

Afrofuturism Laboratory for Chaplaincy: An Andragogical Learning

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We grow spiritually as we teach and nurture future chaplains for the church and community. It is my hope reflect with colleagues how we can immerse ourselves in a time of action-reflection-action a faith formation that fosters spiritual care leadership development. An Afrofuturist CPE process helps both in practice as a means of self-care and in chasing freedom by radically centering the margins and honoring the lived experience of the other.

“If you see beauty in something, don't wait for others to agree.”

– Sherihan Gamal

VOCATION AS AN ADMINISTRATOR

This is my first sabbatical. While it is exciting to think about what I will focus on during this time, I find it helpful to first reflect on my current vocational focus. Currently, I have been using my gifts of administration in higher education. As I consider the brilliant team of scholars I serve with daily, I often wonder how we can build upon and improve our current pedagogies. By embodying deep and authentic ways of teaching, we can better serve a swiftly changing society. My vision is to establish a more dynamic chaplaincy program in the future. As dean, I have been leading efforts to innovate and integrate asynchronous courses that respond faithfully to scholarship while also creating continued spaces of collaboration and fellowship.

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Likewise, with the help of faculty, I have been redesigning the Master of Professional Studies, Master of Community Leadership, and the Doctor of Ministry degrees. My vocation calls me to develop strategies that improve educational equity, while simultaneously keeping a keen eye on and improving graduation rates. Some of this work is done through innovation, and at other times it is by monitoring cultural and socioeconomic changes that may affect the academic process and means of chaplaincy leadership. This work typically includes the implementation of effective student recruitment and retention strategies.

VOCATION AS TEACHER

The CPE process currently utilizes verbatim, case studies, and other methods for reporting one's experiences and ministry encounters through self-evaluation and group supervision. Regarding ministry, discussions frequently focus on the caregiver as much as the recipients of ministry. I am convinced of two things. First, the minister receives spiritual care when journeying with others. Second, there are other culturally intuitive ways of reflecting and creating.

The authority received by chaplains, preachers, and those called to serve is typically not requested but given by the parishioner and patient. So then, we must find ways to seriously hear their needs beforehand. We must explore the multiple ways we can uplift and promote faithful responses *with* oppressed communities, including those saturated with death, dying, and trauma.

My experiences and acute awareness of the realities black communities face prepared me to steward new spiritual care training programs. I launched the project "Taking CPE to the Streets," with partners such as the Foundation for ACPE Innovative Program, and in collaboration with the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab's "Resilience in Frontline Spiritual Care Workers" grant program. This grant has been a joy to administer. We are currently in our third and final semester of this grant. This sustainable project provides the community with access to theologically and CPE-trained chaplains and will hopefully continue for the foreseeable future. Meeting people in the streets takes on a whole different world view all based on the desire and formation to care for others.

Before receiving this grant, I created the Urban Chaplaincy Certificate program in partnership with the Walker Leadership Institute of Eden Theological Seminary. This program allowed degree-seeking students to share space with current pastors and community leaders to map, explore, and take seriously the community ailments that ultimately affect our congregations and leaders.

"Art is the imposing of a pattern on experience, and our aesthetic enjoyment is recognition of the pattern."

– Alfred North Whitehead

Vocationally, through chaplaincy, supervisors grow in culturally relevant scholarship utilizing ministerial practices that focus on faith, society, and aesthetics. Rightfully so, many of our vocations have been situated in hospitals and other medical facilities. Likewise, there is a growing number of co-vocational chaplains who work several jobs—all serving in ministry. Now more than ever, leaders and CPE supervisors are working in churches, hospitals, and communities of interest with the desire to tackle the root causes of systemic problems.

Considering the changing dynamics of CPE, I want to introduce an idea that captivates me, *Afrofuturistic Aesthetics*—finding God in both beauty and the profane. Inspired by this idea, a question occupies my thoughts, “What do you do until freedom comes?” This is the question of Black communities all over the country. The answer to this question likely has something to do with finding the already present and available God. Communities need much-needed spaces of spiritual care that are free of dogmatic religions. All this reminds me of living in-between, “here, but not yet,” which Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King preached, the ontological liberation of Dr. James Hal Cone, and Audre Lorde’s gut-wrenching poetic sermons that revolutionized art. Aesthetics is not a new concept, but chaplaincy could use it to enhance and create future sacred spaces for those oppressed by religion. An Afrofuturism laboratory of andragogical learning creates space for everyone, including the neuro-divergent, the saint, and the sinner. Black Aesthetics lends itself to future spiritual formation and the urgent needs of currently oppressed communities.

