary adviser. Otherwise, it is intended to be generally applicable to other situations.

Dear Faculty Mentor of Color,

Hopefully you don’t mind that we write to you like this. You and we (your doctoral mentees of color) share a substantial degree of overlap in our personal, demographic, and politicized intersections. You often remind me, however informally, that we are both cisgendered, heterosexual, married, fathers, pastors, and scholars. Yet our academic interests, advocacy commitments, political opinions, sense of etiquette, cultural values, and teaching styles can, at times, pit us against each other.

You have felt our agony—haven’t you?—when we are forced to negotiate yet another potentially tense conversation under a cloud of feigned sensitivity, mandatory deference, and (more often) thick silence—deafening and choking.

So then, we both are aware there have been incidents where the sameness we share also demonstrates how utterly dissimilar we are from each other. It would serve us well to recall identifiable categories in which there is overlap yet where, also, there are significant differences—and this, as you know, is by no means an exhaustive list: we are low-church Protestant but from very different branches of the ecclesial family tree; we are ethnic minorities in both the academy and wider society, with the geographic/territorial space we share once belonging to the generational forebears of only one of us—and this, only after it had “belonged” to the forebears of others who had themselves been displaced by colonial power. We certainly also carry on complicated relationships with our theological school, where one of us has served at the highest levels of institutional administration.
There is a degree of privilege in being mentored by someone who understands much of what we experience. But you and we are not the same. You remind us of that fact, however unwittingly. We take note of it, however unseemingly.

O mentors of color, you articulate that there is space sufficient for us mentees of color and especially our representational differences to be lifted up, even perhaps valorized. The academy, you remind us, is lacking a perspective that we, in particular (and in our particularity), bring.

So why is it that our experiences, approaches, and values get filtered through your own? We only find validation once you give it; otherwise, we have not sufficiently “processed” who we are or “worked through” our complex assumptions. You are quick to point out that we will ever be held to a higher standard than our majority-culture peers.

The irony here is that you push us to study and to produce according to some standard that is far from being color-blind—to the degree that we wonder whether you are (merely) preparing us for what is to come, or whether you are (also, passively) perpetuating the very structures of differentiation that both give you the fodder to claim the harder work was already accomplished in your generation’s time and reify for us the matchless, untouchable, ineluctable reality of white privilege.

We (mentees of color) wonder: Did you ever think you would be perpetuating such imperialisms? Has expanding one’s mind, in the ghettoized context we both share, just become an expansion of the colonization of minds? From our perspective, this is expansion of the academy as empire—and you brand us and train us and speak to us and market us accordingly.

You and we must continue to struggle, together and apart, in order to understand just how thoroughly we both are intractably caught up in a colonizing dynamic. Conceptually, you might recognize this. But has this realization sunk into the depths of your heart as teachers and mentors—and as our future colleagues?

How are we ever to find solace amid the deep divide between such disparate and inherent ways-of-being /-thinking and /-doing? One more insurmountable dissimilarity between us must be named: your position of privilege to determine our future.

Might it be that we are not even as similar as we once thought?

And yet, there is this impulse we have not to abandon camaraderie and multilateralism. We mentees remind ourselves to question the imperial/colonial principles behind divide-and-rule—not owing to any lack of efficacy in that world-system (as the thrust of the grievances above would show), but out of our very desire to resist being subjugated to its logics.

Are we mentees of color thankful that we have a doctoral mentor who is also a person of color? Yes. And, as expected, no, not always.

In our most honest and sober moments, we would choose to believe that you mentors had a substantial influence in sharing with us the words to speak. Whether under your guidance or out of our frustration with you, we have come to find our voice.

Mentors of color, you have both showed us the way and forcibly driven us onto paths unpaved. So we walk, we march. We resist, yet perhaps only together. There is something of redemption here, while we mentees of color are mindful not to give Empire its due. Shall we not render unto Caesar? We shall not, because this gift of difference does not truly “belong” to him/her.

Not quite the words of life, but you have given us speech.

So then, please hear when we speak.

Please do not assume we are here to serve you, as if held captive to the logics of binary thought. We are here for other reasons, some even as noble as your own.

There is this impulse we have not to abandon camaraderie.
Please show us a better way of being different, since you enjoy certain privileges we might never know. We might surprise you by doing the same, even within the context of our mentorship.

Please show more care in the ways you relate to us while we are being formed under your watch. What we know of mentoring is, in a very large part, being shaped even now by what we experience under your care.

We are both more than pages read, chapters written, or years served.

Please check your own assumptions and process your own sense of being. In other words, do as much of the work you are calling us to do. After all, we are both more than pages read, chapters written, or years served.

No. 25: Make a Difference

I t was my first semester teaching my own class. I was a doctoral student, and the class of 35 had only two students of color—a South Asian woman and a half-white, half-Chinese man who was white-passing. The rest were white.

One day, toward the beginning of the semester, there was an incident on campus of a person scrawling racist graffiti on the dorm room of a Black student. I received a campus-wide email detailing the incident and asking that all faculty members address the issue in class as soon as possible. Since I had scheduled my unit on race for much later in the semester, after I had built a rapport with my class, I was thrown for a bit of a loop.

I tried my best and scrapped my previous lesson plan for a discussion about the power and danger of language. Everything had been going well until the topic of affirmative action arose. To my shock, it was the half-Chinese student who most forcefully argued against affirmative action. Within a few minutes a class consensus had formed around the idea that affirmative action was unfair—that it took away spots that some students “deserved” and gave them to other students who were “less qualified,” albeit belonging to racial minorities.

I found myself in a state of double discomfort.

First, I was attempting to find the best way to complicate the issue and to get the students to develop their own rationales for the benefits of affirmative action. I did not want to create a situation where it was simply the class arguing against the teacher, especially since I might have appeared to them as a person of color merely defending her own advantages. (Since then I have developed strategies for breaking class consensus—usually by assigning certain people to argue for the contrary opinion—but at the time I was still inexperienced.)

Secondly, I had become increasingly uncomfortable with the way the half-Chinese student continued to address me as a Chinese person who must necessarily agree
with him. It was as if he meant to say, “You’re the one getting disadvantaged by this policy, how can you support it?”

Little did he know, and I was not yet ready to share, that I had received a generous scholarship in my master’s program, which had been specifically designated for Chinese and Chinese-descendant students. I had been a beneficiary of affirmative action.

I left the classroom frustrated and emotionally exhausted, feeling as though I had failed as a pedagogue. I also felt torn down and diminished, as if I had been told by a crowd of white people that I did not truly belong here—and that I had only made it by taking a more deserving white person’s spot.

I called up my teaching mentor, who would later become one of my dissertation advisers, and told her about my experience. I asked her for teaching strategies for the future but also for advice on how to protect oneself against the cumulative wounding of microaggressions by students. After listening to my story she said, “I can’t really know what it is like to be a person of color in the university, but I can tell you about my experiences as…” She then went on to describe her experiences as a religious minority. She gave me concrete suggestions for class management but also talked about her own experiences of marginalization and microaggressions.

There are three specific actions my mentor took during our conversation that made this one of the most valuable mentoring experiences for me.

The first thing she did was to listen without interruption. After telling my story, she asked me clarifying questions to get more detail about my perspective about what happened. She never made assumptions about how I should have felt, but rather sought to understand and accept whatever emotions arose for me from my experience.

The second thing she did was acknowledge her inability to access my unique experience as a person of color. She did not try to show how being a religious minority was the same as being a racial minority. She was careful to draw the distinction between different types of oppression and how oppression manifests differently for different people. Finally, she offered concrete solutions and suggestions for dealing with future situations similar to this one.

What this positive mentoring experience made me realize is that white mentors (as well as white colleagues, friends, and others) sometimes jump straight to a kind of empathy that is—perhaps paradoxically—profoundly alienating.

