Intersections

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Intersections

Faith, Learning, and the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education

IN THIS ISSUE

Vocation: Ethical Leadership

Intersections is a publication by and largely for the academic communities of the twenty-eight institutions that comprise the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU). Each issue reflects on the **intersection** of faith, learning, and teaching within Lutheran higher education. Published by the NECU, ***Intersections*** extends and enhances discussions fostered by the annual Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference, together lifting up the vocation of Lutheran colleges and universities. It aims to raise the level of awareness among faculty, staff, and administration about the Lutheran heritage and church-relatedness of their institutions, especially as these **intersect** with contemporary challenges, opportunities, and initiatives. ***Intersections*** publishes pieces on vocation from perspectives in all areas of Higher Education at Lutheran colleges and universities, including students. We publish artwork, short reflections of 500-600 words, and features of 1500-2500 words. We're especially interested in the following: insight from your research, teaching, or advocacy; your perspective based on your campus/position/location; and student perspectives on any of the above.

On the cover:

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CALL FOR ARTISTS

Submit your artwork for the cover of Fall 2026 *Intersections* "Vocation: Beyond Walls, For the Common Good" to the editor, Colleen Windham-Hughes: **windhamh@plts.edu.** High resolution files of photographs, digital art, paintings, drawings, sculpture, fiber or mixed media pieces are accepted media formats.

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LAMONT ANTHONY WELLS

FROM THE PUBLISHER

In this issue of *Intersections*, we are excited to share some of the powerful dialogue and learning that came out of the 2025 Vocation in Lutheran Higher Education Conference (VLHE) hosted by the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU) and held at Augsburg University.

Convening under the conference theme "Ethical Leadership in a Changing World," presidents, provosts, faculty, administrators, bishops, chaplains and other leaders from 28 Lutheran colleges and universities joined together to explore and discern together what it means to lead in an age of deep division.

We are reminded that vocation is never a solitary endeavor but a collective one, a public witness into which we are called:

- **Ethical Formation:** "Peace if possible, truth at all costs," Martin Luther famously wrote. As such, we work to form character and conscience for leadership in social and cultural upheaval.
- **Theology and Care:** Rooted in Lutheran core values, and in solidarity with those from other faiths, the event was infused with an ethic of care that attends to the wholeness of community.
- **Flourishing and Belonging:** Planting vocational seeds with a new generations of learners, diversifying curriculum for a more expansive enrichment, global learning and more—to name just a few were key takeaways from the many workshops.
- **Leadership and Witness:** Drawing from both scholarly and practitioner perspectives, Dr. Walter Fluker and other faculty leaders in NECU called for the work of ethical formation and academic excellence as an expression of faithfulness. NECU leaders joined one another at the conference in witnessing to Lutheran higher education's renewed relevance and commitment to impact.

The overarching message coming out of this year's conference is that vocation is a practice that is best cultivated communally. It is strengthened and made clear in conversation, in contemplation and in action that is sometimes bold, often creative and always rooted in God's grace. Our world is rife with fragmentation and instability, both systemic and existential. In response to these challenges, God is raising up our communities and institutions to be beacons of hope, to tell the truth and to partner in God's work of making all of God's people flourish.

At the heart of our theme: "Ethical Leadership in a Changing World" was an understanding that leadership is not simply positional but intrinsically vocational. Lutheran higher education is both a calling and a call to lead well, with humility and with boldness, to discern faithfully in an age of rapid change and to embody justice, equity and love in practice. Ethical leadership, as envisioned and experienced at the conference, was less about checklists of rules and more about the formation of people of care and conscience who would make decisions that are moved by God's grace, guided by evidence and shaped in response to the brokenness in the world around them.

We hope you will read this issue of *Intersections* with the spirit of holy listening and creative vision that was modeled at the VLHE Conference. May these pages strengthen your call and renew your commitment to our common ministry of serving, leading and loving.

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COLLEEN WINDHAM-HUGHES

FROM THE EDITOR

"Duc. Duc. Goose." My point is not about animals or the children's game, it's about the "duc" in "education" and "seduction" because it turns out to be the same "duc" from the Latin ducere, to lead.

Education is the key note of our charism–the drawing out or leading out of learners to lead according to their calling and vocation.

Seduction is our kryptonite, our Achilles' heel, the flip side of our charism because it's the same power turned away. In other words, our considerable powers and giftedness, steered in the wrong direction, may not promote the life of the world God loves.

I can see two broad paths of seduction today, and they're not all that different from dangers Martin Luther observed in his day. One path of seduction is to be taken in by the life of the world and particularly human delights. This path sets the world/creation over or above the creator and makes us greedy for its pleasures. The second path denies the world and deprives us of receiving it as a gift. This is the path of judgment and condemnation–a kind of No to the world.

To give no attention to the present or to deny and negate it is to say it has no meaning. Faced with suffering, one must not compound the suffering by searching for hidden meanings or by condemning all life as beyond meaning. Instead, through education we are freed to tell the truth about suffering, to proclaim its meaninglessness and senselessness, and to embrace whatever meaning could be fashioned with the truth about suffering as the starting point.

Right now there's no denying that the world we inherited and have contributed to building is crumbling. We see it in decay and destruction, and we feel this is the end of the world. It is—as we know it. And some issues really are as urgent as we think they are—namely climate change and the human suffering that goes with it. Yet much of what we wring our hands over is not the end of the world as such. We've become so anesthetized to our own creativity, we cannot remember the call to act for the life of the world God loves. Two big threats right now are cessation of effort and the limited agency of condemnation—because meaning is stripped or the leader is gone or we do not like the one we have. If we give up, the world does not stop.

We must not lend our energies to No-saying forces that destroy the planet, ignore the poor, and shun our neighbors. Saying Yes to the world when the world is crumbling looks foolish and ignorant. Showing up to affirm one another and confess, "I don't know" is vulnerable and risky, especially when education is our calling.

"[A]sk any person, at any of our NECU institutions, and they are doing it. They'll tell you a story about how their institution is dying *and* how it is finding new ways to live. How their students are thriving and they are floundering." Speakers/contributors such as Rev. Ann Rosendale, quoted here, are finding ways to tell the truth of our current moment and summon Yes-saying energies of hope and world-building efforts. These yesses make third spaces of trustworthy communities, built on the vulnerability and resilience of people prepared to show up, be present, and do the work. As Ann reminds us, "The 'and' is the hardest part."

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WALTER EARL FLUKER

Wake Up Running! A Call to Ethical Leaders in Quest of Democratic Space

This article is an abridged writing from the VLHE keynote address on July 15, 2025.

Good morning to all who are gathered here in faith, conviction, and purpose. I give thanks to Rev. Lamont Wells and the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities for convening this vital conference at Augsburg University. It is a privilege to join educators, theologians, administrators, and community leaders under the theme "Ethical Leadership in a Changing World."

I have spent most of my life literally and metaphorically running. From my earliest days on the Southside of Chicago—running from gun-toting street gangs who needed to prove their manhood, from the ubiquitous presence of police, from white boy terrorists, and from powerful clandestine puppeteers who hide behind the curtains of social fiction and set-up, manipulate, and perpetuate the dramas that hold us all in bondage to lies, trickery and postcolonial nightmares. I would add that the compulsion to run is not necessarily a deficiency in character nor is it an attribute that always suggests fear, dread and terror, sometimes it is an intuitive drive to explore new possibilities beyond what is given. Thus, a clear, almost clairvoyant sensibility drives me to the task of returning to running not only as an historical and literary trope, but as a theological and ethical call to a new generation of leaders who will need to wake up every morning on the run! Like the creatures of the African savannah, we must wake up running. The gazelle runs to avoid becoming breakfast for some pride of lions, and the lions wake up running to feed their families. Every creature in the savannah wakes up running because of the precariousness of existence, and so must we. However, there is more at stake than implied in this predator-prey dynamic. We must not run in fear, but in faith towards the Other and the good futures that we can

"Every creature in the savannah wakes up running because of the precariousness of existence, and so must we. However, there is more at stake than implied in this predator-prey dynamic. We must not run in fear, but in faith towards the Other and the good futures that we can only imagine."

Walter Earl Fluker is the senior editor of The Howard Thurman Papers Project and a well-known figure in the theory and practice of ethical leadership. Dr. Fluker holds the position of Distinguished Professor of the Howard Thurman Center at Hartford International University for Religion & Peace.

only imagine. This is a decidedly spiritual undertaking at the dangerous and maddening *crossing(s)* of this moment in democratic life as an ominous cloud of a revived colonial specter of authoritarianism and chaos covers the land like an encroaching fog.

It was Martin Luther King, Jr., who over sixty years ago, spoke to "the urgency of now." Now, more than then, we need to heed his clarion call "to make real the promises of democracy" in this nation and beyond.[1] We must create communities of discourse and practice that acknowledge our real and distinct differences and yet, seek new ways to live together, and if possible, run together and embrace our differences for the urgent moment at hand. I think this is possible because our religious and social productions of reality are always contextual and constructive. We must, therefore, be vigilant, flexible, and adaptive—we must *congregate, conjure and conspire in common(s)* at cross-ing(s) as we "wake up running."

Running as a Liberative Practice

I employ the metaphor of running throughout this address as a liberative practice for a new generation of leaders on the run. I am playing with and privileging the notion of running as in *running away* and *running to* which are encapsulated in the language of "runagate" or "runaway." According to Vincent Wimbush, the term "runagate" is an alternate form of *renegate*, from Middle Latin *renegatus*, meaning "fugitive" or "runaway." It has come to carry the meaning of a more transgressive act than mere flight. It is marronage, running away with an attitude and a plan, a taking flight—in body, but even more importantly in terms of consciousness, or an awakening to one's path towards freedom.[2] Thus, I present running as a spiritually liberating practice as we reimagine democratic futures in this season of contested political and religious spaces.

Religious educators, scholars and church leaders need to begin with the basic consideration that our theological and ethical projects have always been and will continue to arise from lived religious and social experiences, not from the exalted, hierarchical dominance of master classes whose ideological and cultural narratives of supremacy and fascism portend a shadowy and hazardous future for the least of these! Our interpretive and activistic tasks are contextual and constructive, which means that our visions of democracy must resist not only oppressive constructions of deadly theological and ethical discourses but also corporatism and empire that feed on the fears, prejudices, and ignorance of many of our citizens who have been lulled to sleep by vast and complex systems of technology and communication in the name of "America First" and xenophobic beliefs of white supremacist logic and protocol. For this urgent moment when we are witnessing the forced migration of our brothers and sisters, the dismantling of the separation of powers, of religion and state, the building of gulags within and beyond our national boundaries, and the empowerment of a plutocracy where winners take all—we must insist upon diversity, equity, multiplicity, openness, and dynamism. In other words, we must do ethical leadership on the run!

Habakkuk: Running/Watching/Writing

There are two sources or witnesses for my thinking regarding running as an appropriate sign for our time. One is my reading of the 7th century BCE text from Habakkuk 2:2-4 NIV:

> I will stand at my watch
> and station myself on the ramparts;
> I will look to see what he will say to me,
> and what answer I am to give to this complaint.
> "Write down the revelation
> and make it plain on tablets
> so that a herald may *run* with it.
> For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
> it speaks of the end
> and will not prove false.
> Though it linger, wait for it;
> it will certainly come
> and will not delay.
> See, the enemy is puffed up;
> his desires are not upright—
> but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.

