Theology Theory: The Power of Relationships

Imani Jones

My theology has deep roots in my understanding of relationships. I believe that humankind was created by God to be in relationship with God and one another. The human experience is largely characterized by living not in isolation but rather in community and relationship. Emerging from these relationships are opportunities to know and to be made known, to grow, and to ultimately experience liberation. Womanist theology is integral to how I live out my faith, how I operate as an educator in relationship with my students, and how I personally experience liberation. Womanist theology is a branch of theology that places the spiritual and moral perspectives and experiences of African American women at the center of theological engagement. Within womanist theology is a critical analysis of the stories of African American women and the unique impact that the intersection of race, class, and gender has on their lives. This type of theology is informed by the Bible as well as by literature, music, slave narratives, the African American church, and everyday life.

My connection to womanism began in seminary, after studying countless theologians who neither looked like me nor engaged in God-talk in the ways that I found meaningful as an African American woman. I felt a longing for a form of theology that resonated with me and the complexities of my lived experience. While Black liberation theology was a logical

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starting place for me, with its emphasis on God being on the side of the oppressed, the patriarchy of my experiences in society and in the African American church was reinforced in Black liberation theology as it did not seek to address the oppression of African American women. I was introduced to womanist theology, and I was home! I found myself, my voice, and new life in this form of theology. I could feel the rough textures, jagged edges, and bursts of hallelujahs of my own life in the pages that I read as I studied womanism.

My theology and supervisory practice are largely influenced by the definition of womanism created by Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Though Walker is not a theologian, and though the meaning of womanism has evolved over time, the definition she developed provided the framework and foundation for the origins of womanist theology, and it is there that I ground my theological theory as an educator. A portion of Walker's formal definition of womanism, can provide context to illustrate my theory: "The black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman . . . usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one."[1] This portion of the definition speaks to my work and ministry as a CPE educator. I believe that the nature of chaplaincy work, both in practice and in education and supervision, is outrageous, audacious, courageous, and willful. Making space in relationships for the struggles and pain of others, and even daring to enter such spaces, is outrageous, audacious, courageous, and willful behavior. Engaging in the hard work of self-awareness and reflection is outrageous, audacious, courageous, and willful behavior. Initiating supervisor and peer feedback is outrageous, audacious, courageous, and willful behavior. Facing deep-seated bondage, woundedness, and shame is outrageous, audacious, courageous, and willful behavior. As an educator, I teach and model such behavior through relationship with my students. I journey with my students, endeavoring to know them in greater depth as I teach them about taking the risk to "act womanish." Womanist theology emboldens me to go to the depths or, as I like to say, "go there" with others.

Just as the stories and lived experiences of African American women are at the heart of womanism, the stories of students in the context of CPE is paramount. This occurs first in relationship to the educator during the admissions and interview process and later in community with the peer

group. I provide students with an opportunity to share their stories at the outset of a CPE unit, which takes courage. I establish trust, modeling vulnerability and openness by also sharing my own story with them. When working with students, I connect the curiosity of womanism with the research stance of family systems theory, and I am curious—I want to know "more than is good for one," which is to say I am willing to "go there" to hear the stories that others may not want to hear.

Beyond simply knowing what is going on with students, I want to enter the story, even when pain and suffering are present. As BJ, a White female student in her late twenties, cried in acknowledging the roots of her perfectionism in individual supervision, reflecting on the pressure she felt from her parents to perform well academically, I journeyed to the depths with her. We explored her pain together even as I tapped into my own pain in the context of my perfectionist ways of being. I could see her because I could see myself. I could "go there" with BJ because I have gone there and continue to "go there" with myself. As an educator, I "go there" with students and encourage them to tap into the courage to "go there" with one another as they make deep discoveries about who they are during verbatim seminars, interpersonal group, and individual supervision. My own self-reflections during my CPE experience pushed me to "go there" within the context of my pain and struggles, engaging in womanish behavior on my own behalf as a wounded healer seeking spiritual wellness and wholeness in my life. For example, delving deeper into my tendency to overfunction has helped me to tap into my anxiety when the impulse to be responsible *for* students rather than responsible *to* them is heightened.

