Friendship as Formation across Cultures: Centering the Marginalized

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Should I resign?

There are a few times in my (Natasha's) life when this question has run across my mind. These moments have become turning points for my formation as a practical theologian. The times that I have been formed at the margins include times that I unknowingly perpetuated systems of power, as well as times when I stood up to the powers that be. As an Asian American female, I am at times aligned with power and other times scapegoated by it.

In seminary, I helped put on social events as part of my role as a Community Life Coordinator. During a holiday party in 2015, I "turned off the music" (both literally and figuratively) as a means of de-escalating tension between student groups vying for control of the playlist, unknowingly reinforcing a harmful narrative about whose music—the White majority's—was given more privilege and playing time. When I realized how badly I had offended and hurt several of my seminary peers, I asked myself: *Should I resign?*

Ultimately, I stayed in my role and learned a great deal from discussions with faculty and students. I learned that, even though I already considered myself to be an ally and had attended rallies for social movements such as Black Lives Matter, I still had much to learn. I leaned into difficult conversations and continued to reflect on my call to racial justice. I acknowledged the ways that my own internalized racism—and insidious influences such as the model minority myth—had predisposed me to side with (or be associated with) those in power until and unless I intentionally sided with those on the margins.

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By the time I was working on my PhD and training to become a chaplain and certified chaplain educator, I had grown in competency around navigating the nuances of intersectionality as a spiritual care provider and educator. Conversations around the books *White Fragility*[1] and *Microaggressions in Ministry*[2] helped me name dynamics I had previously experienced but did not have language to articulate. Within the world of clinical pastoral education (CPE), the 8:46 Webinar Series, produced in 2020, reassured me that this professional community, to which I belonged as a future chaplain educator, cared about racial justice.

By the beginning of 2023, I had experienced ways that microaggressions towards women (often by women) and Asian Americans contributed to an unsafe learning environment for my certified chaplain educator process. I leaned into having honest conversations about what I needed to feel safe in my professional development, expressing my desire to work through conflict when needed. I hoped for creative pathways to what supervision might look like, given that my formation in CPE had helped me see that my growing edge as a helper was to learn to ask for what I needed. When things got hard, I asked myself: *Should I resign?*

In the end, the choice was made for me. My petitions for a safe learning environment were reported to Human Resources as complaints, and a formal investigation was launched. It turns out that a request had been made for me to be "terminated for insubordination," a request that was denied because, after hearing my experiences, it was determined that there was "no grounds for termination." Yet, two weeks after receiving that assurance, I was given a severance package and asked to sign papers of "voluntary separation." I had been forced out of my job.

Once a favored employee at a prestigious hospital, I found myself at the margins. And yet, I experienced a "peace that surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:7) and a release from resentment and anger. Was this the freedom to exist as my authentic self that I had yearned for all along, and did it have to come at the cost of my income and career opportunities?

As a chaplain and practical theologian, I am steeped in literature and language about suffering, and I often pay lip service and stand in solidarity with those on the margins. But to be the one marginalized, to feel unheard by those in power, is an experience more real than words can describe. It is also more empowering than I could have dreamed.

In reflecting upon my support system in the face of a distressing situation that threatened my well-being, I recognized that friendships I have made on the margins are

the foundation of my sense of self as one who belongs in beloved community rather than is an isolated individual. In acknowledging my friendships as a source of formation, I invited one such friend to reflect with me on what formation on the margins is and why it is important. The rest of this article is written by the two of us (Natasha and Cecil) unless otherwise noted.

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The breaking of the bread represents a pivotal moment in the formation of the followers of Jesus in the Christian narrative. Indeed, there at the margin, each one of these apostles were formed, literally, at the edges of a table to an enduring friendship.

As the story goes, Jesus asks them to break bread repeatedly in remembrance of him. This is an act that foreshadows the tragic events that would cause immense sorrow among his followers and suffering in his own body.

In the ensuing suffering, a sacramental experience of redemption is made accessible to all those who desire reconciliation in body, soul, and spirit. Hence, the celebration of the Last Supper is very much a perpetual formation as it is about restoration. This is a striking observation imbued with profound insights as to how sorrow, suffering, and redemption commingle divinity with humanity. The body needs the spirit, and it is when the intensity of dis-ease is heightened that a different kind of anthropology is needed to transform the formation of anyone who seeks competence in the healing arts.