If, for example, upon hearing my story, my mentor had gone straight into talking about her own challenging experiences as a religious minority, I would not have felt fully heard. I would have felt like she was trying to impose her own narrative over mine. By taking the time to acknowledge that although she could not fully empathize with my situation, she could nevertheless relate my experience to the things she has experienced, I felt both respected in my difference and supported by a sense of solidarity between us.

As an Asian person, I often feel “othered” or labeled as a “perpetual foreigner,” so I would not have responded well to a person who simply said that they could not fully relate to my experience. At the same time, as a woman—and even more so as an Asian woman—I often feel as though others impose their own understandings and assumptions on my experience, or, as Audre Lorde puts it, by drawing “false and treacherous connections” between my experience and theirs.

I realize that finding this balance between respecting difference and cultivating solidarity may feel like navigating the narrow channel between Scylla and Charybdis, but as my mentor demonstrates, it is more than possible. To feel seen and heard in my own uniqueness, while also connected to another, is a mentoring gift I cherish every day and hope one day to pass on.

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No. 26: “There’s No Way I Would Leave You Behind”

No single person has supported me more as a graduate student than my adviser.

Since the day we met—two years before I matriculated into the program—he has been a voice of constant support. It began at my very first conference.

I was a master’s student presenting at a graduate student conference at the university where my adviser taught. A senior scholar had publicly criticized my research methods during the question and answer session of my paper. As we were mingling during the reception that followed, the scholar who would become my mentor came up to me and told me he liked my paper. My feelings still hurt from the session. I laughed awkwardly and noted that not everyone had been impressed by my work. “Hmm. . . .” he paused, seeming to think for a moment. “Well, I liked it. I thought it was really good.”

It was this kind of subdued vote of confidence that has sustained me throughout the years. I remember, during my first week in the doctoral program, my adviser took me to lunch and listened to my anxieties about reading certain kinds of theory. I told him I didn’t think I was smart enough to ever understand such difficult texts. “Well, I want to push back on you on that,” he said. “I don’t think people are born with a certain finite amount of intelligence. I think it’s more like exercise. The more you do it—and if you’re patient—it gets easier. You’ll get it. Just keep reading.”

He was right.

I read—then I read some more. It got easier. Soon, without even noticing it, I was leading a theory reading group for grad students and teaching theory to my students. It always goes like this. No matter what challenges I face, my adviser always has my back. I have never sensed he doubted my ability to achieve my goals. I can’t remember how many times I’ve burst into his office with excitement—“This conference accepted my paper!” “This journal wants me to write a book review!” “I just found out I got the fellowship!”—only to have him smile and say, “Yeah. I told you so.”

But nothing in the long history of his support for me will ever come close to what happened with my dissertation prospectus. Our program has an interesting procedure for approving dissertation proposals. Unlike other universities, which generally have the student’s dissertation committee approve the student’s prospectus, our department requires that all proposals be passed through a doctoral committee. The year my proposal came before the doctoral committee, just by chance, it was comprised of all old white men. As a person of color, I noted this detail to my department chair, who assured me I would have nothing to worry about. Still trepidatious, but choosing to trust the process, I submitted my proposal—which had been approved by my adviser—to the committee. All the other proposals that came before this committee were submitted by my colleagues—all of whom were white.

Mine was the only proposal that was not approved. There are a lot of ways I would have expected an adviser—even a good adviser—to react. I thought my adviser would be disappointed with his colleagues, perhaps even annoyed, but at the end of the day would probably tell me to suck it up, revise my proposal, and resubmit it. I prepared myself to be told that sometimes life isn’t fair. I was not prepared, however, to see my adviser angrier than I have ever seen him before or since. I did not expect to hear him threaten to burn bridges, sever working relationships—perhaps even leave the university—over how the committee handled my proposal. My shock certainly showed on my face, but I wonder if he misread it in the moment, because he said, “Don’t worry. If I went somewhere else, I would take you with me. There’s no way I would leave you behind.”

The reason I was so surprised at that time was not because I thought he was going to abandon me, but because I never expected anyone to be willing to fight for me at all. I don’t have much of a relationship with my parents or extended family—and deciding to pursue this career instead of a more lucrative one in finance, medicine,
or law has something to do with it. I had long given up on the idea that anyone would fight for me. My parents never came to my defense, and if not them, then who? So to see my adviser act the way I had always wished my parents would—to see him willing to stand up for me, no matter who it was against—meant more to me than I can describe in words.

I know that to write, “A good mentor is a good parent,” is a terrifying sentence. The responsibilities of parenting and the stakes involved are much too high to apply to something like academic mentorship. Nevertheless, I think there are similarities between the two. Specifically, good mentoring, like good parenting, comes from a sense of people whose fates are tied to each other. As one rises, the other rises; as one falls, the other falls. This kind of a relationship involves a fair amount of mutual vulnerability, and is probably not ideal for every mentor-mentee relationship. I am not sure exactly where one ought to draw the line between a personal and a professional relationship—especially where certain gender and sexual dynamics are involved.

Still, I believe there is a way for mentors to communicate to their mentees that they stand behind them, even if it means taking on a certain amount of risk for themselves. The willingness to put oneself on the line for a mentee sends an important message. In an environment where students of color are constantly reminded that they don’t belong, it says, “I am here. I will fight for you.”

Good mentoring, like good parenting, comes from a sense of people whose fates are tied to each other.

At my institution, the graduate student association had to have an intentional conversation about the role of mentoring in student success.

For us, success includes both matriculation through the program and entry into institutions as a teacher or other vocations.

What we concluded is that professors at the institution are trained to advise, but many don’t have the skill set, fortitude, resources, or the commitment to mentor PhD students, especially students of color. As a result, many students of color lack the professional and emotional support needed to get through the program, which exacerbates the impact of the lack of financial, medical, and physical support.

I have witnessed students drop out of school or choose a different career path due to the lack of mentoring, support, or other resources. I personally know three women of color who were matriculating in my program. Each of them dropped out because of lack of support, extenuating life circumstances (for which little to no empathy was expressed or considered), racism, and other factors.

This legacy has turned into a challenge for me, as the pattern of discrimination and indifference has been acknowledged and brought to the attention of some faculty members of color, as well as administrators. Since I have raised my concerns and added my voice to this struggle, this group brainstormed about how to present the issues in a way that would prevent retaliation against me. The concern was that if they made claims against the person responsible—one of my professors—she’d retaliate against me by trying to push me out of the program or through attempts to sabotage my career after I graduate.

We lack mentors at my institution. I have tried to cultivate relationships on my
own and even had mentors assigned to me through organizations. They have all failed with the exception of one individual who took me under her wing earlier this year. She recognized the power dynamics at play and committed to be an ally and mentor to ensure I get through the program.

Why is this happening in my institution?

» Some faculty members are spread too thin. Heavy workloads and responsibilities prevent them from mentoring. They often go too long without an opportunity for a sabbatical.

» Some faculty members aren’t interested in mentoring. They are focused on their careers and don’t see the need to invest in students of color.

» Some faculty members did not experience good mentoring themselves. They therefore do not have a successful model for mentoring students of color; they simply repeat the hands-off, disinterested model that they experienced.

» Students and faculty members often don’t share commonalities or interests in research.

» Some faculty members of color feel they have something to lose by mentoring a student. They feel threatened, as if we are going to try to take their job! Then, there are those whose job security is threatened because they’ve held a position so long. The institution may want to move in a different direction and incorporate diverse pedagogical paradigms. As a result, faculty members will shun students who are committed to contemporary and diverse pedagogical paradigms.

» Internalized oppression is real. Some faculty members have internalized the oppression they experienced and lived through. As a result, they perpetuate the very oppressive systems and structures we all claim we want to resist and dismantle.