For Habakkuk, there is a deep sense of urgency as the prophet sees the utter devastation of his people under the

assault of the Babylonians. He raises a lament, a cry of desperation in the first chapter and asks, "How long will this last?" as he accuses God of not listening and tolerating such gross evil while the enemy hems in the righteous. In verses 2-4 of the second chapter, in a view from the ramparts, he gets a glimpse of the divine response to his complaint in the form of a runner, a herald who carries the vision to the people—a vision that Habakkuk must write down and publish in language that is so plain the people cannot miss it. There is also the caution in the revelation that it will take a while, so he mustn't give it up! And there is an added note that speaks to the divine activity in this awful moment that calls the prophet and the people to faith that is courage and courage that is faith: **"See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright, but the righteous person will live by their faithfulness."** These words call us to prophetic action—to ethical leadership that is grounded in the Lutheran traditions of grace, justice, and community—as we watch, write, and run to new democratic futures. A young 16th century Augustinian monk heard this ancient word quoted in Romans 1:17 and it ignited a revolution in the Roman Catholic Church that changed the religious and political landscape of Europe and the world. I wonder if we might be so courageous and faithful to God's call for our world.

The Parable of the Sower

The second witness is from Octavia Butler's 1993 novel, *The Parable of the Sower*, which tells the story of Lauren Oya Olamina, who is on the run because of the political and social chaos taking place in 2024. She is a runaway, who embodies the role of a *bricoleuse*, a resourceful individual who identifies available materials and repurposes them for survival. Her *go bag*, i.e. her *runaway bag*, like her ancestors', contains essential items for her journey north. The name "Oya" is derived from the Yoruba goddess of rebirth and life, and Lauren Oya, a young Black woman, leads a small community of diverse individuals through many *crossing(s)* of destruction and death to new life and possibilities. They rally around common purpose(s), a *common(s)*, which may or may not continue in the future, but they address the precarious moment at hand. Butler's sequel, *Parable of the Talents* (1998), continues the story in 2032. The Donner Administration disregarded science, and a new presidential candidate named Andrew Steele Jarret, a Texas senator and religious zealot, stirs up a violent movement with his campaign to "make America great again." The future is uncertain and strange for Butler, but through her protagonist, she believes that acting is necessary.

Both Habakkuk and Octavia Butler place a premium on the practices of running, watching, and writing—presenting them as expressions of a unified consciousness. Butler's novel, *Parable of the Sower*, urges us to become renegades to the future and to return to the present with lessons on adaptability, change, and pragmatic strategies for liberation from the constraints of bounded consciousness. It also teaches us key leadership lessons garnered from long memory and horrendous suffering, among these are the incredible power of *justice*, *grace*, and *community* that are integral to the task of congregating, conjuring and conspiring in common(s). Moreover, *Habakkuk* and *Lauren exemplify the running/watching/writing prophetic task to which we are called.*

> "*Soul-filled-work* involves remembering to pack our runaway bags with essential practices for survival and transformation: *love-filled-justice, grace-filled-empathy, hope-filled-resiliency.*"

So, what might ethical leadership on the run look like for this time? Here I offer some reflections on what might be possible in respect to what I propose as a model for intersubjective communication and embodied practices for transformational leaders on the run. As we make our runs to new democratic futures, we must join Habakkuk and Lauren Oya Olamina on the ramparts where we see the vision; and join them on the ground where we *run* swiftly to the people *embodying* the vision in our call to discipleship that I shall call *soul-filled-work*. *Soul-filled-work* involves remembering to pack our runaway bags with essential practices for survival and transformation: *love-filled-justice, grace-filled-empathy, hope-filled-resiliency*.

Ethical Leadership as Soul-Filled-Work

I like to think of ethical leadership as doing *soul-filled-work* or what the pioneering womanist scholar, the late Katie Geneva Cannon called, "the art of doing the work our souls must have."[3] What is the work that our souls must have? Each of us will have different responses to this question because ethics, nowadays, is a lot like love—it's a many splendored and splintered thing! But what does your soul cry out for amid what's going on all around us at this point in the history of our nation and the world? "Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me," says the psalmist.[4] What is calling you from the Deep? Who is calling you from your innermost sense of self and purpose in the world? What is your ultimate concern? Who and what is calling your name?

The phrase recalls Howard Thurman's challenge: *"Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go and do it, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."* [5] Ethics is not abstract—it is what we do in response to the call of the sound of the genuine. In one of Howard Thurman's earliest published sermons, "Keep Awake!" (June 1937),[6] he tells the story of the Indian musk deer on the run:

> It is said that in the springtime the musk deer is haunted by the odor of musk. He seeks it everywhere. There are times when the questing becomes terrible in its agony. He runs over hills, jumping streams and rivulets with his nostrils dilating and his body aching with desire, confident that around the next turning he will discover musk, the object of his quest. This goes on until at last, he falls exhausted, with his tiny head resting on his still more tiny [hoofs], to discover that the odor of musk is in his own hide. "Go where you will from Benares to Mathura; if you have not found your own soul, the world is unreal to you."
>
> **What is the scent in your own hide? What are you searching for on the run? Ethical leaders wake up running!**

I think Professor Cannon would want to remind us, however, that the deep, underlying issue in the art of ethical leadership and *soul-filled-work* is "power." She asks us to consider how "power" is experienced in a culture that denies one's existence, erases one's history and renders them invisible and voiceless. Ethical leadership takes seriously the moral questions of power and justice, but it also calls us to deep spiritual discipline of *soul-filled-work* and *love-filled-justice*, as we develop a sense of character, civility and community. It calls us into deeper relationship with our inner lives and public witness and transformation.

Love-Filled-Justice

On the wall facing the entrance to my home study, there is a framed photograph taken by Julian Plowden of a rally during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement at the St. John's Congregational Church, U.C.C., in St. Louis, Missouri, where the Reverend Dr. Starsky Wilson, now leader of the Children's Defense Fund, was pastor. The photograph is a colorful and diverse portraiture of *congregating*. Freedom Riders from an array of racial, ethnic, gendered, sexual, religious, and non-religious backgrounds and organizations found a sanctuary for their activism after the killing of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri. St. John's Congregational Church was a site of congregating for the protests. Upon first observation, the gathering seems a bit out of place with the stained-glass windows depicting biblical figures and stories with prominent characters in the tradition of the Europeans who first occupied the site in 1852 as a mission of St. Paul's Evangelical Church and relocated to its present home in 1923.[7] Throughout the crowded sanctuary was an intergenerational gathering of youthful and older adults from different backgrounds, all with clenched fists raised toward the pulpit and choir stand, draped by a white and gold banner displaying a cross and two tethered, rope-bound wrists straining to break free. Underneath the cross are the bold and provocative words, *"Reviving Justice."* When I first saw the photograph, I said to myself, "This is *congregating!* This is *love-filled-justice—this is the work that our souls must have!"*

Marching, protesting, and assembling in sanctuaries are all manifestations and manifestos of the proclamation of the Gospel that calls us into advocacy and justice for the most vulnerable in our society. However, marching and

protests, while necessary, are not adequate for the moment that is upon us. We need to find ways to maintain a sense of wholeness within, as we struggle for change without. In other words, to quote an overused, hackneyed slogan, "We must be the change that we want to see." But how do we remain sane and whole and not succumb to the numbing social aggregation of market-stimulated moralities that shape and form generations of consumers as ethical capitalist subjects?[8] This is one of the most profound and nagging problems of our time that has vast implications for the cognitive, affective and behavioral performances of people in leadership roles.

"But *love-filled justice* requires more than policy—it demands **repair**. It demands truth-telling about the structural inequities that have shaped our neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, and courtrooms."

Here Howard Thurman's call to the inwardness of religious experience or deep-seated spirituality is an essential tool for leaders on the run. It was his insistence that our inner transformations complement our outward quests for change in systems and structures that militate against human and nonhuman flourishing. This means that people who are dedicated to changing barriers that impede the possibility of becoming whole in the world are "under judgment, to make a highway for the Lord in the hearts and market place of [their] fellows."[9] The spiritual and ethical practice of inwardness that spirals into the world of nature, people and things involves creative confrontation and transformation of the cultural pattern in which we find in ourselves.[10] While the basic ethical significance of spiritual practices tends to be personal, the vision of the unity of consciousness impels the leader into the world as an agent of change and transformation. Although the overwhelming problems of just human relations cannot be solved by the radical transformation of individuals in society,[11] leadership on the run must be expressed in positive and life-affirming service in society, by "doing the work our souls must have."

As we sit, stand and run in the middle of the third decade of the twenty-first century, the rally at St. John's Congregational points to what is at stake in congregating to create democratic space. We live in a time when the idea of justice has too often been reduced to legal compliance or temporary reform or to no justice at all! But *love-filled justice* requires more than policy—it demands **repair**. It demands truth-telling about the structural inequities that have shaped our neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, and courtrooms. From racialized mass incarceration to the systematic underfunding of public health infrastructure in marginalized and rural communities, justice cannot be fulfilled without the courage to name and undo the accumulated harm of history.

In the wake of renewed attacks on voting rights, reproductive freedom, LGBTQ+ dignity, and academic freedom, love compels us to act—not with vengeance, but with moral clarity. *Love-filled justice* says: *We cannot be content with diversity if equity is denied; we cannot be satisfied with charity while systems of exploitation remain intact.* This is not about winning a war of ideologies—it is about creating a world where no child is disposable, where no elder is invisible, where the vulnerable are not blamed for their suffering.

In this moment of backlash and regression, *love-filled-justice* affirms that justice is not retribution—it is **restoration**. And restoration begins not with slogans, but with deep moral commitments to dismantle supremacy in all its forms—white supremacy, male supremacy, heteronormative supremacy, economic supremacy—and to build democratic spaces where love becomes a spiritual force that informs the political.

Grace-Filled-Empathy

In an era marked by digital disconnection, algorithmic bias, and the mechanization of moral decisions, grace-filled empathy is a radical, revolutionary practice. We are inundated by information but starved for understanding. We know how to simulate emotions with AI-generated empathy tools, but we struggle to sit in silence with another's pain. *Grace-filled- empathy* dares to say: *I will not only listen to your words—I will feel with you and imagine and work*

to create a world in which your suffering is no longer necessary. This form of empathy cannot be outsourced—it is our responsibility! It requires disciplined imagination—the sacred act of placing oneself inside another's story, of refusing to treat strangers as data points or headlines. As surveillance capitalism grows and performative outrage dominates our screens, grace-filled imagination is the capacity to reach toward the human behind the headline, the story behind the statistic.