GOALS

TEACHING

“Aesthetic matters are fundamental for the harmonious development of both society and the individual.” – Friedrich Schiller

During the Pandemic, I returned to reading and researching black literary works, particularly, Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, and Afrofuturist works, such as Ytasha Womack’s *Afrofuturism*. Ingrid LaFleur, art curator and contemporary of Womack, explains, “Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation... I generally define Afrofuturism as a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens.” This research came as a result of being a guest on the Liminal Theology podcast. From that experience, I developed an intensive focused learning course to assess its viability, interest among students, and practical applications for the sake of spiritual and faith formation. The class was well-enrolled with both degree-seeking students and auditors. I hope to return to this research and develop a syllabus on Afrofuturist Chaplaincy through Aesthetics.

RESEARCHING

“... tracing the Black Fantastic identifies the: “Minor-key sensibilities generated from the experiences of the underground...” and on another level tracing the Black Fantastic means to recover past counter futures, sprouting them into the present while reading their radically hopeful possibilities into a future augmented with progressive values infused with more Black soul.

C. Derksen, Black Jeopardy

In CPE, students enter a pastoral training program consisting of small-group and action-reflection-action learning. Personal and professional goal-setting fosters and develops Spiritual Care Leadership. Furthermore, facilitated peer dialogue accentuates and enhances ongoing reflection. Clinical hours allow the student to provide care as part of an interdisciplinary team comprising doctors, nurses, and social workers. CPE requires regular one-on-one consultations with a CPE Supervisor, self-reflection, and group evaluations that take theological, spiritual, and personal reflection seriously. CPE works within the lived experiences of people who dwell in spaces that are less familiar to the majority. Considering how the breath of God moves in many urban areas of society, pastors and teachers will need to expand how CPE can be a resource of andragogical learning and witness.

CPE research and Afrofuturism practice will offer me the opportunity to develop and expand my spiritual formation and chaplaincy leadership, particularly in creating a course on Cultural Aesthetics as Afrofuturist Spiritual Formation. This course could easily span traditional units or in 8-week intensive offerings within a traditional unit.

This semester I was intentional about adding a course called *Decolonizing Neurodivergence* to the course catalog. Contextualized learning helps to support the development of leaders’ progressive spiritual identities while also infusing their capacity for pursuing racial equity and its intersecting struggle for human freedom. As institutions of higher learning continue their pursuit of being anti-racist and epistemologically decolonized, I believe that one’s vocation can be resilient, filled with purpose, and full of joy with andragogical learning. Afrofuturism and cultural aesthetics within chaplaincy are needed for forming sacred spaces that add to chaplaincy, theological education, and meeting a wider audience.

SERVICE

“The world is full of painful stories. Sometimes it seems as though there aren’t any other kind and yet I found myself thinking how beautiful that glint of water was through the trees.”
— Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

If my hypothesis proves that cultural aesthetics, particularly Afrofuturist aesthetics, is a tool for spiritual formation, then chaplains everywhere would be able to help non-profit organizations, healthcare facilities, and Black communities. This method of care will

likely result in a greater sense of community as we continue to work hard at the intersections of the church, society, and the academy.

Theological Aesthetics: Afro-futuring Method

As we operate in CPE groups across the country, we may share the following definitions and their relevance within inclusive communities and spiritual care practices. The Afrofuturist Method is concerned about the remembering of one's own identity and traditions for the sake of centering those of the African diaspora in the urgency of now. For the sake of communal liberation and freedom of a society. Please note, anyone, regardless of ethnicity can practice this approach. Reflection of the Afrofuturist method aim to create space for the forgotten, suppressed, oppressed and all who are in need of freedom, particularly those marred by the fallibility of cultural and religious traditions. Reflection is a basis for action, not continued theorizing.

A common language and a collective understanding of terms related to Afro-futuring theological aesthetic:

Afrofuturistic Aesthetics—exploring God in both beauty and the profane for the urgency of communal liberation, and particularly for afro-futures.

Future- here and now

Inclusive community- a context that offers some measure of salvation, even a reflective community in pursuit of freedom

Liberation -the need for change; to see the lived experience of a contextualized people and make known the forces of oppression, violence, struggle and domination.

The guiding questions are How do we respond in the creating of freedom for our society through dismantling systemic oppression, internally and externally? Does our locale or space offer a measure of salvation for me? For all people?