» There are loopholes in accountability. Many faculty members are allowed to get away with microaggressions; students shun these faculty members as mentors and in general.

» There also seems to be a culture of elevating some faculty members and students to the status of “celebrity.” This creates a hierarchy among faculty and students, one that breeds competition and stifles communal growth and efforts toward the success of the collective.

» Sometimes there is tension between junior and senior faculty members. This thwarts efforts of junior faculty members to fulfill mentor obligations and duties, especially when race is a factor in those relationships. I’ve witnessed and experienced both junior and senior faculty members having to navigate racial oppression and superiority in their attempts to mentor and guide me successfully through my program.

» Institutions often don’t offer faculty members opportunities for professional development. Faculty members need support as well. It’s hard to constantly give out (or find new and innovative ways to mentor and support your students) when you aren’t receiving resources or benefits.

» Institutions may fail to offer financial assistance to those who serve as mentors. It takes extra work to mentor people. When faculty mentors invest their time, energy, and resources, institutions should find ways to support them. This is one way to make mentoring sustainable.

These are some of the challenges that prevent healthy and sustainable mentoring relationships with PhD students of color. If students of color are to experience meaningful, productive, and effective mentoring relationships, those who choose or are selected to mentor should be willing to participate. They must resist hierarchically abusive and oppressive paradigms for engaging in the mentor-mentee relationship, and make the mentoring relationship mutually beneficial and reciprocal in respect and professionalism.

At times I had to counsel my adviser and offer professional advice that reflects a type of mentoring or reciprocal mentoring. I have had to work with faculty members of color to undermine and resist patriarchy and white supremacy for the benefit of both professor and student. I am trying to underscore that the mentoring relationship should not be only one-way, with one person giving and pouring so much into another individual’s life and the other only receiving. The exchange can and should go both ways. Both individuals’
loads can be lightened through mutual commitments to engage one another in the mentoring exchange.

The person who recently became my mentor provided opportunities for pedagogical development before developing a mentoring relationship with me. She has now given me opportunities to assist with research. These processes are beneficial for both of us, and she’s articulated that the mentoring relationship helps her to process personal and professional aspects of her life.

While I was in the comprehensive exam phase of my program and transitioning into the dissertation phase—which for me was the most brutal and gruesome phase—I gained several mentors outside of my institution. These mentor relationships were self-initiated by the individuals, which may reflect the genuineness, passion, and sustainability that undergirds the relationships.

The first set of mentors I gained resulted from an organization allowing me the privilege to speak at a program. Three women there introduced or reintroduced themselves to me, followed up, and committed themselves to serving as accountability partners for me while I complete my studies. I am not sure of how well they know each other, or if they share with each other that they engage in a mentoring relationship with me, but it seems that they rallied together, focusing on different aspects of the journey to ensure that I would cross the finish line.

One mentor focused on self-care and self-pacing. Another focused on providing me with opportunities to teach, publish, research resources for my dissertation, and other valuable resources. She held me accountable for sticking to my writing schedule, and she encouraged me to create workshops on teaching. The third mentor focused on encouraging me and providing opportunities for professional development outside of teaching. She also helped me make meaningful connections.

All three came into my life at a time when I’d failed my first comp. I was considering dropping out. I was too overwhelmed, lacked finances, was working four jobs to stay afloat, was experiencing what I would call hazing, and was fighting against injustice at my school. I really didn’t see the value of moving forward in a program that didn’t support or affirm my work anyway. Fear stifled me. I didn’t think I had it in me to retake or pass any of the comps.

No. 28: A Community of Encouragement and Accountability

I really didn’t see the value of moving forward in a program that didn’t support or affirm my work.
Many of the professors I turned to for guidance were busy trying to manage and maintain balance with all of the transitions at my school. Personal mentors could only advise from an outsider’s limited perspective how to navigate the power and racial dynamics at play.

But my three key women mentors continuously encouraged me. They checked in. They asked how they could help me create strategies that would benefit me academically, mentally, emotionally, physically, and financially. They were focused on me moving forward.

Shortly after I’d failed my first comp and had sat to retake it, I met another individual in my area of studies. Because there are so few Black women in my area, I had reached out to three other women, all of whom were much older. Two out of the three brushed me off. The third woman offered to mentor me. I failed to maintain the relationship because of severe life happenings that prevented me from cultivating our relationship in the early stages. Later, when she came to our school to present a book she’d written, I was able to sit with her privately on multiple occasions. Immediately, she treated me like a little sister. She asked how she could help me get through the program. We’ve been communicating organically ever since. She holds me accountable for getting through my dissertation and sends me resources for completing it. She informs me about opportunities, and I hold her accountable for her writing projects.

These women have become members of my community of accountability. They’ve taken a similar journey. They know the struggles and have committed themselves to not allow me to struggle alone.

I met other mentors—two female professors—at a conference. They heard about a paper that I’d written and invited me to join their organization, and to write and publish through it. I was the only woman scholar of color to present at their conference, yet they were most intrigued by my paper. As a matter of fact, they were brutally honest about how their presenters didn’t represent racial or gender diversity, its resulting impact, and their commitment to embody that diversity in conferences to come.

Oppression and injustices against women and scholars of color was a strong theme at the conference. I am not sure if this is why these two women decided to invest in me as a rising scholar, but their mentorship has been very affirming. It has had a great impact on how I view myself and my potential as a scholar. My time at the conference and correspondence with these two faculty members has since countered every negative pronouncement I have received throughout my educational journey—especially in my doctoral program. Because of this, I felt confident to actually apply for teaching positions and to become assertive enough to teach.

I’ve been trying to think through what accounts for these effective mentoring relationships. I believe that each individual is committed to transforming the struggle of academic pursuit for students of color. They are invested in the process and in progress. Moreover, they are willing to practice what they are proclaiming. Each individual is committed to new ways of teaching, thinking, being, and is willing to embrace and cultivate these gifts in others. They recognize that they can’t transform the world or the academy by themselves and are committed to transcending cliques and silo mentalities.

These mentors galvanize both faculty members and students of color toward the embodiment of collective agency and collective action. They are mirroring what it is to be morally and ethically astute faculty members who live out the change they want to see in the academy, church, and world. These effective mentoring relationships reflect a commitment to diversity, the embodiment of empathy, and a willingness to use power, authority, and agency to advance the lives and careers of others. True mentors see the need to transform the academy and they value the voices, knowledge, experiences, and pedagogies of people of color.
The night view through the window of the airplane when I came to the United States was filled with clouds of anxiety due to my uncertainty. But my view has been getting clearer and clearer thanks to good mentors.

The biggest challenge for me as an international graduate student was uncertainty. I didn’t know what to do, who I was in my new world, or what would happen to me. Although I had my own plan and expectations, it was not long before I realized that they were not enough to help me survive in the rigorous academic maze. Meeting with good mentors was like having good guides in the maze.

In the past five years I have had two mentors who have contrasting characters and styles. The first is a world-renowned scholar, an older white male who followed the typical track for a successful academic career at my school. He is very kind, gentle, and insightful, so that the meetings and classes with him provided me tremendous benefits. These included well-organized and advanced academic knowledge of my field, insights provoking my further study, and comfort in spite of my uncertain future. He gave me an exceptional opportunity to join a PhD class when I was still a master’s student. Through the class I was able to gain an overview of contemporary scholarly debate and the academic approach to participating in such debate.

In addition, he provided appropriate reading lists and advice to deepen my studies with open-minded attitude. Moreover, when I was disappointed with the result of applications to PhD programs, he warmly encouraged me with kind blessings. Thanks to him, I was able to preserve my mental health and to have courage to face the challenges of the PhD program. He gave me an exceptional opportunity to join a PhD class when I was still a master’s student. Through the class I was able to gain an overview of contemporary scholarly debate and the academic approach to participating in such debate.