Our current curriculums for education and training students for the health professions have been alienated from this ancient wisdom. This is not wisdom unique to Christianity as each of those apostles sitting at the table, including Jesus, were Jews practicing Judaism.

Perhaps we can blame the scientific revolution for this. As Native American scholarship has demonstrated through postcolonial criticism, the accusation of scientific discovery is partial. It is the entirety of the settler colonialism enterprise—religion, science, and politics—that bears equal blame for this loss. How do we begin to reclaim and reconstitute what was lost? That question might need contextualizing as to what spiritual formation itself is about. The Christian sacred text unequivocally defines it best in another seminal—dare we say, marginal—encounter of Jesus with his followers in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1–11).

The beatitudes, in theological colloquialism, are the charisms of a servant healer. We can certainly connect the Sermon on the Mount to that Last Supper encounter where

bread was broken. Deliberate instruction is delivered both as an exhortation and as a mandate.

For those of us living through the terrors of the day, where are these margins and what is this command to break bread and aspire toward the beatitudes? We contend that friendship is a transformative experience that is within the reach of anyone, through which in spirit, in the soul, and with grace healing flows to restore the body. This is the new anthropology we would like to reconsider as the margins for spiritual formation.

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The margins are often an afterthought in the enterprise of formation, and yet they are the spaces where divine and human energies meet. In my Christian tradition, heaven is described as a place where "every tribe and tongue and nation" worship God together. Diversity is acknowledged as the new reality, with the streams that feed it having come from the same two original humans. The human race is reunified in the afterlife. To be different is to belong.

In divinity school, our most formative class was called Ministry and the Disinherited, a class in which we did a deep dive into Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*.[3] Ministry and the Disinherited was taught by a professor whose credentials included work as a social worker, chaplain, and pastor. The pedagogy was relational and reflective. Lived experience and emotional realities were a welcome part of class discussions. And the premise of ministry with and for the disinherited was that Jesus was himself a marginalized person in his time.

We sat with Thurman's book for the whole semester, sometimes growing uncomfortable at the questions with which it asked us to grapple:

Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself?"[4]

These questions, in light of the reality that Jesus was a brown man from an oppressed class, struck us to our core.

In this class, we experienced not only diversity but also inclusion and belonging. This belonging happened because we were not afraid of conflict, of asking the hard questions about the ways we were disinherited and the ways we had disinherited others. We took turns leading meditations at the start of each class, and in one

particularly poignant one, we pondered the paradox of the fact that, in order for God to "prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies" (Psalm 23:5), the enemies were invited to sit at our table. What were we to do with that?

Out of this collegiality, we cultivated a friend group that keeps in touch to this day. It began with a dinner party at Cecil's, followed by a hike organized by Natasha. One of our most iconic group photos feature thirty-eight friends from eleven different countries, and our circle continued to widen because of our natural inclusion of newcomers. We called ourselves the Disinherited, and we belonged precisely because we knew what it was like to be marginalized. These friendships became my formation in seminary. I learned how to show up with my full self, and to receive another's full self, and to be enriched by perspectives that were shaped by various life experiences. Friendship was formation, and on the margins, the disinherited found belonging.

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How do we take these organic encounters in the margins and channel their essence into formal programs and structures? How can I replicate the experiences of sharing meals, taking road trips, and going out for happy hour with my friends in formal spaces like the CPE classroom or formation classes at church? The early Christian church grappled with this as followers of Jesus attempted to recount their experiences with him among the sick and the poor, in people's homes and on the road, and to perpetuate his legacy in ritual and remembrance.

We propose that formation at the margins begins with a safe space for folx to simply be. This "come as you are" posture is not simply an attitude of welcome; it is also an ethical stance to be upheld. Individuals who have experienced marginalization must feel that they do not need to code-switch in order to be accepted. Formation cannot begin without positive regard and acceptance. The unfortunate reality that must be acknowledged up front is that environments of spiritual formation have the potential to retraumatize participants if safety is not created. Participants have the right to emotional and psychological safety.