Empathy, in this sense, is not passive. It is the precondition for moral agency. It fuels the policies we write, the classrooms we shape, the institutions we lead. Without it, leadership becomes transactional. With it, leadership becomes transformational. In addition, we must find and form strategic partnerships and intersubjectively commune with others who are on the run. **Running to the future and engaging the present is not a solo act—it involves congregating. Congregating is a collective act of resistance, reconstruction, and reimagining. As the African proverb says, "If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together."**

Like my ancestors, the early runaways and maroons, who escaped and lived along the borderlands and hinterlands, we must find ways to create new communities of discourse and practice where we congregate, conjure and conspire on creating new common(s) as we enter the dangerous crossing(s) of the twenty-first century. An essential spiritual practice in this respect is *grace-filled-empathy*. Empathy, first and foremost, is a good habit, yet it is more. "It is by grace that we are saved," writes the Apostle, "not of works lest anyone should boast."[12] Yes, while we are gifted grace—nonetheless ethical leaders must intentionally practice grace-filled-empathy for others as a way of creating a contagious atmosphere or culture (*a moral ethos*) on the run. This is the *common(s)* of our relations with others that also demands hope-filled-resiliency.

Hope-Filled-Resiliency

Hope is not naïve optimism. It is insurgent faith that is courage and courage that is faith. In a world where burnout is celebrated as commitment and despair is marketed as realism, hope-filled resiliency is the strength to stand—not because the path is clear, but because the cause is just.

We are surrounded by what the Cameroonian historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe (*a-shele bembe*) calls *"necropolitics"*[13]—a politics organized around disposability, scarcity, and slow death for the marginalized. And yet, people still rise. Still gather. Still congregate. Still dream. The great Maya Angelou wrote: "You may write me down in history, With your bitter, twisted lies, You may trod me in the very dirt, But still, like dust, I'll rise."

"In a world where burnout is celebrated as commitment and despair is marketed as realism, hope-filled resiliency is the strength to stand—not because the path is clear, but because the cause is just."

This is true not only in human affairs, but it is profoundly rooted in nature itself! Attention to the processes at work in living things all around us reveals what appears to be an unyielding intentionality, a daring determination, an inherent resiliency in life itself.[14] In a meditation, entitled "I Will Not Give Up," Thurman captures what is at stake in the personal and collective struggle of *becoming* and the search for *democratic space* on the run. He tells the story of his encounter with what appeared to be deformed trees that somehow had grown above the timber line. He writes: "The steady march of the forest had stopped as if some invisible barrier had been erected beyond which no trees dared move even in single file." These stunted bushes were really branches of trees that somehow had survived despite their restricted movement. They did not appear "lush"; in fact, Thurman writes, "they lacked the kind of grace of the vegetation below the timber line, but they were alive and hardy." His further investigation revealed a rather stunning phenomenon: these branches had *congregated* as vines hugging the ground, developing trees that were different from anything he had ever witnessed. For him it was a statement of the force of life daring to live, not merely surviving, but to live the branches had to reconstitute themselves, which also reshaped their anatomical

structure—hardly recognizable as trees (or whatever they were *becoming*)—they dared to resist existing conditions, patterns, designs and presuppositions about what they were—like a *rising from the dead*.[15] Thurman exclaims,

> What must have been the torturous frustration and the stubborn battle that had finally resulted in this strange phenomenon! It is as if the tree had said, "I am destined to reach for the skies and embrace in my arms the wind, the rain, the snow and the sun, singing my song of joy to all the heavens. But this I cannot do. I have taken root beyond the timber line, and yet I do not want to die; I must not die. *I shall make a careful survey of my situation and work out a method, a way of life, that will yield growth and development for me despite the contradictions under which I must eke out my days*. In the end I may not look like the other trees, I may not be what all that is within me cries out to be. But I will not give up. I will use to the full every resource in me and about me to answer life with life. In so doing, I shall affirm that this is the kind of universe that sustains, upon demand, the life that is in it." I wonder if I dare to act even as the tree acts. I wonder! I wonder! Do you? (italics added)[16]

Hope-filled-resiliency is not about bouncing back to the status quo—it's about bouncing forward into new configurations of life. It is the spirit of movements led by those who have every reason to give up but instead declare: *We are not done yet. God is not finished with creation; God is not finished with us!* From migrant children separated from families to trans youth targeted by legislation, hope insists that we must remain grounded not in what is, but in what can be. This kind of resiliency is not individualistic grit. Like the trees hugging the ground far above the timberline, it is communal determination rooted in sacred memory. It is the fire of ancestors, the laughter of children, the protest songs of people who have refused to disappear singing, "Aint't goin'a let nobody turn me around…" *Hope-filled resiliency* tells us that survival is not enough—we are meant to flourish. And in that flourishing, we become signs of another world struggling to be born. I may be fated by political machinations of birth, color, gender, sexual and ableist identifications—but fate is not my destiny! Destiny is what I do with my fate!

The Third Component

This intimate relationship between *soul-filled-work, love-filled justice, grace-filled-empathy* and *hope-filled-resiliency* with one another extends into our struggles for eco-justice. Love is not simply an interaction between human beings but is part of the very relationality of life and existence.[17] The existence of Life for humans and other species is part of an unfolding interconnectedness. This understanding of love, justice and hope is grounded in the conviction that the harmony of individuals, communities and the natural world are but separate aspects of a single fluid phenomenon. In a sermon entitled, "The Third Component," Thurman illustrates the idea of "common consciousness" that makes intersubjective communication, *love-filled justice, grace-filled-empathy* and *hope-filled-resiliency* possible. He tells the story from his youth in which he rushed into his cousin's home and that his cousin gestured for him not to move and to maintain quietness. To Thurman's surprise, the cousin pointed to his infant child playing with a rattlesnake in the backyard of the home. The child and the rattler, according to Thurman, were having a marvelous time at play. He suggested that this was a *for instance* of the ways in which "common consciousness" is present as something that is already given in our experience as creatures who are interrelated with other creatures—and by implication, it hearkens back to a sense of community that already exists in which we may participate with other forms of life in harmony, without threat.[18]

It is through *the third component*—the incarnational construction of these new intersubjective connections and the multiplication of spiritual experiences of unity—that we discover that love, justice, empathy and hope that feeds only our communities, and our causes is not sufficient. We must also share our experiences of *soul-filled-work* with the larger societies of which we are a part—and even the world.[19] These new communities of discourse and practice are rooted in the Gospel call to love and to do justice—to run to the ramparts and see God.[20] This is incarnational

theology and leadership at its best—it begins at The Table with the body that tastes, touches, smells, feels, hears, knows in ordinary and extraordinary ways of being with the other in love and just relations.[21] Moreover, it honors fluidity of identities as discursive practices and expressions. *Congregating* in *love-filled justice, grace-filled-empathy* and *hope-filled-resilience*, therefore, takes these difficult and often awkward practices to strategic, yes, even magical, flexible, and constructive tasks of *bold, courageous embodied leadership on the run*.

Let's Make a Run for It!

We must make a run for it! We are in good company. Our biblical stories are replete with prophets and others who woke up running and encountered the third component at crossing(s)—those liminal spaces fraught with danger, peril, and possibility. Moses woke up running away from Pharaoh's House and hid out in the Midian desert until he bumped into a fiery bush at a crossing (s) and returned to Egypt to liberate his people; Elijah woke up running from Ahab and Jezebel after he called fire from heaven on Mount Carmel and hid in the wilderness until Yahweh summoned him to cross the desert near Damascus and appoint a new order of government and religion; Jacob woke up running from Esau and crossed the Brook of Ja-kob where he bumped into a night demon that anointed his future as Israel, the prince of the nations; Rahab, the Canaanite, hid two spies on the run at the crossing (s) of Jericho and her extended family escaped doom by waiting inside a house marked with a red thread; Hagar was on the run crossing the desert of Paran with her infant child escaping from Abraham and Sarah, and was met by an Angel by a spring of water, who told her to return home and promised her that she would become the mother of a great people; David woke up running from the terror of Saul and crossed over into the precincts of Adullam and hid in a cave in the and returned as King of Israel and Judah; yes, even those frightened disciples of Jesus woke up running after the Crucifixion and crossed into their destinies on the Day of Pentecost where a ghost of wind and fire scattered them to the corners of the earth, witnessing and testifying to what they had seen and heard!

> "We must make a run for it! We are in good company."

Let's join them and make a run for it! Remember that Habakkuk's cry of lament ended with a paean of hope:

> The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
> God makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
> God enables me to tread on the high places.
> —Habakkuk 3:19

Thomas Merton asked in *The Seven-Storied Mountain*, "What negligence, what delay is this? Run to the mountain and get rid of the slough which keeps you from seeing God." Let us run to the high places! On the high places we can see the vision more clearly. We are the heirs of the vision of a new kind of community—a beloved community. It is a dream of peace and justice that continues, and no one can claim it as their own until they are willing "to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before their God." This is not a dream for cravens and cowards who hide behind false justifications for non-action. It is not for spectators who stand on the sidelines and watch injustice and exploitation at a distance. It is not for those vain religionists who bury their heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich and pretend that everything will be all right anyway. For when we bury our heads in the sand, we always leave more exposed than is hidden. It is not for greedy and insane puppeteers who hide behind the curtains of social fiction and manipulate the mindscape. It is not for sentimentalists and vain practitioners of a dysfunctional American Civil Religion who wave the flag higher than they wave the cross. It is a dream for those who are willing to join the ranks of men and women who are so inspired by the moral order of the universe and the sacredness of human personality that they are willing to make a track to the water's edge and to lay their bodies down as a bridge for future generations to travel over into the land of freedom. It is a dream for women and men who are willing to stand alone when the crowds disperse, who will keep on moving against all odds, who refuse to cling to

falsehoods and lies that contradict reality, who believe that truth has the final word in this universe, and that justice and love will endure forever.

This is the dream! It is a dream born out of a zeal for peace and justice, nurtured in the praxis of struggle, refined in the fires of persecution, strengthened by the arms of faith, propelled by the vision of hope, enriched by the power of love, and set free by the truth that no lie can endure forever. We are Habakkuk's heirs. We are the ones for whom he has written the vision. We are the dreamers who must make this world a better place. We are the ones who must run swiftly and prophesy and publish this dream of peace and justice for the peoples of the earth.

"Dream on, dreamers! Dream in season and out of season. Dream in the valley and climb to the mountain and see the land of freedom and justice! See what the prophets saw!"

Dream on, dreamers! Dream in season and out of season. Dream in the valley and climb to the mountain and see the land of freedom and justice! See what the prophets saw! See what Delores Huerta (*wehr-tuh*), Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Fannie Lou Hamer and Martin Luther King, Jr. saw! If your vision is rooted in justice and truth, there is no power on earth that can nullify its mandate. Politics can't legislate it, poverty can't define it, racism can't destroy it, religious bigotry can't condemn it, sexism can't vanquish it, water can't drown it, fire can't consume it, death can't kill it, hell can't hold it, greedy and insane men can't prevent it—for it lives in the mind of the One who has said, "Yes!" and no other power in the universe can say "No." Begin again! Hope again! Struggle again! There is a great camp meeting in the Promised Land! Wake up running!

Endnotes

1. Martin Luther King, "I Have a Dream." Speech presented at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Washington, D.C., August 1968.