Although he was a very nice, kind, and gentle person, I, as an Asian male student, felt there was an invisible boundary that I was not allowed to go beyond. That is, I felt he wanted not to engage too much in my life beyond his responsibility and wanted me not to expect too much breaking of such a boundary. It was reasonable, but I felt it was not enough.

The second mentor is my current adviser, a scholar whose life was a bit different from the typical academic career. Actually, I was little bit scared when I met him for the first time because I had heard notorious stories about him. Someone told me he was too straightforward, harsh, and direct, so much so that he hurt students into crying out loud when he led classes. Some students considered me unfortunate. The rumors are partially right and partially wrong. Yes, he is very direct. Sometimes he seems to lack consideration of students’ feelings. In consideration of his character I was very careful not to make mistakes or rock his emotion.

There was an event when I had to face him without disguised courtesy. I met him to discuss my rough draft for my research proposal. As we read the draft and exchanged some words answering his questions, I got hurt the way other students had because his comments were so straightforward. I recognized that he was challenging me to reconsider what I thought was right and to draw out my appropriate answer based on my understanding of the topic. But I became almost mute to avoid bursting into emotions.

After a short but deep silence, he began to share his own experience in doing his dissertation. As a student of color who had not been familiar with academic requirements, he also had hard experiences in progressing through his doctoral program. To prevent me from having that experience or failing, he pushed me to the core, although he knew how I would feel. I agreed with his opinion that hard training is better than failure, and bitter truth is better than sweet fallacy. Then we again read my draft and tried to find a better way to develop my research. It was a bittersweet and hard experience. But I appreciate his brave and candid response to my work because I

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**Hard training is better than failure, and bitter truth is better than sweet fallacy.**
experienced a couple of failures in my master’s program due to the lack of such straightforward direction.

When I consider my experience with two different types of mentors, I ponder what is required to draw out students’ potentials and lead them to the successful academic life. Especially in the interracial relationship between mentors and mentees, what kind of relationship and communication style is required or considered better? Which of my mentors was better or worse?

I don’t think their different styles are because of their different racial identities. A variety of causes probably impact their teaching styles. However, I think it is evident that both of my mentors have something to learn and something to correct.

Sometimes the direct and straightforward style may be useful, but sometimes not. Sometimes the indirect mentoring style, drawing the expected answer from students themselves, may be valuable. One approach can be too risky, the other can be too safe. But both styles are necessary for students who are wandering in uncertainty.

Effective mentors must have the wisdom to discern the best time to be direct or indirect, as well as the personality of those with whom they work. Some students may be willing to receive the direct mentoring style; others might consider it offensive. Some students may feel unclear and frustrated with an indirect teaching style; others might be thankful for it.

If white teachers mentor students of color, they often feel a direct style of mentoring is too risky. I think the most important thing is whether it is required for the student’s benefit and advancement. I expect mentors to have both the courage to teach and the wisdom to teach.

No. 30: In My Blackness and in My Femaleness, I Am Enough!

While I was working on my dissertation proposal, I found myself in an interesting conversation. After reading my proposal, my adviser, a man I admire greatly, noted that none of my main conversation partners were white males. There were a few in the bibliography—but they were not my primary conversation partners. My adviser told me that if I wanted to be taken seriously, I would need to include at least one dead white man as a prominent voice in my dissertation. He conceded that it was not fair, but said it was a rule of scholarship in the larger, mostly white academy. My bibliography—not my conversation—needed “classical scholarship.” This is the type of scholarship that everything else would be measured by.

My adviser at the time was a Black male. He did not think that white male scholarship was superior to the voices in my book. Nor did he think that the conversation needed a particular bent that would be filled best by a particular scholar. But he was training me to navigate a white academy by passing on what he had learned: I had to prove that I was knowledgeable of “their” scholarship as well as “our scholarship.” It was not a rule that had to be followed by white scholars who would produce bibliographies and syllabi including only people of their own racial identity. It was, however, a rule for Black scholars.

I nodded my head and did not protest. I had heard all of this before, so his advice made sense to me. I went to the library, did a search for a white man that kind of talked about my larger topic, grabbed a few books, skimmed them, and added this scholar’s voice to my proposal narrative. I honestly do not remember which token white man ended up in the proposal because he did not end up in the dissertation.

When I sat with my dissertation committee to discuss the proposal, one person asked me why I had included this man who seemed to not be related to the rest of it. My work was about Black girls. It was unclear what this nineteenth-century white philosopher had to add to a topic that he had never addressed. I was honest. I said that I was told to put a dead white man in my work, so I picked a dead
white man. My adviser piped in and stated that he told me to do that because he knew the difficulty of navigating a very white academy as a Black person. And he knew that for many, this white voice would add legitimacy. What followed was an important mentoring moment that taught me about challenging white normativity and finding my voice as a Black woman in academia.

The committee agreed that I did not need a white male scholar to validate my work when I had the likes of Delores Williams and Katie Cannon in my work. They were classical enough. Neither whiteness nor maleness was needed to validate the voice of a Black woman who was writing about the lived experiences of Black females. In fact, the committee noted that this particular scholar actually had nothing to add to the conversation. The conversation was not incomplete without him. Truth is that it was not that he added a missing piece to the argument; all he added was white normativity—the idea that whiteness is normal or standard while other ethnicities are peripheral. The conversation I had with my committee that day has resonated with me through several writing projects, syllabi creations, and conversations with other scholars.

There were a few things that I learned from that committee assessment and throughout the writing process as I continued in conversations with these mentors. The first was to examine what we mean by classical scholarship. In different presentations, I have heard that I am not classical enough. If it were not for my mentor conversations, I would have listened and changed my methodology. But because of this experience, I now push back on the notion of classical scholarship. Classical scholarship is often a code word for white and male. As someone who is neither white nor male, I had to realize that I would never fall into what was seen as classical scholarship, but I could push to widen the canon.

I also learned the importance of finding my voice and claiming my voice in my writing and my teaching and presenting style. I am not a white man, and I cannot sound, speak, or think like a white man. That does not make me any less scholarly. This pushes me to think beyond the white normativity that is prevalent in the academy and to think about the various ways that I can be true to my own voice. It is also clear to me that learning how to express myself as a Black woman happens with the reading and citing of more Black women.

The fact remains that my adviser was right. There are segments within academia that will not take me seriously if I do not spend a major chunk of my time showing that I am well versed in “their” scholarship. Those are the rules of the game. However, my committee taught me that I could choose to not play that game. In a bigger sense, I was mentored to believe that I am enough and the writings of those who look like me are enough. Indeed, my scholarship does include the voices of white males—just as all good scholarship should include a variety of voices—but they are not at the forefront of my work because they do not help me claim my voice. By showing me that the writings of those who look like me do not need to be validated by another, I learned that I do not need to be validated by another. In my Blackness and in my femaleness, I am enough!
Navigating Dangerous Intersections

By the Rev. Dr. Cristian De La Rosa
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Entre los individuos, como entre las naciones, el Respeto al Derecho ajeno es la paz.
—Benito Juarez

We live at complex intersections of the academy, the church, and our communities. As scholars, clergy, and/or community organizers of color, we inhabit places and spaces at a particular time in history, when human dignity is at risk within every social process. As a scholar of Nahuatl ancestry, I recognize that scholars of color are constantly engaging and managing complexities produced by issues of colonialism, institutional racism, human sexuality, and more. All these issues are unfinished business of justice impacting the lives of people of color in every social process. They are issues relating to what scholars of color in this volume experience as invisibility, and the questioning of identities, insights, and research in academic institutions.