In addition to connecting inwardly, I also draw upon my previous experiences as a hospital chaplain to remind me of the value of acting womanish. For example, when I see students avoiding the painful emotions of their patients and/or families, I lean into some of the more profoundly painful clinical encounters of my chaplaincy experience. As I teach, I recall situations like working with patients in an inpatient drug detox unit. I remember how I decided to "go there" and "act womanish" as I felt the pain of the patient who had lost custody of her children to foster care due to her drug use and was longing to feel their arms around her again. I have felt this way, in reverse, as it relates to my own mother, as the child who longs to put her arms around her mother again—but cannot. I felt the pain of the mother who gave birth to a nineteen-week-old baby who did not survive and whom

I was privileged to baptize through my own tears and deep sorrow. I can recall the tracks of a father's tears when he learned that his eighteen-year-old son was brain-dead. I felt raw pain as I touched the heels of a dying young woman who had been tortured and burned so badly that the only part of her body that was not bandaged was the bottom of her feet, caked with mud and soot from her horrifying ordeal.

In each of these instances and countless others, I engage in willful behavior by choosing not to play it safe. I willfully choose not to maintain an emotional distance, which is not always easy given the prevalence of such behavior in my own family system. However, the depth of my desire to engage in the outrageous, audacious, courageous, and willful behavior of supervision emboldens me to "act womanish"! I seek to remain connected and in relationship during challenging situations and interactions with students by being present and empathetic. My theological perspective is that "going there" is what God dared to do in freedom through the incarnation, as Emmanuel, God with us, took on the form of human flesh and dwelled among us. I engage in this kind of incarnational ministry and supervision in my work with students.

I recognize that womanist theology may not resonate with all male students, female students, or students from other racial, ethnic, sociocultural, or economic backgrounds. Womanism may not even connect with all African American female students. In addition, not every student will want or have the capacity to "go there" or to "act womanish." This was true for JF, a White Christian male Summer Unit student. I had difficulty relating to him in the beginning of the unit due to the seemingly impenetrable walls he put up. I tried to "go there" and "act womanish" with him, but the boldness of this approach did not work well. I adopted a different approach by drawing upon Martin Buber's "I-Thou" concept as critical purchase. I found myself feeling frustrated with JF, working harder in supervision than he was, which then frustrated me more. I realized in reflection that my frustration was more about me than him and that it would be helpful for me to seek to relate to him differently for both our sakes. Deconstructing the subject-object or I-It relationship that I was operating in with JF, which contributed to my frustration, I adopted the "I-Thou" approach, which is a way of engaging others in which people enter into a relationship with the object that Buber defines as an encounter in which the countenance of God is seen in the other.[2] Whereas I was initially inclined to push JF and "make" him

open up to me, I realized that meeting him where he was, and seeing the suffering and wounded God in him, could potentially result in a more positive encounter between us. I shifted perspective and challenged myself to learn about his life and story. I asked him curious questions and offered him a safe space in individual supervision to open up each week. I pondered his areas of bondage and the potential for liberation as I invited JF to reflect upon and consider the previously held assumptions he held about himself. We also discussed how he experienced connection and disconnection and how being disconnected contributed to the internal bondage he lived with. I held his shame without judgment and sat with him in the midst of those feelings. As an educator, I embodied a ministry of presence with JF in the I-Thou encounter as he shared the valley and mountaintop experiences of life.

As a practitioner of womanist theology, the faith that I profess begins with my belief in and relationship with a God who is a present, loving, and active force in the world and in the lives of humanity. I am informed by a faith that places value on having a personal relationship with God. God affects creatures in a variety of ways, and creatures affect God in a variety of ways. Through the act of creation, God engaged in relationship with the cosmos. Though God is creator of the universe, God has chosen in freedom to be in relationship with creation in general and with humanity in particular. This unique relationship that God has with humankind is evident throughout the biblical canon, from the creation account in Genesis where God underscores the value of relationships, proclaiming that it was not good for humankind to be alone and therefore created people to be in relationship with one another, to the covenant relationship God established with Israel and later with all humanity through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As humanity relates to one another in positive and healthy ways, I believe that we reflect the way in which God lives in communion with creation. The greatest commandment, Jesus noted, of loving God with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, and loving one's neighbor as one's self, embodies the true nature of being in relationship with Creator and creation.

The reality, however, is that many human relationships are characterized by some level of dis-ease and tension at some point. Relationships go through series of connections, disconnections, and reconnections due to the brokenness that exits in the world. These disconnections often stem from

broken relationships within families of origin, which are the most significant shaping forces in people's lives. Conflict and confrontation also inhabit relationships and at the same time have the potential for transformation in the midst of the conflict. This tension occurs in the CPE educational space between members of the peer group and between students and educators. LH, a White female Extended Unit student in her mid-twenties, experienced conflict with me and was hurt when I challenged the "there and then" conversation she initiated in IPG. She felt that she had disappointed "the teacher" and was tearful at home as she reflected on the situation. She initiated a conversation with me during the next scheduled individual supervision. As we worked through the conflict together, we became more connected, thus experiencing liberation in the relationship in the midst of the conflict. As an educator, I am aware that the emphasis I place on connection with students may not always yield positive or connected relationships between students or between myself and students. When connection does not seem to be possible, I lean into the responsibility I have to continue to educate and provide opportunities for learning and growth, limited though they may be.