2. Vincent I. Wimbush, "Interpreters—Enslaving/ Enslaved/ Runagate", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 1 (2011): 5-24.

3. Emilie M. Townes, "Ethics as an Art Of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have," in Katie. G. Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims, eds. *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 36-50. For reference to Katie Cannon's use of the phrase, see Alison P. Gise Johnson, "Fulfilling Katie's Deepest Desire." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religio*n 35, no. 1 (2019): 107-108. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/723448. In her first book, she listed three "black womanist virtues": "quiet grace," "invisible dignity," and "unshouted courage" are "virtues" that have been part of practices foreign to the institutional arrangements of powerful elites. Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 86-87.

4. Psalm 42:7.

5. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 1995), xv.

6. *PHWT*, vol. 2, 34-40.

7. St. John's Evangelical Church was organized on the north side as a mission of St. Paul's Evangelical Church. It was first located at 14th and Madison and then in 1923 moved to Grand and Lee, just northeast of Fairgrounds Park. In 1858 ground for their cemetery was first purchased at 1293 St. Cyr in what is now Bellefontaine Neighbors. *Historic Buildings Survey, Churches Built before 1941 in Saint Louis County*, 1992. Prepared by Esley Hamilton and Judy Little with the assistance of Barbara Bernsen, Daniel Thorn, and Mary Webb Duck for the St. Louis County Department of Parks and Recreation under a grant from the Missouri Department of Natural Resources. https://mostateparks.com/sites/mostateparks/files/STLC%20Churches%20Report.pdf, accessed December 13, 2024.

8. Peter Bloom proposes that "neoliberalism strategically co-opts traditional ethics to ideologically and structurally strengthen capitalism. It produces "ethical capitalist subjects" who are morally accountable for making their society, workplace and even their lives "more ethical" in the face of an immoral but seemingly permanent market." Furthermore, "rather than altering our morality, neoliberalism "individualizes" ethics, making us personally responsible for dealing with and resolving its moral and structural failings. In doing so, individuals end up perpetuating the very market system that they morally oppose and feel powerless to ultimately change." Thus, Bloom's argument reveals the complex and paradoxical way capitalism is currently shaping us as

"ethical subjects." We are asked to ethically save capitalism both collectively and personally. Among the ways this scenario plays out is through asking subjects to maintain austerity through financial crisis; to make neoliberal organizations and corporations more "responsible", "moral" and "humane" for problems that it creates and perpetuates (poverty, social dislocation, health inequity, racial, gender and sexual inequities, etc.); asking individuals to contribute to their families and communities in a globalizing economic culture that works against healthy families and communities. Peter Bloom, *The Ethics of Neoliberalism: The Business of Making Capitalism Moral* (London: Routledge, 2017), 17. For an historical and sociological review of the term of "neoliberalism" that critically interrogates its labeling as a simple version of laissez-faire economics, see William Davies, "Neoliberalism: A Bibliographic Review," *Theory, Culture & Society* 31, nos. 7/8 (2014): 309-317. For a feminist/womanist perspective, see Keri Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

9. Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness* (Richmond, Ind: Friends United Press, 1972), 124.

10. Ibid. 126.

11. Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change," *Edens Seminary Bulletin*, 1939, p. 29. Luther E. Smith argues that though Thurman can be rightly identified within the pietistic tradition because of his insistence on self-awareness and inner transformation, he had "just as an intense commitment to community, and his mystical experiences were the basis for this commitment." *Mystic as Prophet*, p. 10. Martin E. Marty, speaking of Thurman's contribution in this respect, writes: "He…has shown us how the path of holiness and enlightenment is not merely parallel to but links up with the path of community and action." "Mysticism and the Religious Quest for Freedom," *Christian Century* 100:8 (16 March 1983): 246.

12. Ephesians 2:8-9.

13. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11-40.

14. See Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, pp. 13-15.

15. I find you, Lord, in all Things and in all my fellow creatures, pulsing with your life; as a tiny seed you sleep in what is small and in the vast you vastly yield yourself. The wondrous game that power plays with Things is to move in such submission through the world: groping in roots and growing thick in trunks and in treetops like a rising from the dead. Rainer Maria Rilke, "I Find You, Lord," in *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Modern Library, 1995).

16. Howard Thurman, *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*. Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber, eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998) 308-309.

17. As he wrote in *The Search for Common Ground*, "There seems to be a vast, almost incomprehensible interrelatedness tying all together…Man is an organic part of the universe. In his organism he experiences the order and harmony of the universe." Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, 31-32.

18. Howard Thurman, *The Third Component*, Oct. 26, 1958. Running time: 37:49. Thurman discusses the "third component", or the relationship between two or more entities that is already given and must be discovered or realized. He elaborates with examples of different interactions he has witnessed between people and nature. http://archives.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room/detail?id=340585.

19. Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 124. Speaking of his experiences in India from 1935-36, Thurman writes, "We knew that we must test whether a religious fellowship could be developed in America that was capable of cutting across all racial barriers, with a carry-over into the common life, a fellowship that would alter the behavior patterns of those involved. It became imperative now to *find out if experiences of spiritual unity among people could be more compelling than the experiences which divide them.*" WHAH, 136. [italics added].

20. adrienne marie brown writes: "If love were the central practice of a new generation of organizers and spiritual leaders, it would have a massive impact on what was considered organizing. If the goal was to increase the love, rather than winning or dominating a constant opponent, I think we could actually imagine liberation from constant oppression. We would suddenly be seeing everything we do, everyone we meet, not through the tactical eyes of war, but through eyes of love. We would see that there's no such thing as a blank canvas, an empty land or a new idea—but everywhere there is complex, ancient, fertile ground full of potential." adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA and Edinburgh: AK Press), 9-10.

21. *Congregating* in love is closely akin to "assembling." According to Day, "assemblage theory rather than intersectionality is better poised to speak of *love* in political terms as an affective politics, which challenges neoliberal forms of protective disgust based on fear and hatred of difference." In Day's earlier work, *Religious Resistance: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), she employs queer theorist Jasbir Puar's theory of assemblage. She argues that Puar's theory of assemblage "offers a groundbreaking analysis on the limits of intersectionality and how a 'theory of assemblage' might help

ground an articulation of affective political communities. For Puar, a theory of assemblage suggests a different set of metaphors for identities within the social world such as mosaics, patchwork, heterogeneity, fluidity, and temporary configurations. Within this theory, there is not a fixed, stable ontology for the social world and its multiplicity of identities (as theories of intersectionality assume). Rather, identities (such as race, class, sexuality, gender) are complex, fluid configurations that can properly be characterized as discursive practices and expressions, which means that identities are social constructions generated by material and linguistic conditions rather than ontological assertions. Ibid., 123-124.; See Fluker, TGHS, 260-261, fn57.

SAVE THE DATE

Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference

Augsburg University, Minneapolis, Minnesota | July 13-15, 2026

TOPIC: Beyond Walls, For the Common Good: Lutheran Higher Education and Civic Responsibility

In an age marked by polarization, inequality, and public distrust, Lutheran higher education is uniquely called to witness to faith active in love through its contributions to the civic and common good. The 2026 Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference invites participants to step "beyond walls"—of campus, culture, and comfort—to rediscover how core values of faith and sharing "good news" shapes our shared responsibility for the world.

Rooted in the Lutheran tradition of two kin-doms and vocation as service to neighbor, this gathering explores how our institutions embody public faith: nurturing civic imagination, moral discernment, and courageous leadership. Together, we will examine how Lutheran colleges and universities can help heal the social fabric, cultivate democratic engagement, and advance justice for all people through education that integrates faith, reason, and the call to serve.

Participants will:

1. Reexamine Lutheran theological frameworks (vocation, two kin-doms, grace and freedom) as resources for engaging public life with humility and hope.
2. Explore practices of civic learning and community engagement that align with Lutheran identity and contribute to local and global well-being.
3. Strengthen institutional commitments to the common good, including democratic participation, ecological stewardship, and social equity.
4. Build interdisciplinary networks among faculty, administrators, and students to sustain faith-informed civic engagement initiatives across NECU campuses.
5. Discern how Lutheran higher education can model public trust, moral leadership, and hospitality amid pluralism and division.

For more information and registration details, contact Grace.Robinson@elca.org

ELIZABETH KUBEK

Building a Third Space in the Age of AI: A Conversation with Dr. Walter Earl Fluker

In his talk at this year's VLHE Conference, Dr. Fluker's call to "Wake Up Running!" spoke strongly to our vocation as educators to persist in the face of injustice. And his invocation of "third space" called us to something further: a celebration of related embodiment that transcends differences.

"In the last decades, technology has broadened access to education. But 'AI' is now being marketed to students as a way to avoid 'mistakes' and the stress of awkward conversations. Yet trusting one's wellbeing to an LLM-based chatbot means entering a hall of mirrors."

That morning, I experienced a serendipitous moment. As with many campuses, Augsburg's restroom doors double as bulletin boards. On one poster, for the Counseling and Wellness Center, someone had written: "Use character.ai and talk to it like a therapist. Trust me."

In the last decades, technology has broadened access to education. But "AI" is now being marketed to students as a way to avoid "mistakes" and the stress of awkward conversations. Yet trusting one's wellbeing to an LLM-based chatbot means entering a hall of mirrors. Trained to mimic and reassure, chatbots can amplify delusions and encourage isolation. Users have experienced psychotic episodes, or developed parasocial emotional attachments to chatbot personas. At the same time, we face a crisis of public trust in education. Small wonder that tech-savvy students turn to the apparent safety of virtual space, the affirming voice of the machine.

As educators, we know that authentic connection with students is vital to our vocation, and also key to students' wellbeing and academic success. We work hard to cultivate trust in the classroom, a place of constant communication across differences, including those inherent in evaluation

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of each other's labor and ideas. But AI companies encourage students to avoid emotional and intellectual labor by pre-aligning their work with statistically-likely examples and uploaded instructor materials. The result is a pre-emptive "flattening," a deviation towards a (largely Americanized, banal) mean.

Dr. Fluker's ethos of embodiment, authentic connection, and productive tensions offered a vital alternative to AI's hall of mirrors. I requested an interview, and Dr. Fluker generously agreed to expand on the "third space" in relation to teaching. Some of our conversation is excerpted below, with the full interview (edited for clarity) available online.

Walter Fluker: I'm excited to talk about what I'm feeling and knowing and trying to work through in my own spirit and mind when I speak about third space. Generally it's understood in cultural and post-colonial studies as a contested arena, where new forms of meaning, identity, community emerge from binary opposition or fixed categories, like colonizer to colonized.

"Generally third space is understood in cultural and post-colonial studies as a contested arena, where new forms of meaning, identity, community emerge from binary opposition or fixed categories, like colonizer to colonized."

Black, white, male, female, these binary oppositions, the third space is used as a way of identifying the tension that the binary sets up…which has with it a sense of angst, anxiety and disequilibrium. So the third space is part of that. So how do we get to another space? We're saying when there is opposition—my view versus your view—how do we have a dialogue that is authentic, that is relational? Third space provides a window into possibilities of having those kinds of conversations and relationships. So I like to think of the third space, and here's a concise definition, as an in-between or hybrid space where different cultures, identities, perspectives negotiate and hopefully transform in this third space.