Academic experiences communicated in this volume remind me of a powerful statement by Benito Juarez, a Zapotec president of Mexico (1857-58). He said, “Entre los individuos, como entre las naciones, el respeto al Derecho ajeno es la paz” (“Among individuals, as among nations, respect for the rights of others is peace”).7 The wisdom in this statement frames our struggles for dignity and justice within social, political, and religious institutions today as we face complex dynamics of globalization rooted in values and structures of power inherited from colonizing processes. Consideration of our current experiences as scholars of color necessitates a revisiting of key points of

7 This memorable statement by Benito Juarez has been passed down as oral history.
reference dealing with unfinished business of colonization and our precarious state as descendants of the colonized within the particular context of the United States.

My response to the academic experiences of these doctoral students and recent graduates of color is framed by the statement of Benito Juarez. Challenges such as being ignored, offended, questioned, and misinterpreted as a student, faculty, or administrator have to do with a lack of respect for the dignity and the rights of people of color in the academic world. In my response to the autobiographical reflections in this book, I suggest accompaniment as key to mentoring. I point to the Debate of Valladolid and the slave trade in the United States as two traumatic events questioning our dignity as human beings. I do so intentionally, since this group of scholars relate mostly to religious institutions, and note some limitations of Christianity as a resource for our struggles for justice. Finally, I conclude by suggesting some considerations as we engage the journey across dangerous intersections within academic and religious institutions.

Accompaniment as a Key to Mentoring

I believe that mentoring within communities of color at these complex times of globalization involves being accompanied by those from generations before us and being intentional about accompanying generations that come after us. Spaces for personal formation and leadership development, such as partnering in research projects, invitations to present at conferences, and teaching assistantships, are the best avenues for accompaniment in academia. The narratives in this volume about experiences in the academy communicate multiple gaps within the processes of institutions of higher education. These gaps occur in spaces of transition, instability, and tension produced by re-colonizing processes under the guise of globalization. This unstable, tense state is nurtured by ongoing discriminatory relationships between the descendants of the colonizers and the descendants of the colonized. In these relationships, the dignity and rights of communities of color continue to be questioned or ignored by the dominant cultural ethos, which is embedded in institutional processes designed to be racist and sexist.

Human rights were institutionalized within the constitutions of most modern nations. However, as my mother reminds me all the time in the wisdom of one of our sayings in the Latinx communities, “Del dicho al hecho hay mucho trecho” (“There is a huge gap from what is said to what is done”). In light of the fact that we experience abysmal gaps between the discourse and the practices in academia, accompaniment as an element of mentoring means the facilitating of spaces and places where new generations are respected and find ways to recognize points of reference that are vital for the framing and reframing of their own identities, knowledge, and practices.8

My office has a sign on the door that reads, “This office is available to students looking for a place to breathe.” This sign was made by a doctoral student who became aware of the need for spaces and places where students of color, particularly students impacted by the shift on immigration policies, could feel free to share their circumstances and find support. I travel a great deal, so my office becomes a mentoring space where students share their experiences of frustration and success with each other as they are mentoring through accompaniment. Doctoral students accompany master level students. Those in their second or third year accompany first year students. And domestic students accompany international students. Everyone shares the wisdom they gleaned from their own experiences within a predominantly white institution, where they are constantly facing racist dynamics of power. An interesting element of this mentoring is the collective processing of theories and assumptions from lectures and assigned readings, doing so with familiar points of reference as descendants of the colonized and without the need to explain or translate meaning and relevance.

The Debate of Valladolid

The issues and challenges mentioned in this volume remind me of the fact that the human dignity of the colonized was argued and negotiated within the conquering and colonizing processes of the Americas. In the experience of Latin America, we

have The Debate of Valladolid (1550-51) that took place in Spain when Bartolome De Las Casas and Juan De Sepúlveda debated about the dignity and human rights of indigenous peoples of the Americas as colonized subjects. Within a church context, the questions under consideration concerned whether indigenous peoples of the Americas were fully human and whether they were by nature slaves for the benefit of the colonizers bringing “civilization” and Christianity. In a text titled The Spanish Struggle for Justice: The Conquest of America, Lewis Hanke notes the philosophical arguments made for the superiority of the Spaniards and the subjugation, by forceful conquest, of indigenous communities. He writes:

The most important point discussed at Valladolid, certainly the most hotly disputed then and now, was the second justification propounded by Sepúlveda, the idea that the rudeness of the Indians’ nature justified war against them, a concept that seems to come easily to most imperialistic nations, for they frequently invoke it. Sepúlveda declared that the Indians, being rude persons of limited understanding, ought to serve the Spaniards, and applied to the Indians Aristotle’s theory that, since some beings are inferior by nature, it is only just and natural that prudent and wise men have dominion over them for their own welfare as well as for the service of their superiors. If the Indians failed to recognize this relationship and resisted the Spaniards, just war could be waged against them and their persons and property would pass to the conquerors.10

The jury, assembled by King Charles V of Spain to decide over the arguments, never reached a position on this moral and theological debate. This failure allowed for the further expansion of Christianity by force and the subjugation of indigenous peoples as inferior to the Spaniards. Sepúlveda, Hanke says, “seems to have advocated a permanent mandate for Spain over the peoples of the New World.”11 He “could be quoted therefore in support of the perpetual encomienda” system where land, indigenous peoples to work the land, and priests to evangelize were granted to Spanish conqueros by the crown. Bartolome de Las Casas became known as the defender of indigenous people in the Americas. His struggle for the recognition of dignity and the granting of rights to the conquered and the evangelized in this continent continues to be taken up by the surviving indigenous peoples of the Americas and the new Mestizo people that struggle for justice. The predominant attitudes of the state and the church, represented by Sepúlveda, survived within religious institutions, and they continue to impact every religious or academic process today.

Slavery in the Context of the United States

In the context of the United States as a new nation, enslavement of African peoples marks the traumatic event framing the experiences and identities of African Americans today. In this case, the Protestant version of Christianity negotiated the dignity and human rights of enslaved communities. It is interesting to note that after the First Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century, some Protestant denominations (Baptists and Methodists in the North, for example) preached against slavery. However, as the slave trade continued to grow and southerners argued for slavery, leadership of these denominations changed their preaching and accommodated their biblical interpretations and teachings to provide for slavery. It is well-documented that Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopal clergy owned slaves and used them to build religious institutions.12 Discipleship formation during this period—with the shifts from preaching and teaching against slavery to accommodating—revolved, particularly in southern states, around the Christian responsibilities of the white masters and the duty of slaves to servitude. These teachings overlooked the inhumane treatment of all slaves, the rape of slave women, and the economic interest that drove the slave trade across the ocean and capitalized domestically on the reproduction of slaves by forcing Black women to work and birth the next generations of slaves for their owners.

The Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863) by President Abraham Lincoln changed the legal status of about three million slaves. This proclamation, however, did not free the enslaved communities in confederate states where the authority of President Lincoln was not recognized. Plantation owners in these states resisted the order and continued to hold slaves until the Union army arrived.13 James Cone

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10 See Hanke, The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America, 122.

11 Ibid., 123.

12 Sewanee University in Sewanee, TN has an interesting history. It is an Episcopal Church-related institution, and most of its original buildings were constructed by slaves of the Episcopal bishops who organized the University.