Acceptance of oneself and others, in our uniqueness and our limitations, provides opportunity for authentic dialogue, healthy tension and grappling, and fellowship and belonging. The gift of being known and knowing others opens one's heart and exposes one to blind spots and embedded assumptions. In the Johari window, a foundational concept in CPE, we see that being in community allows for greater self-

awareness of blind spots. A Freirean approach[5] would suggest that this include greater awareness of blind spots of the facilitator or educator.

Melanie Harris offers six steps for engaging with communities on the margins:

1) Uncover Experience and Stories
2) Validate Experience
3) Ascertain Values from Critical Reflection of Experience
4) Connect Values to Wisdom
5) Take Action upon the Wisdom and Values
6) Use Empowerment Gained from the Action to Move toward Justice[6]

These steps mirror what chaplains do at the bedside in that our aim is to come alongside spiritual care receivers and empower them to identify their resources rather than fix or tell them what to do next. A womanist virtue ethicist reminds us that survivors of systemic injustice are often well aware of their values and have developed ways to thrive based upon their values. "Resistance," a term often used in CPE to negatively characterize students whom educators feel are out of their power and control, becomes an asset for those on the margins. Both Walker's virtue ethics and Freire's pedagogy take seriously the importance of drawing from individuals' life experiences for wisdom rather than depositing an idea of what "should be." Harris writes:

> Virtues can be described as habitually practiced characteristics of a person or the process of developing good habits of character such that they are a normal part of one's way of being in the world. Values are the standards and principles by which we judge worth or preference. Together, virtues and values are used as measuring codes by which to evaluate ethical or moral action and behavior. As mentioned above, there is an interconnection between virtues and values in that virtues are often reflective of the values that are most pronounced in a community. Thus, virtues based on the prominence of these values become standards of ethical action and being.[7]

Making room for the unexpected is an ethos that the margins offer to the mainstream. The healthy disruptions that we embrace at the margins are often what is needed to shake the mainstream out of apathy, fear, entitlement, and stuckness. The margins are where Jesus sought out John for his baptism and where he was commissioned by God for ministry.

Chaplaincy is a space of formation with and from the margins, whether that be with patients whose illness and hospitalization have displaced them from their sense of normalcy or with students whose own experiences of marginalization grant them perspectives that help those in power uncover their blind spots. Let us behold the margins as a sacred space.

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The margins are a place where joy erupts in belly laughs and lasts until the tears flow. The most incredible thing about our formational friendships was that we did not feel like the margins were a place of deprivation—they were rather a place of abundance. I often felt sorry for students who did not have the opportunity to experience the richness of friendship that we had, and I often wished I could offer them a taste of what we had. Just as the edge of a pork chop often has the most flavor and crispness, I see the margins as a space reserved for the adventurous.

Those days were some of the best days of my life. Out of that reservoir of friendship flows my passion for formation and my sense of identity. If by our friends I am known, then those friendships cultivated at the margins represent excellence, authenticity, creativity, and resilience.

Hauerwas reminds us that "virtue . . . begins and ends in friendship"[8] and that, rather than seeing friendship as an outcome of cultivating virtue, it is itself the formation of virtue. Indeed, "[F]riendship itself is an activity by which we acquire the kind of steadfastness necessary for being true friends."[9] I am because you are, and my own sense of self is ultimately the beginning of friendship and formation through friendship. So, when we ask how to find formation at the margins, let us begin by cultivating our own openness, and then the margins will be easily found.

Last but certainly not least, we cannot talk about the margins without acknowledging the power dynamics at play within society, institutions, and religious communities. Each individual's relationship to power—which is ever in flux—determines their proximity to the margins. It begs the question: When do we choose to align with power in order to advocate for those on the margins, and when do we give up our power, risking becoming marginalized?

There are no easy answers, only examples from religious traditions of individuals who counted the cost and chose to invest in their own spiritual formation, even when it occurred at the margins.

NOTES

[1] Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).
[2] Cody J. Sanders and Angela Yarber, *Microaggressions in Ministry: Confronting the Hidden Violence of Everyday Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015).
[3] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).
[4] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* , xix.
[5] See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Berman Ramos (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000).
[6] Melanie L. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 90–105.
[7] Harris, *Gifts of Virtue*, 105.
[8] Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 38.
[9] Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*, 38.