It disrupts fixed boundaries and while it disrupts it also creates possibilities for new meanings, practices and relationships. As a theologian and ethicist, it has even more meaning for me. In July at [the VLHE] conference, where I began to talk about the third component, I'd spoken about the gifts or the graces that have been given to the church and other religious bodies of grace-filled empathy, hope-filled resiliency and love-filled justice. I think these are very important values, practices that we will need going into this very precarious present and even more precarious future. We're at a strange place in history. There may be parallels, yet there are some things that appear to be unparalleled, at least for ways in which we thought about religion, spirituality, and its role in democratic space, life, and practices.

So having said that I borrowed deeply from my mentor Howard Thurman. He was an African-American religious thinker—he didn't like the term theologian—born at the turn of the 20th century in Daytona Beach, Florida, poverty-stricken. He dealt with all of the terrible atrocities of a segregated society in the deep South, but . . . lived a life that brought him to the pinnacle of what I like to call theological excellence. He was a mystic. He loved nature. As much as he loved people, his deep closest companions, he says, as a child, were the trees and the rivers and the creatures. He lived closely to nature. Not surprising for these kinds of mystics who've shown up throughout history, which is important for our conversation on third space.

Thurman poses questions for the possibility of what I refer to as inter-subjective communication. He doesn't use that language but he uses language like common consciousness, common ground, a fluid center out of which we speak and find the other, and he thought—maybe still thinks—wake up in the other. You can wake up in me.

And if I'm doing this right…I might be able to see the world through your eyes. That for me is grace-filled empathy. So that's a backdrop for what I'm thinking about with "third component." Thurman in many ways is a precursor [of] this idea that I see in post-colonial thought, in other places [like] cultural studies…. We now have a bunch of writers, thinkers, who are doing postcolonial

theology, especially feminists, queer thought. It's just incredible the creative work that goes on there.

So [Thurman] tells a story. When he was a young man he rushes to his cousin's house and his cousin begs him to be quiet and he tiptoes around the house. He peeks and the cousin points to his infant daughter playing with a rattlesnake, and they're having such a great time. The snake is going back and forth and the baby is laughing and giggling. And he says that is an instance of the third component where things are in relation without threat.

"So I'm interested in third space, therefore, as the space where we are already situated but it requires work—discipline."

This for Thurman feeds his definitions of love and what I was portraying as love-filled justice. So that justice by itself can be rendered very dangerous. It can be retributive. It can be retaliatory. We're seeing a lot of that in our culture now. But love-filled justice urges us, almost, I think, requires of us, that we look for this relation that Thurman is pointing to.

So I'm interested in third space, therefore, as the space where we are already situated but it requires work—discipline.... For educators I think there [are] limitless possibilities of placing classrooms, learning experiences, closer to our mother whom I call nature, . . . because I think we're so torn from her we have forgotten her heartbeat, her adoration of us, her care for us. We've forgotten it because we're in a race that never ends. It's a race that we cannot even finish. So that's one.

I have one other: I'm convinced that art is a medium that brings us—aesthetics is probably a better word—that brings us closer to what I'm calling the spiritual. It also has incredible potential for spiritual, ethical, reflection, conversation, living, all of the above. I use a big word for that though because it combines [with] body. I call it somaesthetics. For me, that's a site of spirituality and ethics.

I'm doing work with hip-hop and rap in this new book that I'm working on. And I use the example of Kendrick Lamar, at the Super Bowl this year where everybody was present, including our President. And Kendrick put on a performance that was prophetic. It was deep ritual. It was a remixing and he used technology and the body and the sound in ways –I recommend that to any listener who may recall that to go back and to see how he signified in our culture the dominance of binaries, and ways in which he created this third space or this third component. I think it's possible. It will take imagination.

JOHN ARTHUR NUNES

Ethical Leadership: Rooted, Open, Generative, and Mindful

I want to be in the room where it happens—that is, the classroom! Of course, students also learn meaningfully in many other campus spaces—the fields and facilities of athletics, the social centers of student services, residence halls, formal and informal gathering sites, contemplative prayer and public liturgies in chapels. But considering the mission of schools belonging to the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU) the place for cultivating knowledge, curating dreams, and evaluating growth toward learning goals, our centerpiece and *sine qua non* is the classroom. So, I am preparing to teach a course titled "Ethical Leadership" as part of the First Year Seminar at California Lutheran University.

For decades I've striven and fallen short in enacting my belief that administrators need to be actively engaged in this primary craft of their institution—which is not administration! This daunting and dreamless moment in higher ed makes it more imperative now than ever. In light of heightened business pressures, rising costs, lowering confidence in the value proposition for higher education, as well as the overall intensification of unfavorable public and political environments, leaders seeking to maintain their integrity of purpose and their lucidity of vision will pursue ways to stay connected to students in classrooms.

Seeking to foster this in myself, I am organizing my seminar around three themes: 1) an inward turn 2) an outward turn and 3) an intellectual turn. I see these *learning turns* as mutually-reinforcing, inter-related building blocks of ethical leadership. Are there three turns or one? Or, both: three turns in one?

Determining Terms

By "turn" I am referring to a methodological focus. For many students, the invitation to consider these "learning turns" may represent a new shift in their worldview, a reorienting approach that develops unrealized dimensions of selfhood. They discover more fully their *why.* They embrace a mindset (intellectual turn) that liberates them from the prisons of shortsighted, superstitious, superficial, or smallness of thought. Liberating the mind is the literal

"For many students, the invitation to consider these "learning turns" may represent a new shift in their worldview, a reorienting approach that develops unrealized dimensions of selfhood. They discover more fully their *why.*"

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("liberal") purpose of a liberal arts education. Practitioners of these turns are motivated to move towards themselves and towards others with new intellectual openness, embracing a diversity of perspectives. For those who live, love, study, compete, eat, drink, think, publish, pray, and play within the theater of Lutheran higher education, the learning turns will insinuate a direct or indirect invitation to creatively interpret and personally implement an approach to leadership that is ethical.

By "ethical" I am referring first, specifically, to Cal Lutheran's missional promise to "educate leaders for a global society who are strong in character and judgment." Then, more broadly, I am engaging the moral imperative brimming within the Christian tradition of Lutheran education, that of vocation; namely, that our lives, by divine design, are purposeful; we are not ontologically unmoored, existentially nomadic, or teleologically aimless but our lives are rooted. In families, in faith communities, in workplaces, in political economies we experience "the reality of God's love for the world and for human beings,"[1] as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) describes these *mandatum dei*, divinely mandated estates or orders. The purpose of these created orders is to uphold and preserve humankind from careening into chaos, and to provide a concrete, specific context for our moral mission. Bonhoeffer builds these four organizing structures for societies from the three estates[2] of Martin Luther (1483-1546). Whether there be three or four civil estates, we leave it to theologians to debate; what is without argument is 1) that all human beings participate—knowingly or unknowingly—in all these orders; and, that 2) these orders all provide the context *in* which and *for* which character is developed.

The societal skeleton of these *mandatum dei*, invigorated by a Lutheran understanding of vocation, can also provide a unique enfleshment for the value proposition of NECU institutions. By marketing a distinctive Lutheran charism within a crowded higher educational marketplace, we differentiate our institutions and add texture to our claims. This identity is particularly suited for a world haunted by the holy yet audaciously viewing itself as secularized or post-Christian. Secular is a good thing. The secular city or human societies constitute the locus for which we form our students, their penultimate destination. Where else can we do concrete world-work (Luther, *weltlich*[3])? But because of sin, the secular devolves idolatrously into abject secularism, and the world—created as good and loved by God—degenerates into self-serving materialism, scientifically reductionist worldliness, and worse into the disordered desire and disfiguring lusts that lead to death. These devolutions thicken the walls of resistance to explicit Christian witness.

"The secular city or human societies constitute the locus for which we form our students, their penultimate destination. Where else can we do concrete world-work (Luther, *weltlich*)?"

Luther offers insight with his notion of the "hidden God" (*deus absconditus*, Isaiah 45:5). One contemporary theologian helps us to see the prophetic implications of these Reformation-era teachings which I conceive as imbricative to Lutheran higher education—both interwoven through and overlapping with our pedagogical charism:

> God is anonymously present within the universal structures of life, whether we feel it or not. God may be experienced within people as the hidden drive to do justice, whether they like it or not. God may be acting on the demands of conscience without our acknowledgment of their ground and source in him. God may be working as a driving force behind the demands human beings make on each other in every social situation. People who do not know the triune God through his self-revelation, according to the Scriptures and church teaching, cannot escape the Creator of all things who is hiddenly at work in our natural lives as the directing power in our everyday encounters. There is no escape from the hidden God anonymously at work under the guise of various masks (see Luther's idea of the *larvae dei*).[4]

These *larvae dei* or "masks of God" impel the idea of vocation; God is at work, in, with, and under our so-called "secular" callings, for the sake of the common good. For this reason, we engage in the task of Lutheran education. For this reason, we and our colleagues and our students are endowed with reason and enlightened by the Spirit—whether they know it or not—for lives of leadership.

"Whether mentor or protégé, professor or student, the goal is to understand how, as created co-creators, we join the divine intent to liberate and free others for lives of flourishing."

By "leadership" I am not referring to hierarchies of power, privilege, or status. I am pointing to the way of Jesus, a way of *being* and *doing* that is spiritually rooted, communally open, intellectually generative, and eternally mindful. A foundational document of NECU captures this paradoxical truth; whether mentor or protégé, professor or student, the goal is to understand how, as created co-creators, we join the divine intent to liberate and free others for lives of flourishing.[5] The heartbeat of the Lutheran educational tradition pulses with an emancipatory insistence and vocational priority that is veined within its pedagogy.

Finally, by "pedagogy" I am speaking of a transformational and transcendent goal of our higher educational project: to develop in students a sense of reason that radiates in lives of altruism motivated by love, *caritas*[6]; such love will inspire our students with a fire that is "committed to service and justice"—as California Lutheran University's mission statement puts it. Here, goodness, truth, and beauty converge to *capacitize*[7] students in their personal search for full human flourishing, the common *why*. There are no individuals. Every person's *telos* is entwined with all persons' *teloi*. There is no flourishing without attention to serving others and contributing, according to one's vocation and location in life, to justice for all. Access to this capacitation constitutes a social justice issue of our time.

Justice (צדק) is a concept that cannot be untied from Judeo-Christian morality or Lutheran pedagogy. In these times, when many families with immigrant backgrounds are suffering through depersonalizing and dehumanizing experiences, students are hungry to discuss interpretations of justice. For example, the strategy being deployed by agents of the United States' federal government in the enforcement of immigration policy represents a newsworthy topic in 2025. Rather than leaving the conversation to the soundbytes and memes of dopamine-driven digital drivel masquerading as information, we bear a pedagogical responsibility: to guide students in assembling their data and research, constructing points of view, reflecting upon and applying ethical categories, developing and defending sound arguments, and being motivated to deploy their intellectual reasoning and spiritually-rooted wisdom towards lives that are outward facing; lives of public service and civic engagement.