13 See “In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism you have to start on the plantation” by Matthew Desmond in the New York Times Magazine issue of the 1619 Project (August 18, 2019).
notes the suffering of Black people during slavery and beyond and the complicity of Christianity in the opening chapter of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. He writes:

> The sufferings of black people during slavery are too deep for words. That suffering did not end with emancipation. The violence and oppression of white supremacy took different forms and employed different means to achieve the same end: The subjugation of black people. And Christian theology, for African Americans, maintained the same challenge: to explain from the perspective of history and faith how life could be made meaningful in the face of death, how hope could remain alive in the world of Jim Crow segregation. These were the challenges that shaped black religious life in the United States.\(^{14}\)

> At no time was the struggle to keep such hope alive more difficult than during the lynching era (1880-1940). The lynching tree is the most potent symbol of the trouble nobody knows that blacks have seen but do not talk about because the pain of remembering—visions of black bodies dangling from southern trees, surrounded by jeering white mobs—is almost too excruciating to recall.\(^ {15}\)

After a long civil war (1861-1865) it was clear that whites could not own Black bodies. However, a new relationship of justice and plans for restitution were never considered. It took the organizing of the Civil Rights Movement and struggles for more than a decade (1954-1968) to acquire codified civil rights and legal equality with whites. However, even though African Americans contributed to the establishment, development, and wealth of this nation, the economic disparities between whites and Blacks are abysmal today. Statements and services of repentance by religious and political institutions do not bridge the economic gaps between descendants of the slave owners and the descendants of former slaves today. The inherited racist attitudes and discriminating dynamics within every social structure in this country continue to harm and endanger the very lives of black and brown bodies. One only needs to consider *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander to see how slavery has been “redesigned” into new systems of subjugation.\(^ {16}\) One may simply notice who makes up the top leadership of mainline denominations and academic institutions to know that Protestantism and its academic institutions are still complicit with processes that continue to re instituted racist power dynamics and systems.

**Limitations of Christianity**

Scholars of color today need to consider—and never forget—that the introduction of Christianity by conquering and colonizing world powers is problematic in itself. We exist within the spaces of the fragmentation, the tearing apart, and the erasure of cultures and religions inflicted by very violent conquering and colonizing processes that were intricately woven into the expansion of Christendom on this continent. Scholars talk about fragmentation as a new experience of Postmodernism. However, fragmentation has been the experience of all the surviving descendants of the colonized since the arrival of Europeans to this continent.\(^ {17}\) The introduction of Christianity itself to those originally from this continent was a traumatic occurrence that frames our everyday experiences today. The destruction of cultures, the violent imposition of a new religion, and the intentional erasure of any trace of indigenous identity by the new established orders and systems across the continent produced fragmented subjugated peoples that still struggle today to survive in light of such traumas.

The struggle for life—*la lucha que da vida*—for any descendant of the colonized, is intensified when bridges are built between communities of color and the established systems where spaces of power and/or leadership within social structures are considered or occupied. I believe the spaces of the academy are designed for the descendants of the colonizers and any attempt to enter as scholars of color is met with resistance. The image I have when I think of the absent mentors, the unresponsive attitudes within academic institutions, the insults from administrators and faculty, and the clear micro and/or macroaggressions is that of a

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\(^ {15}\) Ibid, 3.


\(^ {17}\) Linda Smith talks about fragmentation as a result of colonization. It is a new concept within the world of academy in postmodern times, but it became a state of being for survivors of the colonized. See Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 29.
Scholars of color involved in religious institutions need to recognize, as a key point of reference, the limitations of Christianity as a source of knowledge and resource for struggles of justice and dignity. Its complicity with European colonizing projects all over the world—including the ways in which doctrines, biblical interpretations, and practices (of both the Roman Catholic Church and the different Protestant denominations) have served social and political powers in the establishment of discriminatory systems and processes—continue to problematize our existence and to question our essence as human beings today. Christian institutions were part of the conquest and colonizing processes. Christian institutional structures and procedures are designed to safeguard, to this very moment, inherited traditions and values that accommodate discrimination, slavery, and subjugation of indigenous peoples. One only needs to consider Protestant churches today (think large majestic building) in very ethnically diverse communities that continue to be completely white in their membership! They are shrinking and dying as white congregations, while in the same neighborhoods new immigrant communities of faith are growing and need spaces to worship.

**Suggestions for the Journey**

It is my hope that we, as scholars of color in the academy, are clear about the fact that when we enter the world of academia and claim a Christian identity, we become implicated in systems that directly or indirectly promote our own subjugation. We place, literally, our bodies at dangerous intersections within academic and religious institutions. It is also my hope that through accompaniment as the essence of mentoring, we avoid becoming complicit with the very forces and systems that subjugate us not only within academic settings but in all of our communities of color, doing so through every social, political, and religious system. I would like to conclude this response by making two suggestions for consideration as we find ourselves in these journeys across dangerous intersections.

**Spaces of Marginalization and Power**

My first suggestion is to consider that our experience of fragmentation, and the spaces of marginalization from the centers of established systems and institutions can be powerful resources and places of resistance and organizing. Parallel structures from our own perspectives, which can facilitate moving beyond survival and accommodation of our own subjugation, can be a tangible product of mentoring. The invitation here is to become stronger and to engage ideas like the one proposed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith in the following statement:

> To acquiesce is to lose ourselves entirely and implicitly agree with all that has been said about us. To resist is to retreat in the margins, retrieve ‘what we were and remake ourselves.’ The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices—all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope.¹⁸

It is important to identify platforms to work from within the academic world. A doctoral program or a teaching position, as difficult and painful as the experiences might be, serve as spaces and places from which to shift institutional power dynamics and to critique, question, and reframe what is said about our communities. These spaces of marginalization can also be spaces of dialogue and mentoring for building our own identities, our own epistemological reformulations, and our own strategies for talking back. These can be powerful platforms where we can pause in the struggle and in an almost subversive certainty, in company of others with similar epistemological understandings and experiences, affirm with my colleague Howard Wiley, “I am more complex than power’s ability to

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¹⁸ See Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 4.
constitute me.”¹⁹ In our complexity, we are powerful individuals able to engage any institutional dynamic pretending to erase or diminish our identities and contributions.

Epistemological Retrieval

My second suggestion is to consider that a key task for us as scholars of color is the epistemological retrieval of knowledge from the surviving fragments of our own cultural, social, and religious traditions. Without this knowledge, as fragmented as it might be, we can never become who we are meant to be. I believe that without this knowledge, it is very difficult to find meaning and relevance in any academic process. Without this knowledge, we cannot find our own language (vocabulary) to engage, communicate, and appropriate our own dignity as human beings.

Our identity, becoming who we are meant to be, requires that we identify and retrieve surviving fragments from our own cultural, religious, and philosophical points of reference. We are not part of the Western philosophy that deals in binary systems. We are people from indigenous cultures and/or Mestiz@es that continue to be ignored and erased. We are very complex individuals able to manage complex and dangerous intersections without a car! This statement by Howard helps me understand that there is so much knowledge about who I am that subjugating powers and dominant systems do not have. Knowledge, wisdom, from our cultural, religious, and social systems was not deemed important, so it was obscured. However, it survived. We can find this knowledge within our own indigenous and mestizo bodies, within the fragments of our existence, and in what our ancestors managed to safeguard for us within the institutionalization of symbols and rituals.²⁰ I invite us to consider that perhaps our primary work as scholars of color needs to be the epistemological retrieval of that which builds us and our communities of color.

¹⁹ This statement was made by Howard Wiley, an African American colleague, as part of a seminar dialogue in regards to the constitution of subjects as we considered the implications for people of color in the context of the United States. Our concerns and statements in that particular class session engaged Judith Butler’s theories of power and questioned historical, cultural, and social points of reference within our own experiences as people of color. He made this statement as a supportive response to my insistence that there had to be a way out of subordination. Spring 2007 Seminar, “Judith Butler: Religion and Culture,” Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois.

²⁰ In the Latin American Experience, particularly Mexican and Mexican American experiences, Our Lady of Guadalupe is a symbol/image relating to the Nahua/ culture. Interpretations of the Image indicates that this particular icon gathers religious and cultural elements from the Nahua culture that became part of the new imposed religion in the Americas. See Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, 3rd ed., tr. Norma E. Cantú (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 52-53.