The goal within CPE is to develop a praxis for spiritual living and leadership development:

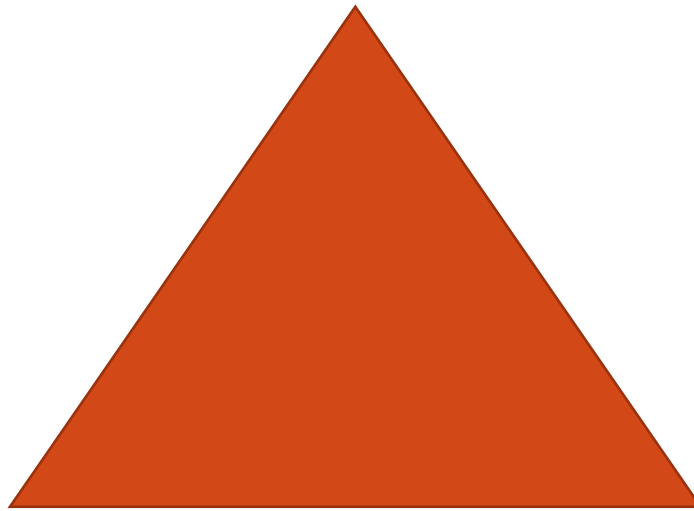
Emotions

What moves us: honor feelings and sensation

Where have belonging been denied?

Intuitive concern

Grotesque remembering



Imagination

Do you have the freedom to imagine?

How do you imagine God in this context?

Imagines God's empathy, where is the brokenness?

What is imagined in a liberated society?

Physical Touch

Rain

Skin

Scarring

What do you feel?

The hand patten to the beat

What is the touch of freedom?

Being concerned with questions about God and issues in theology perceived through cultural knowledge, with special attention to the resource of self. Practical theology takes seriously the integration of theology and the social sciences. More easily said, theology and the lived experiences of people including our own experiences and epistemological ways of knowing.

Locating God within our context may be challenging at first, but it does not have to be. For instance, I am an African American woman whose life experiences span a multitude of musical genres. When the chaplain takes seriously there is no division between the sacred and profane, we ourselves will be able to sit with the bassline beat of hip hop and the sad undertones of a favorite genre. Not only sit with the tune but feel through your own interpretation and allow hearts to ask the hard questions. Reflect for the sake of action and listen to the tear that cascades against her skin.

A brief example of this approach could reflect on Will Smith's, song, *Tell Me Why* (feat Mary J. Blige), one of the most sacred songs of the 21st century. ¹

Whyyyyyy, whyyyyyy

[Chorus:]

I really wish I could explain it baby
It's just the world is kinda crazy baby
Ain't no pretty way to paint it baby
Don't cry, dry your eyes

[Will Smith]

September 11th I woke up about 7 AM
West coast time, french toast and my turkey bacon
Takin' my time awakin, turnin' my TV on
To my surprise, saw what everybody in the world saw
Me and my children, images were chillin'
My son said - daddy were there people in that building?
A cold sweat, frozen with a lump in my chest
I heard his question, couldn't bring my lips to say yes to him
That night at my son's side, he cried
And prayed for the ones who died in the World Trade
His palms to God, seeds of qualms with God
He just, kept on pressin' me, wanna know why
Then one week later our bombs were dropped
We seein' them, on CNN, they just won't stop
The infrared, images of brutal attack
He said "Daddy now we killin' 'em back," right right

[Chorus] ...

[Will Smith]

Honest to God, why is the bomb always gettin' the last word...

¹ Lyrics.com. Song: Tell Me Why. Artist Will Smith. [Will Smith - Tell Me Why Lyrics | Lyrics.com](https://www.lyrics.com/11071/1/Will+Smith/Tell+Me+Why). Accessed 12/18/2022

There is nothing within these lyrics that points us to congregational life nor, synagogue or religious order. Yet, the lyrics are heart wrenching at best and an indictment of the injustices our children face, and sometimes face alone. Sometimes, the arts create feelings that rise up within and makes us feel as if we are seated at the right hand of God. There are other so-called secular songs, that makes us feel all the feels – it allows us to reflect, see things as they are, and sometimes allows us to engage our theological imagination in ways to see what could be or even how we are complicit in the very act.

Supervisors, the work of Afrofuturistic aesthetics calls us to reflect on and ask for reflections on beauty and the grotesque parts of our lived experience that

1. move us, honoring our feelings and sensations,
2. reflect a piece of artwork that articulates a denial of belonging,
3. bring up an intuitive concern brought forward from feelings attributed to one's lived experience,
4. invite feelings that situate our hope for a community's liberation (what grotesque story positions us to see beauty?), and/or
5. honor the story.

Were you able to imagine a different perspective? Imagine God's empathy? How do we achieve freedom in spite of all that has been withheld or denied? May we reflect, in order to act.