Martin Luther once quipped, anticipating the wise warning of Lord Acton about power's corruptive tendency—albeit with characteristic hyperbole, perhaps overstating the point to reinforce a point of view: "All experience proves this and in all the histories we find that force, without reason or wisdom, has never once accomplished anything."[8]

Humans are endowed with judicious temperaments, inherent senses of what is right and wrong—though sometimes blurred, distorted, and dulled; justice is written on every human soul, whether legible or illegible.[9] This flourishing or *eudaimonia*, the Greeks called it, is both ancient and perennially fresh, both locally realized and universally recognizable, timeless, timely, and time-tested.

With the prolegomenon proposed—presuppositional questions matter as much as the discourses they frame. I turn to the "three turns," 1) an inward turn; 2) an outward turn; 3) an intellectual turn.

The Turns: Inward, Outward, and Intellectual

Though the first turn in the subtitle is *inward*, this ordering is more theoretical than sequential. The Christian understanding of the human person cannot be untied from the doctrine of the Trinity (God in three persons); hence, there

are no considerations of the inward self which are atomistic or individualistic. Nurturing our contemplative selves addresses at least three personal, existential realities: 1) an affirmation of identity; 2) an exploration of spirituality, and 3) an inward turn that leads necessarily, centripetally, to an outwardness. The Dominican maxim enjoins the contemplative to see the inward turn as *contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere*—"to contemplate and to hand on to others the fruit of contemplation." Irrespective of census data's boxable categories, or stereotyped descriptions, there are neither individualized nor hierarchical ways of being human. From the perspective of theological anthropology, all human persons are inherent possessors of divine dignity, intrinsic value, and infinite purpose. This understanding animates us anew to study the humanities as the human ties which humanize us—the intellectual turn returns us to our inward and outward selves—never towards recondite, disembodied rationality.

"Personhood is always integral and never is without social consequences."

Personhood is always integral and never is without social consequences. Interrogating inwardly life's biggest questions cannot occur without outward ethical deliberation. Since human life is essentially social and moral, so-called inward questions transcend the narrow categories humans use to identify themselves and apply outwardly to the entire community life of the entire species in every major religious tradition: "Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?"[10] To deny these questions is to deny our humanity. Without a clear estimation and knowledge of self, we cannot be in healthy relationship with ourselves or the others who, in a broken world, may draw us or tempt us to deviate into falsehood. We receive this exhortation in the Qohelet—which in the Hebrew Scriptures means one who assembles either students or protégés and shares with them a collection of wisdom sayings—

> Guard your heart with all vigilance,
> for from it flow the springs of life.
> Put away from you crooked speech,
> and put devious talk far from you.
> Let your eyes look directly forward,
> and your gaze be straight before you.
> —Proverbs 4:23-25

"Guard your heart," was the counsel Howard Thurman (1899-1981) provided to a disconsolate Martin Luther King when the pursuit of non-violent resistance became sidetracked. By turning inward to put away what is crooked or devious, ethical leaders will turn outward bearing the time-tested Aristotelian ideal of virtue (*aretē* or excellence). The Greek verb used by St Paul in Philippians 4:8 to describe fixing one's focus towards such ends is λογίζεσθε (logizesthe). We hear in it, to logicalize, an actual English verb meaning to prioritize this use of reason in pursuit of truth.[11] While staying on course and keeping one's eyes from straying either to the left or to the right is key to reaching this goal, neither must we avoid "reading" peripherally with discernment the trends and tides of the times. These inward and outward turns are processed in the life of the mind, *intelligence*; derived from *inter* (between) and *legere* (to read), reading between the lines.

The concept of leaders as readers can be understood in two ways using a framework of analytic interpretation; one is "wide sense" and the other "narrow sense"—across a variety of academic disciplines these are sometimes also referred to as "broad sense" and "strict sense." In the narrow sense, leaders are readers of books—a sort of literacy that has become the union card of being human. A. O. Scott captures what is inherent in the narrow sense's inward and outward humanistic turns.

> Is any other common human undertaking so riddled with contradiction? Reading is supposed to teach us who we are and help us forget ourselves, to enchant and disenchant, to make us more worldly, more introspective, more empathetic and more intelligent. It's a private, even intimate act, swathed in silence and solitude, and at the same time a social undertaking. It's democratic and elitist, soothing and challenging,

something we do for its own sake and as a means to various cultural, material and moral ends.[12]

This attentiveness to the text, in the narrow sense, helps to train the mind's eye for an attentiveness to context, in the wide sense. Reading, in both the narrow and the wise senses, always includes a notion of alterity—"the ability to imagine vividly, and then to assess judicially, another person's pain, to participate in it and then to ask about its significance."[13] The Lutheran charism always includes a dimension of literacy for two reasons. One, the historic location for the beginning of the Reformation was a college campus, Wittenberg University. Second, the spread of the Reformation was indebted to a revolution in literacy ignited by the technology of Johannes Gutenberg (1400-1468) and his movable type printing press.

Eyes to Read Who Pulls the Strings

One of my ineradicable life-lessons occurred while traveling the world when I was the President and CEO of Lutheran World Relief. We invested globally on behalf of U.S. Lutherans in local communities working their way out of poverty on the continent of Africa, in South Asia, and in Latin America. As I reflected over time on what I saw and whom I met, I became grounded in the conviction that nothing can uproot in human persons their hopes and dreams. And not for themselves only. But personhood is inextricably linked to one's community and one's progeny. The love of children and grandchildren is universal. To be fully human is to be a humanitarian. I also became aware, glaringly, of the structures that keep people imprisoned in poverty. I am learning to read the signs of the times, akin to Daniel 5. It takes being contemplative to read "the handwriting on the wall." It takes reading between the lines to see how systems meant to redeem and support humanity, *mandatum dei*, can, due to our age-old rebellion, become perverted to perpetuate and systematize injustice. Governments, political institutions, societies, organizations, corporations, systems of economic exchange, workplaces, communities, and families are designed to anchor humans in communities of flourishing. A spirituality of discernment turns inward and outward with intellectual insight to see how these systems no longer are doing their job. They can become habitats of malice which not only deprive humans of access to opportunity and the ability to exercise their agency with dignity, but leave them vulnerable to abuse and susceptible to manipulation.

"As I reflected over time on what I saw and whom I met, I became grounded in the conviction that nothing can uproot in human persons their hopes and dreams."

As a mystic and a mentor to many, Howard Thurman spoke often about inward matters of the soul. His Commencement Address to the graduating class of Morehouse College in May of 1980 addressed the inward turn (identity, spirituality) as correlated to an outward turn (community, personal agency):

> There is something in every one of you that waits, listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. … you are the only you that has ever lived. Your idiom is the only idiom of its kind in all the existences. And if you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.[14]

To augment value in living, Socrates (469-399 BCE) axiologically suggested that life must be examined. This is no new wisdom, what is good, true, and beautiful is enduring. But we must apply it to new problems, especially in these dreamless times in higher education. The venerable duty and discipline of self-examination matters even more now in our new dizzying world of *inter*-everything. Witness the rising interdisciplinarity of the academic enterprise, subsisting within a skyrocketing context of tech-driven interconnectivity, as we dwell in a planetary interdependency of livelihoods, with an upsurge in the awareness of identity intersectionality, and a multiethnic pluralism which makes unavoidable the mutuality of interculturity. Therefore, the unexamined life not only does not know itself, it cannot affirm or fully

acknowledge the worth of others' lives because of the inevitability of interconnectivity.

The inward turn not only merely prompts an outward turn, but the pilgrimage into silence, listening, waiting becomes itself a life-giving sacrament. "I am a part of all that I have met" (Tennyson). The more vulnerable we are in our mysticism, the more ethical our leadership; leading will lead to those we meet themselves becoming more spiritually rooted, communally open, intellectually generative, and eternally mindful.

Endnotes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p 390 See also "Creation and Fall" pp. 138-140.

2. In summary, Luther identifies the *politia, oeconomia*, and *ecclesia*. These indicate government and state, the household and economic interactions, and the church. "But the holy orders and true religious institutions established by God are these three: the office of priest, the estate of marriage, the civil government." "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper" in *Luther's Works* (AE) vol. 37:364.

3. *die Stad, das ist weltlich regiment* (WA 50:562.23-24) Cf. *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), AE 41:177.

4. Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007: 76).

5. *Rooted and Open*, p. 8. I am appreciative of this Sunday Collect which captures the rooted and open dialectic; composed by Pr Chamie Delkeskamp and prayed at Ascension Lutheran Church, Thousand Oaks, California on Sunday, 10 August 2025: "Gracious and Eternal God, you are our firm foundation and our guiding wind. In a world that shifts and changes, teach us how to be both rooted and responsive, grounded in your Word, yet open to the movement of your Spirit. Shape us into disciples who hold fast to truth while walking with open hands and hearts. In the name of Jesus Christ, the One who is both our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen."

6. Often attributed to St Bernard of Clairvaux: "There are those who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge; that is Curiosity. There are those who seek knowledge to be known by others; that is Arrogance (Vanity). There are those who seek knowledge in order to serve; that is Love (Charity)."

7. To capacitize needs to be an English language verb corresponding with the Spanish verb *capacitar* meaning to train, qualify, empower, and develop a person's capacity, potential, agency, and ability.

8. *Luther's Works* (AE) 34:238.

9. See pages 70-72 of Philip Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* of 1543. Translated by J.A.O. Preus (Concordia Publishing House, 1992).

10. This citation concludes with these words: "These are the questions which we find in the sacred writings of Israel, as also in the Veda and the Avesta; we find them in the writings of Confucius and Lao-Tze, and in the preaching of Tirthankara and Buddha; they appear in the poetry of Homer and in the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles, as they do in the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle. They are questions which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart. In fact, the answer given to these questions decides the direction which people seek to give to their lives." in John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio: On the Relationship between Faith and Reason* (Boston: Pauline, 1998) pp. 9-10.

11. Philippians 4:8. Eugene Peterson's creative translation of this verse puts it this way: "Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse."

12. A.O. Scott, "The Reading Crisis: Book Bans. Chatbots. Pedagogical Warfare. Does Literacy Have a Future" in The *New York Times Book Review*, Sunday, June 25, 2023.

13. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) 91.

14. https://thurman.pitts.emory.edu/items/show/838 accessed on 9 August 2025.

JANELLE ROZEK HOOPER and CORY NEWMAN

Ethical Leadership for a Changing World: A Shared Calling from Cradle to Career

A recent ELCA Barna-funded survey found that parents are looking for shared values when it comes to their children's education. The "ask" was to parents of young children as it relates to early learning centers, but the answer of "shared values" reverberates in our Lutheran higher education as well.

Those shared values, stemming from our baptismal vocation, are what make for ethical leaders. And now more than ever, we recognize these must be cultivated from the earliest ages through the highest levels of education. Yet until recently, our educational ministries have operated in surprising isolation. At the 2025 Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference, a college president learned that there are 1,200 Lutheran schools and early learning centers across the ELCA. Their surprise revealed more than an awareness gap—it highlighted our untapped potential to develop ethical leaders across the entire educational continuum.