As a womanist, I have a strong and meaningful connection to the faith of my African American foremothers and forefathers who, "through many dangers, toils and snares," held fast to a relationship with the living and liberating God of their understanding, which differed greatly from the oppressive God presented to them by their White slave masters. Through their relationships with God and the community of faith, they found meaning and hope in a God whose compassion for them could be felt, and a prophetic voice could be heard in the midst of their suffering as a people. It is this faith that has, in many ways, rooted and grounded African Americans in America and enabled them to survive through generations of racism, poverty, suffering, and social struggle. I believe that this same faith, which lives in me, is etched in my bones, joints, and marrow and has enabled me to keep pushing to survive as a young woman bound in many ways by a dysfunctional family, as a teenage mother, as an African American woman in America and the academy, and in the context of the patriarchal African American Baptist church. In each of these circumstances being in relationship with a power greater than I who is aware of who I am, who loves me for who I am, and who will see me through no matter where I am nourishes my faith all the more.

My name, Imani, which actually means "faith" in Swahili, holds special significance for me as I seek to live into the tension of what it means to be a woman of faith in a world that has an intimate relationship with good and evil, sin and salvation, wholeness and brokenness, joy and pain. I educate students who live in this very same world, with an awareness that they too experience the world's brokenness in ways that are not easily explained away by the faith that we each profess. I am aware of the paradoxical and highly complex nature of human beings, created in the *imago Dei* and filled with goodness while at the same time living with the reality of sinfulness and brokenness. God knows the imperfections and shadow side of humanity and at the very same time upholds a covenant to be in relationship with all of creation, offering unconditional love, redemption, reconciliation, and wholeness. God reveals Godself to humanity as the Divine Knower and also moves within us that we may know ourselves more fully and deeply through engagement in the world and in relationship with others. God is also present with humanity in pain and suffering and calls people to be present with one another during such times, weeping with those who weep and mourning with those who mourn.

Within the context of humanity's relationship with God self-discovery often emerges. I have come to know myself more fully as a result of God's revelatory work in me individually and in community. As I work with students, I believe that God is at work in the self-discovery process through the relationships formed in the peer group, through the giving and receiving of feedback, uncovering of blind spots, engaging in confrontation, receiving consultation in achieving learning goals, and engaging in critical reflection in the group context.

The discovery of self in relationships was evident in SS, an African American male Extended Unit student in his early thirties. While presenting his first verbatim, he was visibly jarred by the questions and feedback that his peers and I were raising about his pastoral care. In his mind, his visit had been a good visit. He had not anticipated much critique. An accomplished author and pastor, SS was accustomed to his own competency and less comfortable with the disorientation of learning a new competency. SS had shared with the group previously that he considered himself to be a very open and emotionally available person. However, during the verbatim presentation he shut down and became disengaged with the process. When I inquired about how he was doing, having been able to both see and feel

his anger, he quickly replied without much emotion that he was fine. My intervention was to share with him that he didn't seem to be fine but rather seemed angry and was often defensive when receiving feedback. SS was not open to exploring this in the moment, but upon further reflection he was able to speak openly about how difficult the verbatim process had been for him. He had not realized that he was behaving defensively. It was in relationship in the context of the group and its process that SS discovered a new behavior and way of being that he had not previously considered.

My desire for relationships as an educator is that they are rooted in caring and trust, which allows for greater depth and authenticity and intimacy. As I form relationships with students, who are created in the divine image of God, I believe that I encounter God in new and fresh ways. I enter the encounter as a representative of God, and I meet God in the face of the other. I met God in the face of FP, a White female Christian student, who so reminded me of the things I find most frustrating about my mother that I wondered how I would supervise her. Her loud and boisterous personality caused me to feel anxious. In my anxiety, I became curious, and I became open to learning more about FP. I learned about the complexities of FP as an only child being raised by two extremely introverted parents who described her as being "too much" for them. I leaned into FP's feelings of loneliness and fears of rejection. I connected to her fear of not being accepted as I wrestled with my own fears as an African American woman navigating spaces where I am almost always the minority. My relationship with FP grew deep roots as I sought to see her and dared to see myself in her. Forming relationships in this way from the very beginning makes room for mutual empathy, empowerment, respect, and the beauty of knowing and being made known to one another. This, to me, is the essence of true relationship—being with and bearing witness to the lived experience of another with empathy and grace.