I am not sure where I thought professors came from. This was clear to me when, during my senior year as an undergraduate, my senior thesis advisers encouraged me to think about graduate school.

I wasn’t entirely sure what they meant.

By this time, I understood that people called to ministry went to seminary and that teachers might get their Master of Arts. I knew that there were people out there who were called “Dr.” but weren’t medical doctors. I knew that the books I’d been reading came from somewhere and that my professors had might even written some of these books. But the idea of being a professor, enrolling in a doctoral program, and entering the academy were completely unknown to me.

I was set on the path towards a doctorate less by a sense to teach or even become a professor. I was caught by a question. And I had, serendipitously, married someone who went to a major university with a major library, and in that library were thousands of ways of answering the question that had gotten under my skin. It had been lurking around me since I was eight years old. The many questions under the big “What are you?” question had peppered me as long as I could remember. It had been with me since I had felt the triangulating gaze that could not make sense of my father and my mother and me, since watching my brother and I navigate our bodies in varied ways, since my first baptism, my first sermon, my first Pentecostal church service. My body was doing work in the world, but I couldn’t name what that work was or where it came from.

Not sure what to make of my professor’s encouragement, I tried teaching in high
school, then eventually got an everyday office job. Two years later I was working in my little cubicle, with the questions still itching and feeling the absence of classrooms and books and discovering answers, I recalled the words of my professors about this place called graduate school. I wrote to them and asked, “So how does this grad school thing work?” I applied. I got in. My wife, my nine-month-old baby and I packed and moved to Durham, NC not knowing what any of this was supposed to look like or where it would lead.

For the next two years in my master’s program I stumbled around trying to find a home for my question. American religious history? The sociology of religion? These professors told me my questions were neither historical nor sociological, but theological. “You need to talk to Dr. Willie James Jennings,” they said. So I did. I made an appointment and then sat down with five questions scribbled on a sheet of notebook paper.

Dr. Jennings asked me about my story. He listened to the stream of consciousness that were my questions. Then he looked at me and told me my questions mattered—for the church, for the academy, for my own life. And then he met with me, every week, for the next four years—where I saw how disparate ideas, histories, methods, and theologies might converge to say something new, and speak to a moment, to uncover something in our lives.

Reading the reflections of the doctoral students in these pages, I was struck by how much I felt myself in them. I recalled the intense hope and anxiety of getting into a program, only to find yourself there and have no idea what to do next, or where any of this will lead, or if you’re really up to the task in the first place. More than an apprenticeship into a guild, more than an introduction into the profession, these students are seeking to be seen as whole people, asking for their questions to be recognized and their communities honored. As emerging scholars of color in a culture that was not built for them, they are, more often than not, venturing into a foreign land to find something that might bring life, to them or to their people.

Throughout the reflections we see, again and again, the fullness of life present: finances, family, death, mental and physical health. What does it mean to see that these students are whole people and that their life does not disengage from the body as they enter into this work? Perhaps, even more so, they begin to feel their bodies in new ways, feel the ways that our world presses on us and exposes us in ways that are sometimes frightful. The nature of the work is not just intellectual. If the questions we ask are tied to our lives and our communities, this knowledge is bodied knowledge, lived knowledge that, as we deconstruct, as we follow the threads of oppression or colonization, or hegemony, we feel its weight. The thorns shred our fingers, even as we find ourselves doing work that we were made to do.

As mentors, we walk with students who are navigating this world, their call, their community, and their questions. The task of mentoring is drawing students into this world that we occupy, but perhaps even more than this, we are participating in their formation as co-creators in this world with us and after us. As we hope for their future, our mentoring isn’t simply about “professional” success, but also about the possibilities of wholeness for the students and a cultivation of life that allows their work to bear fruit in their communities and the broader world.

Some time ago I was struck while reading about Margaret Burroughs, a Chicago artist who in 1961 opened a museum with her husband on the first floor of their home as a space for African American artists to show their work and to gather. The museum would outgrow the space and is now housed in Chicago’s Washington Park. This was not the first museum she founded. In 1938 Burroughs was a founding member of the Southside Community Art Center. Begun with a grant from the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration, the center would go on to become a central institution in cultivating art and artists in the African American community. Burroughs—considered to be the driving force of the center for 30 years—understood art to be vital to the freedom of the community. She wrote, 21

We believed that the purpose of art was to record the times. As young black artists we looked around and recorded in our various media what we saw. It was not from our imagination that we painted slums and ghettos, or sad hollow-eyed black men, women and children. They were the people around us. We were part of them. They were part of us.” (Quoted in Farrington, 168)

Whether in the Southside Community Center or in the first floor of her home, Burroughs saw the cultivation of artists and spaces for artists as practices of liberation. She did not tell them what to paint, but in these spaces they learned techniques; they encountered masters and fellow learners so that they could create art that spoke of what they saw.

In similar fashion, throughout the reflections of the student essays in this collection, there are echoes to this song—the power of creating spaces and walking alongside people who are trying to speak of what they see and hear and experience in the world.

In some cases, we might call mentoring a form of professionalization. But this professionalization suggests a somewhat identifiable partition between the personal and one’s profession. The experiences told in this collection display how students were empowered or limited by processes that were only partly about professionalization. In addition to professionalization, perhaps the notion of enculturation, or more precisely a liberative enculturation might begin to point to some of the echoes of life-giving mentoring described in these reflections that are exhibited through the cultivation of life in the personal and the communal.

The Personal
One of the biggest themes to emerge from these accounts is just how personal doctoral work is. Whether in the negative and dehumanizing or the inspiring and centering, the mentor mediates the recognition or refusal of the student. Moments of recognition were noted again and again throughout these reflections. They were welcomed into a community—coffee/homes/Skype. These were points of contact and acknowledgements that they were being thought of. Students had not only entered into a program, but a relationship. The mentor served not only as a point of contact for an intellectual journey, but mediated entrance into a vocational identity that encompassed the totality of who they were.

This relationship is not only about the adviser alone, but also other graduate students, colleagues, staff—a community of intellectuals and professionals committed to a peculiar work. Students in these reflections had a series of related and unrelated relationships where their questions were taken seriously, they were offered resources or ways of connecting with resources, and ultimately, they were seen as a scholar and member of a community.

The inverse of this can be seen in several of the struggles described by students. The language of “intellectual hazing” stands out, a proving of oneself in successive stages until finally, at the end of it all, the PhD are letters that signify survival and carry nothing but scars and stains. For students who described difficulty and pain, there was a pressure to ignore vital aspects of themselves, they were left without information about the simplest processes, and perhaps underneath it all they felt like they were alone in the process.

The Communal
I completed my master’s degree and PhD at the same institution. But something shifted in the transition between these programs. As a master’s student, I sat in awe of certain intellectuals or professors or movements, and I mimicked the critique or the intellectual “moves” I saw my teachers make. Looking back, I must have looked like a kid who brought a toy trumpet to a jazz concert and was wailing away in the corner as the band swung on stage. Somehow, one of the musicians heard me. I don’t know what they heard, to be honest. But they did. And they called me up. To play with them on a song at first, but then later sit with them backstage. That’s where the education really began because I heard what they heard while they played. I heard what they wished they had done and what they hoped they would do next time. I saw how they warmed up before and how they would unwind afterward. And then I was invited again, a solo this time, on one song. And again, a couple more songs this time. Until eventually the question wasn’t, “Do you want to come?” It was, “Where you at?”