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This discovery emerged during conversations between NECU attendees and the ELCA's Program Director for Ministry with Children, Janelle Hooper. As part of her role, Hooper also serves as a board member for the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association (ELEA), which supports weekday education programs for children from birth through 12th grade in ELCA congregations. While Hooper led her workshop, what became clear was that our institutions don't just share a Lutheran identity—we face identical challenges in preparing ethical leaders for our rapidly changing world.

United by Common Challenges

Both ELCA colleges and early learning centers grapple with identical challenges in today's changing world. Most

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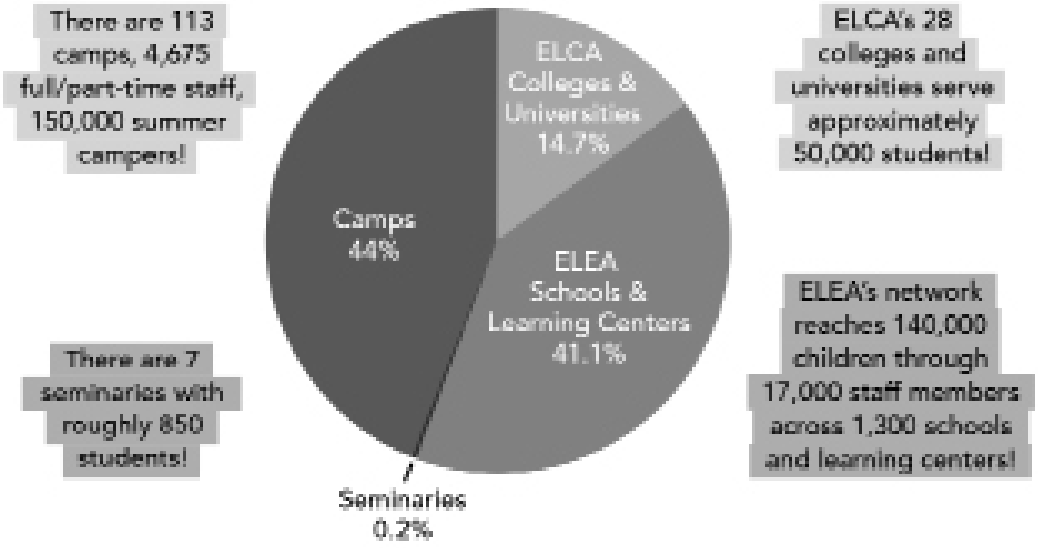

Lutheran weekday ministries touch nearly 300,000 lives annually!

significantly, we're both hiring increasing numbers of non-Lutheran directors, staff, and faculty to broaden our leadership diversity. Yet neither sector consistently provides "Lutheran identity onboarding" for these crucial team members. We speak of being "rooted in Lutheranism" while leaving staff to discover what that actually means in practice.

Cultivating Communities of Curiosity

Higher education faculty expressed a desire for students who arrive on campus to be more comfortable questioning their faith as part of spiritual growth. Meanwhile, early childhood educators are perfectly positioned to nurture these "communities of curiosity" from the earliest ages. Imagine the possibilities of intentional rubrics used by campus pastors like Lisa Kramme at Midland Lutheran, with the school's observatory for stargazing reflection, that build from preschoolers similarly lying in wonder beneath star-covered ceilings.

A Call for Connection

As we face an increasingly complex world requiring ethical leadership at every level, the time has come to bridge the awareness gap between our educational ministries. Creative programming could flow both directions—bringing college innovation to early learning and early childhood wonder to higher education. Our shared mission demands intentional partnership. When college presidents and early childhood directors discover their common ground, when faculty and preschool teachers share best practices, when students and children experience seamless Lutheran formation from cradle through career, we fulfill our calling, as President Pribbenow says, to be "small to our students and big for the world."

"When college presidents and early childhood directors discover their common ground, when faculty and preschool teachers share best practices, when students and children experience seamless Lutheran formation from cradle through career, we fulfill our calling, as President Pribbenow says, to be 'small to our students and big for the world.'"

To explore partnership opportunities between your institution and ELEA, contact Cory Newman or Janelle Hooper, or visit elcaschools.org.

PAUL C. PRIBBENOW

What is Required of You?: Higher Education Leadership in a Moral Key

Excerpted from an opening plenary address at the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference, July 14, 2025

Each year, I offer an opening convocation address to our incoming students with the title, "What is required of you?" In it, I remind them that change happens—as it always has—but I also let them know that there are things that have not changed for our university because they are at the heart of our identity and values and mission. Students will receive the highest quality education we can offer—in partnership with each other and a remarkable faculty. They will be challenged by ideas and experiences and relationships new to them—because that is what it means to be educated. They will meet friends and peers for life. And they will be equipped for democratic citizenship—because the world needs them.

I begin with the obvious allusion in my title to the well-known passage from the Old Testament prophet Micah, the sixth chapter, verse eight:

> 6.8 *He has showed you, [O mortal,] what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

And, if I was smart, I might leave it right there, because if each of us were to behave as Micah claims the Lord requires, all would be well with the world. Justice, mercy and humility set a high bar for God's faithful people, but the theological claim embedded in Micah's prophetic words is not mine to negotiate for our students. The links between their faith, their relationship with the divine, and how they live in the world, are for them to explore and work out. We provide a rich and challenging context for them to do just that, but we do not pretend to know how they will make sense of what the Lord requires of them.

On the other hand, there are some things that we can and do require of our students. And that is the simple message I share as they commence their Augsburg education. And maybe—just maybe—if they do what we require of them, they will find a pathway to understand what the Lord requires of them. That would be the bold claim at the heart of an education for vocation in the world, that how and what they learn here, that who they meet and engage here, that what they find out here about themselves and their various gifts, will offer them a clearer idea of what it is that they are called to do and be in the world.

This message lands with some urgency at this time, because in a time fraught with social and political division and fear, many are questioning whether or not

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both higher education and our democracy will survive. Throughout the past few years, our city, country and world have been torn apart by violence fueled by all sorts of isms—racism, nationalism, fundamentalism. During our lifetimes, our economic lives have been marked by a growing gap between those who have and those who have not, a gap that threatens to unravel the social fabric of our communities.

"In the midst of all of this volatility, we welcome our students to an institution that at its very core believes in democracy, not simply as a political system, but as an ethic, a way of life."

In the midst of all of this volatility, we welcome our students to an institution that at its very core believes in democracy, not simply as a political system, but as an ethic, a way of life. And this democratic ethic means that they become members of a teaching and learning community—students, faculty, staff and partners—that believes that there are clear parameters for our lives together, in classrooms, residence halls, playing fields, in this chapel and everywhere we navigate daily life. There is, in other words, what Yale law professor Stephen Carter has called an "etiquette of democracy," rules we must follow if we are to live and work and study in ways that live out our mission as a college.

I have always believed that a college education is about challenging ourselves with new ways of thinking, provocative questions, mind-stretching inquiry and conversations, pursuing knowledge and wisdom with abandon. And that is deeply intense and sometimes emotional work. The commitment to our academic vocation—critical thinking, openness to other perspectives and experiences, having your mind changed and your life transformed—may be even more difficult in the midst of our social disruptions. It can be frightening to learn new things; it can make us angry to be challenged by provocative ideas and experiences; it can be threatening to risk our social identities in the midst of those who do not share our paths in the world.

And for all of these reasons, the etiquette of our lives together has perhaps never been more important to the well-being of our common lives. Here is the wrestling that our students must engage and here is the call to be generous and gentle with each other, perhaps with a portion of forgiveness and grace, not so that freedoms are abridged or opinions squashed—college is not meant to be a safe place for our minds, students will encounter provocative, even troubling ideas—but so that we might pursue our teaching and learning in ways that advance our mission and our democracy. Gentle and generous, the etiquette of democracy—a claim upon all of us in the university.

In this context, then, I offer our students the following challenge—a challenge to wrestle with an ethic that may be more relevant than ever in our university and in our democracy.

Show up

The first requirement is really pretty fundamental but certainly not simple.

As the coming days pass, we know that students will be tempted by many distractions and late nights and other obligations to not show up, to miss a class or a meeting, to say that it doesn't matter whether you attend every class session. I know this tendency—I lived it myself, making elaborate excuses for why I could skip every 7th class session and no one would notice. And we might not notice every time, but they will notice (whether they fully get it now or not) that it is a slippery slope to not show up. Statistics show that skipping even one class session has an impact on whether or not first year college students stay in school, let alone graduate, or perhaps most importantly whether or not they learn something.

But, of course, this is not simply about physical presence. Showing up is also a sort of spiritual practice. It is about being present now. It is about being in relationship to a text, a classmate, and/or a teacher. It is about accompanying each other on a journey that is both solitary and social. The famous educational philosopher, John Dewey, said that genuine education is not preparation for life, it is life itself.

And if we believe that, then showing up, being present now, is the key factor in whether or not you get the education you need in order to live in the world.

> "Showing up is also a sort of spiritual practice. It is about being present now. It is about being in relationship to a text, a classmate, and/or a teacher. It is about accompanying each other on a journey that is both solitary and social."

Pay attention

The second requirement is also quite simple. But the equally simple fact is that we live in a world full of distractions and paying attention doesn't come easy. This may be the most pressing requirement in this time of unprecedented chaos and confusion

Like all of our students, I'm on social media. I have a myriad of devices. I follow the news through various channels. I do my best to lead a wonderful and complex university. I have a family, and a life full of things I "must" pay attention to—and it's hard work. And I'm old. Our students are young and have grown up in a time when multitasking is not an option, it's an expectation. I really can't imagine how they keep it all together. I admire them, but I also worry about them.

So yes, I ask students to put away all the distractions that they can control. Turn off the cell phone occasionally, spend some time away from the computer. Focus on what teachers and classmates are saying and doing. Find ways to pay attention.

But it is more than that, of course, because even when we have put away all those sources of distraction, it remains our responsibility to figure out what is most important and how you can make what is important the center of your life. The sociologist, Robert Bellah and his associates, have written that "Democracy means paying attention," (from *The Good Society*) by which they mean that the psychic energy we use to pay attention is the key to the sort of person we hope to be—as individuals and as a society. If we continue to be distracted, our attention and the energy that it requires of us will also be distracted, and the values and people and ideas and causes we should care about and attend to will not get our energy. And we will not become the people we want to be.

Do the work

The final requirement follows logically from the first two. If we show up and learn to truly pay attention, we will find that there is work that must be done.

For our students, on many days, the work will be assigned. Read this text, explore these ideas, test this hypothesis, run this experiment, play this scale, practice this drill. Our students know all about doing school work already, but they need to know that this is college and college signals a quantum leap in the work required. Don't get behind on reading and papers. Take advantage of the support we offer to help manage time and learn to study. Support each other and ask for help when you feel you need it.

> "The profound truth at the heart of our academic mission is that the work our students learn to do—in the classroom, on campus, in the neighborhood and around the world—is the basis for pursuing the important work to be done in the world—and we need them to do it."