As an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ (UCC), my understanding of relationship is also rooted in the biblical concept of covenant practice. While each congregation in the UCC has the ability to live out its faith as a community in freedom, autonomy, unity in diversity, and covenant, the four key principles that undergird the foundations and current function of the denomination, our identity as a united and uniting church honors the covenant relationship we have as a body of believers. As a member of the UCC, I feel liberated by the freedom and autonomy to express

myself and my beliefs without the pressure of uniformity and strict polity because of the covenant that is shared. I have the freedom to accept and develop relationships with people from all cultural and religious backgrounds with extravagant welcome within the UCC because of the importance of covenant. I apply my UCC understanding of covenant in a variety of ways in my supervisory practice. I choose to interview and accept students into the CPE program from a variety of faith traditions, ethnic backgrounds, ages, stages of life, and life experience. I regard the training agreement and the student rights and responsibilities that students sign as forms of covenant. I create space for students to create a group covenant for engaging the group process with one another at the beginning of the CPE unit. I view learning contracts as a form of covenant and agree to work in relationship with students to assist them in reaching their goals as they discover themselves more fully and deeply through the liberative learning process.

Another very integral component of my theology involves the intersection of theology and culture. Each person that I encounter and form relationships with, whether a patient, family member, staff, or student, emerges from a particular cultural context. "Culture is a given to the human person. It simply is in our origins."[3] I believe that it is very important for me as an educator to be aware of and sensitive to the particularities and nuances of a variety of cultural contexts in order to teach and supervise students. As much as possible, I don't want to make assumptions about people or apply personal or learned principles about human behavior to people from other cultural contexts that may not fit. As womanist theologians note, as well as emerging disciplines within the context of pastoral care, there are cultural codes, or words, beliefs, behavioral patterns, conditions, events, meanings, and values, that crystallize in a variety of contexts. Culture must absolutely be taken into account when providing pastoral care because "the way one experiences illness and death is profoundly influenced by race, cultural and religious background, and socioeconomic status."[4] Though I cannot possibly know all of the elements of each culture that I encounter, I have an awareness that such factors exist and am therefore mindful of the presence and power of these factors in my supervisory practice.

As an African American woman and a member of the UCC, which places a high value on diversity and cultural sensitivity, and as a member of the ACPE, which also values diversity, I strive to be a culturally aware educator by being intentional in learning more about the cultures of others,

understanding my own values and basic assumptions, having a capacity for welcoming, entering into and prizing other worldviews without negating their legitimacy, and seeking sources of influence in both person and context. It is also important for me as an educator to be aware of the particularities of my own culture as an African American woman and how these particularities could potentially help or hinder my supervisory practice.

As a womanist, I place significant emphasis on the life and ministry of Jesus and less emphasis on his suffering. That said, as I reflect theologically about culture, I believe that Jesus modeled cultural awareness within the context of his life and ministry. He ministered to people in an agrarian culture and used language and imagery that would connect with them as agrarian people. The parables of the fig tree, the sower, and the kingdom of heaven as compared to a mustard seed are each an example of how Jesus was culturally sensitive to those he ministered to. He used the vernacular of the people and imagery they would connect with based on their cultural context. He formed relationships with people on the margin and had compassion for the left out, the lowly, and the least of these. In addition, through the incarnation Jesus was born into a specific culture at a particular time in history. Within that culture there were subcultures, and Jesus spoke to them, integrating what he knew of the culture into his work. Jesus did not limit himself to speaking only to those within his own culture but reached outside to the folk from Samaria, for example, who embraced other cultural norms and practices.

My theology truly does emerge from the essence of who I am as an African American woman who has a relationship with a relational God, a relationship with people, and an understanding of and deep appreciation for the ways in which culture and theology intersect. Being present to the experiences of others as a practitioner of womanist theology by hearing their stories is important to me as I seek to establish meaningful, mutually empathic, and life-giving relationships. As a growing CPE educator, I will employ the same practice of meeting students where they are and being attentive to what is meaningful to them spiritually, emotionally, and culturally in authentic relationship. In so doing, I believe that I will facilitate connection and liberation for both the students and for myself.

NOTES

1 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii

Note the full definition of womanism:

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Ans. "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

2 Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Touchstone, 1970), 17–24.

3 David Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling across Cultures* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 20.

4 Marion Danis, "The Roles of Ethnicity, Race, Religion and Socioeconomic Status in End-of-Life Care in the ICU," in *Managing Death in the Intensive Care Unit: The Transition From Cure to Comfort*, ed. J. Randall Curtis and Gordon D. Rubenfeld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 215.