This sense of belonging, this sense that I have something to contribute, was a part of my intellectual formation, my sense of vocation as a scholar. The work wasn’t simply about ideas or analysis or the production of articles and manuscripts. It was an entrance into a community, a small band who belonged to a history, a people
trying to create something in the world, trying to give voice to some semblance of beauty or truth or pain. But the belonging was also not without the tangible practices of intellectual and institutional work. It required learning systems and protocols and etiquettes. My mentors taught me these sometimes through explicit conversations, but I also learned by watching, discerning patterns of how they interacted, and how they engaged in various situations. As I walked with them, I began to see that the invitation was not only into an institution or isolated group of scholars. I had been invited into a wider academic community.

The enculturation into a community extends beyond the relationship with the adviser or the student’s immediate colleagues into a wider guild or community of scholars and practitioners. Again and again, in the reflections of this volume we see how advisers validated the work of their students through connections to other scholars, conversations in preparation for conferences, and connections to editors and journals. This process of connecting is an aspect of professionalization, of introducing students to the systems and networks that constitute a field. But this connective practice is also a profound affirmation of the student’s presence in the field and their importance to its future. Whether in the mundane conversations about procedures and policies and preparation, or in the larger conversations about vocation and job searches and publications, the intention of mentors in these practices communicated a sense of belonging to students.

These seemingly mundane practices, clarity regarding expectations, and institutional procedures press against the implicit barriers that so often exist for first generation students and scholars. How does a student navigate a conference for the first time, submit to a journal, or know which guild to join? Too often these are lessons learned in isolation, commonly through mistakes and a bit more pain or time or money than was necessary. But in relationship and conversation with mentors and colleagues who were a bit farther ahead I entered into spaces with a bit more agency, a bit more freedom to discover who I needed to be in these spaces to be whole. In these small creations of space, we cultivate practices of belonging and formation for those being welcomed into an intellectual community as well as into a broader network.

In my work with doctoral students and in seeing various cohorts of students from a wide swath of institutions—as well as in the narratives of this collection—there is a profound interrelationship between the clarity of expectations and presence in the everyday processes, and the sense of belonging among a cohort and a small network of faculty, with the student’s sense of preparation and agency in their project and in the academy. Those who were mentored well were prepared to work within these ecosystems with a greater sense of agency and with a network of scholars and colleagues. Because of this they also now have a greater freedom to pursue the work they are called to, and that benefits their immediate community, and ultimately the broader community.

Can the Academy Be Home to Scholars of Color?

One of the most sinister effects of white supremacy in the academy is the cost it extracts from the people of color in its midst. This encompasses those who do not finish for any number of reasons, those who manage to finish but for whom it cost so much they cannot imagine a lifetime of that same suffering, and those who managed to cobble together a life as the only or one of a few scholars of color in their institution. They fight isolation and marginalization each day.

When I arrived at my first institution I was one of four Black faculty out of 180. Faculty of color as a whole were eight percent. I loved my Black colleagues, but we were spread across the university. They had been there 10, 15, or 20 years and they were tired. They were “firsts” and that journey cost them. My Black colleagues were amazing people, but they had also struggled to keep themselves afloat, much less create space for others.

And in some ways, it was simply a numbers game. There were four Black faculty to make a possible deep connection with. These were not great odds. Being a first in my department wore on me, especially as I saw white colleagues arrive and seem to enter the community seamlessly. But among 176 other white faculty, I suppose
chances were pretty good they would find at least a handful of colleagues they would resonate with.

While I had been welcomed into a small band and introduced to the realities and inner workings of the academy, I was still not prepared for my first job and the reality that permeates the academy: To be a scholar of color is to perpetually enter into spaces of alienation and isolation.

What saved me from a deep sense of loneliness was a network of scholars and students across the country. Annual conferences became my way stations, invitations to lecture became important affirmations, two to three people I knew I could call for an idea, advice, a reference, or to just shout into the wind with—all of these became tethers that reminded me that I was not alone in this work and that an institution does not define me. And perhaps most importantly, it was a network of people who reminded me that I was needed. I needed to survive. I needed to flourish.

In the mundane work of institutional networking, connecting students to one another and to professional networks outside of the institution, mentors offered students ways of navigating and surviving these alienating spaces. In so many ways a theme that emerges again and again in these narratives is just how communal a mentoring relationship is.

Mentoring is not simply about a one-to-one relationship. Mentoring is about drawing a student into a communal space. The mentor is an entry point, a harbor.

Throughout this essay I have talked of “enculturation.” This is not an unproblematic term, oftentimes tied in theology and religious studies to colonial missions and the incorporation of non-European peoples into Christian theology and practice. The incorporation of students into institutional values and systems might be considered the problem to be overcome in the academy. But enculturation also connotes a sense that so many mentoring terms lack. Professionalization? Apprenticeship? Certainly, we are speaking of a process that is more than the conveyance of professional standards and etiquette.

We are not preparing students for a trade with a set of distinguishable competencies that must meet a certain standard for inclusion. While not excluding these aspects of any professional preparation I am also pointing to the substance of this vocation as tied to personhood, community, and in many cases one’s sense of faith, of purpose. There is a process of formation in theological and religious graduate work that is intimate and personal.

This intimacy and personal nature might be what explains the violence of refusal and silences that so often meet people of color in graduate programs. We enter seeking questions for our community, and for ourselves, only to find that neither our questions nor we ourselves are welcome. In the face of this, mentoring is more than preparation for a job. It is formation into a way of being. It is formation not only into an intellectual life, but also a life that can overcome histories of exclusion and create spaces of life, for themselves and for those who they will eventually teach.

In this way, enculturation, for me, is multi-directional. The “culture” of enculturation is not monolithic nor stable. The academy is a space of multiplicities even as it holds and is held by deep, abiding practices and commitments. Some of these are life-giving and beautiful and vital for the cultivation of flourishing communities. Others are death-dealing and enduring vestiges of a violent hegemony (and perhaps we do not always know which is which). But students also enter into these spaces with ways of being and knowing, and with practices, histories, and communities. They are cultural realities.

The reflections that spoke most positively throughout this collection were consistently marked by moments of recognition, inclusion, and accompaniment. Students were able to bring their full selves to the work and into the community. In this process they were slowly introduced to the peculiarities, the possibilities, and the dangers of academic spaces. But given a sense of agency in these spaces, they also offer something to the institution, to the academy, to the community.

The students of these reflections saw their mentors as partners and guides in a process that was not determined by the mentors’ values or methodologies or commitments.
The mentor provides guidance, but also space. I wonder if this is something of the culture we invite students into—that higher education could be the fostering of liberative space. The space to think, to knock into new ideas and new people. In this space we discover our own histories and aspects of ourselves and our communities. We are afforded the space to ask a different set of questions without the immediacy of a solution that works right away. Or we are afforded the space to experiment with solutions, create grants, or foster partnerships with local organizations that may not have easy access to the academy and its economic resources.

Graduate work is the entrance into these spaces and preparation for creating these spaces as teachers and scholars. Naming the multiple shifting nature of these spaces allows us as mentors to cultivate life through attentive guidance and liberating space that allows our mentees the space to be animated by their questions, their communities, and their histories. Enculturation, in this way, is not simply about the adaptation of students to the academy, but the ongoing enculturation of the academy to the world.

In this regard perhaps the mentor is a harbor, not a ship. We are points of entry and egress. In this current moment of upheaval and decline in higher education enrollment, a proliferation of two-year master’s programs, an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary writing and research, and increasingly diverse and complex worlds, perhaps mentors must also ask, “What does it mean to be cultivators of the answers to come and wedges in our institution that create space for these answers to find a way into our institutions?

We are entry points for emerging scholars, but we are not end points. Where we were often products of discreet disciplinary formation, our institutions are prioritizing interdisciplinary programs. Students are entering programs with questions that require careful, but complicated inquiries across disciplines. What will theological education be? What does it mean to mentor toward a place we have never been?

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