Because more and more, on many days the work will be theirs to discern and pursue. There will be no one there to tell them what to do. They will need to seize the work that needs to be done. The profound truth at the heart of our academic mission is that the work our students learn to do—in the classroom, on campus, in the neighborhood and around the world—is the basis for pursuing the

important work to be done in the world—and we need them to do it. We are counting on them to do it. That is why our university exists—to educate students to be informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers and responsible leaders—not just because we think it would be nice if they were all of those sorts of citizens and stewards and thinkers and leaders, but because the world needs them. There is utility to this education, there is purpose and direction, there is work to be done by educated folks. Work they are called to do. Work that might just have to do with what the prophet Micah claimed—the work of justice and compassion and humility.

Show up, pay attention, and do the work. That is how I invite our students into the wrestling they are about to commence. In a university dedicated to pluralism and democratic engagement, simple lessons that I challenge them to remember. Lessons that abide, lessons that will help them in college, surely, but most critically and urgently, lessons that ground a democratic social ethic and that will serve them for a lifetime of following their passions and calls for the good of the world. I believe that wrestling with their education—showing up, paying attention, and doing the work—equips our students to live together as engaged citizens in our democracy.

KRISTINA FRUGÉ

What Does Ethical Leadership in a Changing World Require?

This question warrants a long list, but one thing belongs at the top: *cultivating trustworthy communities*. This is a patient and delicate process but the good news is, these communities can form anywhere—in a classroom, in a campus ministry, in a congregation, in a home, on a neighborhood block…. Anywhere there are people, there are opportunities for relationship. Wherever there is relationship, there is opportunity to cultivate trustworthy community. In turn, these trustworthy communities, made up of trustworthy relationships, equip us with the collective wisdom, care, and accountability needed to be the kind of people the world needs.

Trustworthy communities have always been needed, but perhaps part of the reason we are where we are is because too often our society has NOT invested in cultivating trustworthy communities. Instead choosing practices of exploitation and violence, eroding trust and convincing us that those around us are more likely a threat than a neighbor.

When I see many challenges around us, I fear that the world is ending. Maybe it is. Maybe (probably) parts of it should. This is scary and when we are scared it is easy to turn inward, to scapegoat our fears onto "others." Ethical leadership when the world is changing—and perhaps ending—means resisting that impulse and instead doubling down on setting more tables, doing the slow relationship work, being bold and humble as we engage with people around us.

We need to be the kind of people and create the kinds of communities the world needs when it's ending.

> "Trustworthy communities, made up of trustworthy relationships, equip us with the collective wisdom, care, and accountability needed to be the kind of people the world needs."

As a former youth ministry director, camp counselor and convener of congregations through my work at Augsburg with the Riverside Innovation Hub—my instinct as a leader has been to carry the bulk of the responsibility to build this kind of community and then invite others into it. But this is a lopsided approach.

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Cultivating trustworthy community is a group effort. Leaders may take initiative, but the work isn't to build for, but to set a table where something new can be nurtured—more accurately, to *co-create trustworthy community.*

My thinking about this has been particularly shaped through a recent book project I led. *Hungry for Hope, Letters to the Church from Young Adults*, released this summer, is the culmination of three years of stewarding a writing community of twenty-five people. Many of them are young adults who brought to the table their hopes, heartaches and imaginations of another way possible for the church and the world.

The process of co-creating this book mirrors the final product, which is an invitation to sit at the table together and wrestle with the questions of our time, ones that really matter to young adults (and folks of all ages!) Rev. Lamont Wells concluding remarks at this summer's gathering landed home for me when he quoted Sharon Daloz Parks. Ethical leadership is "not about having the right answers, but about cultivating the courage to hold questions that matter and walk with others through them." These are the first faithful steps towards *co-creating trustworthy communities*. These are the kinds of communities that not only are needed when worlds are ending, but are needed to seed what new worlds may begin to emerge.

For more information about the book, Hungry for Hope: Letters to the Church from Young Adults, *visit the book's website at www.hungryforhopebook.com.*

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The theme for *Intersections* in Fall 2026, "Vocation: Beyond Walls, For the Common Good," is directly related to the summer conference for Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education. Join us in person for conversation in Minneapolis: July 13-15, 2026.

Contributions for the Fall issue are due September 1, 2026. If you would like to be in conversation about an idea that is brewing, please be in touch with the editor, Colleen Windham-Hughes: **windhamh@plts.edu**

LAMONT ANTHONY WELLS

Fostering Moral Imagination and Inclusivity: The Role of Ethical Leadership in ELCA Colleges and Universities Amid Societal Challenges

Ethical leadership occupies a central position in the operational spirit of the Network of ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) Colleges and Universities (NECU), particularly in our search to promote moral imagination and inclusion in the midst of a variety of social challenges. "Moral imagination" is the capacity to envision ethical alternatives, empathize with others' experiences, and creatively respond to conflict or injustice in ways that uphold human dignity and the common good (Lederach, 2005). Our institutions are largely based on the principles of faith, learning and commitment to community.

> "'Moral imagination' is the capacity to envision ethical alternatives, empathize with others' experiences, and creatively respond to conflict or injustice in ways that uphold human dignity and the common good."

We have the task and the deep responsibility to shape future leaders who not only understand but also embody the essential ethical imperatives to navigate within contemporary complexities. The challenges presented by today's social inequalities, environmental sustainability and different cultural perspectives requires a leadership style among us that emphasizes ethical frameworks to guide decision-making processes. Drinkwater and Waghid (2024) highlights this need, which articulates that "ethical leadership can cause a transformative impact by promoting decision-making processes based on values that improve inclusion and address inequities effectively."

As I shared in my keynote at the 2025 Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference (VLHEC), the heart of ethical leadership is rooted in our moral imagination. Our ability to imagine various possibilities and perspectives to address moral dilemmas is needed now more than ever. Within the context of NECU, I propose that we encourage moral imagination to support our constituents (students, teachers and personnel) to confront conventional thinking and explore the alternative ways that prioritize ethical considerations. I believe this approach not only enriches

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the academic environment, but also prepares students to become individuals capable of leading efforts to instigate positive social change. For example, NECU faculty, staff and administrators play a fundamental role in the modeling of behaviors that reflect the commitment to inclusion. Each one serves in our own vocational capacity as examples and advocates in a community where each voice is recognized, and where collaborative discourse can be seen as a fundamental mechanism for collective growth and understanding.

As explored in 'So That All May Belong', NECU institutions have historical commitments to inclusivity and representation. Moreover, we live into an authentic commitment to difference and diversity of perspectives. Therefore, we are uniquely positioned to cultivate an atmosphere where diverse perspectives are not only welcomed but are actively sought in the configuration of politics and practice. In implementing strategies that raise the underrepresented voices, NECU leaders in our value system encourage conditions that promote collaboration and innovation. Being in community with interested parties of various origins ensures that the complexities of the social dilemmas are addressed in an informed and holistic way, which allows institutions to respond proactively instead of reactively to the challenges that may arise.

In light of the growing polarization obvious in contemporary society, the role of ethical leadership has been further amplified. Leaders in NECU institutions must face not only local narratives but also global realities that shape public discourse on issues such as race, gender, climate change, etc. This implies a conscious effort to align our institutional missions with a commitment to social justice, thus amplifying moral reasoning and ethical deliberation within academic curricula. Consequently, the challenge for our leaders becomes one of the integration of these ethical dimensions in the central operating frameworks of our institutions. Given the concepts of moral imagination and inclusive commitments, educational leaders in the network are called to create initiatives that promote critical thinking and reflexive practice, allowing students and faculty to get involved with pressing problems that transcend ideological divisions.

By anchoring ethical leadership in the principles of imagination and moral inclusion, Lutheran higher education has an opportunity to arise as a leader in the cultivation of socially responsible citizens. This requires intentional attention to our Lutheran core values and a readiness to be open to an age characterized by rapid social change and an increase in complexity. Our ability must not only imagine but also implement ethical solutions to contemporary challenges in our Lutheran distinctive mode of effective leadership within our institutions. Through such efforts, NECU can defend a vision of education that is not only transformative at the individual level, but also contributes significantly to the broader social discourse, aligning with our mission of promoting the common good.

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This mission is not easy, and yet with all of the complexities of our roles as leaders in higher education it is becoming more critical to promote moral values. Liu et al. (2022) states that ethical leaders should properly navigate a landscape full of competing values and still provide a vision that galvanizes collective action. In doing so, we are being called as leaders responsible for cultivating an ethical structure and environment that enables students and faculty to engage constructively with social challenges and not simply react to crises.

The concept of moral imagination can serve as a vital tool in this educational enterprise, allowing us to see alternatives, face ethical dilemmas and develop solutions that reflect various perspectives and experiences so that all may flourish. It involves our ability to empathize with others, to recognize competing interests at stake in any ethical dilemma and to imagine a series of action possibilities

that transcends conventional answers. I believe NECU is uniquely positioned to promote this mindset. We can amplify environments conducive to open dialogue and creative problem solving.

How can this be accomplished? We must organize forums, workshops, and collaborative projects among our network. We can encourage stakeholders to share their views and unique experiences, thus enriching moral discourse within each institution. Such initiatives are not new, but they illuminate the paths of moral reasoning, creating a vibrant and inclusive community, where several voices are heard and valued.

The implications and results of nourishing our moral imagination can lead to the development of institutional policies and practices that prioritize inclusion and equity. For example, programs that are based on moral imagination can seek to dismantle barriers of access for underrepresented groups, ensuring that all members of the university community can prosper. Gonçalves (2024) emphasizes the importance of challenging the status quo, suggesting that leaders who promote moral imagination contribute to a transformation of institutional culture that actively seeks to accommodate various perspectives. This may include reassessing curriculum to ensure that it reflects a multiplicity of historical voices and contexts. It also reinforces student success priorities by developing marginalized student support systems that recognize and respond to their unique challenges.

An ethically conscious leadership structure that embraces moral imagination cultivates a community that is not only responsive but also proactive in the treatment of social injustices. Leaders who incorporate these principles signal to teachers and students that ethical considerations are fundamental in decision-making processes. When leaders shape moral courage and articulate a grounded view of ethical values, they inspire their communities to exercise their own moral agency. This empowerment can manifest itself in many ways, based on initiatives led by students who defend justice and equity to the research of the faculty that interrogates systemic biases in education and beyond.

In the context of Lutheran colleges and universities, we take serious introspection and critical analysis of our purpose and impact. The experiences of students, teachers, and staff matter. Therefore, it is essential for us to create supportive environments in which each member of the community feels appreciated and accepted, which is particularly critical in an era marked by social divisions and systemic inequalities. By modeling ethical imperatives of transparency, responsibility, and integrity, we set up a culture that gives priority to inclusion as a fundamental value.

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Lutheran higher education is well positioned to dismantle the barriers to inclusion by promoting fair practices that recognize and celebrate diversity. This effort requires proactive involvement with ethical dilemmas that often arise in our educational contexts. For example, decisions relating to admissions, intake practices and allocation of resources must be addressed with an ethical lens, ensuring that marginalized constituents are listened to and considered. Leaders who embrace moral imagination can include innovative solutions that expand opportunities for under-represented groups. This imaginative ability allows leaders not only to face existing disparities, but also to anticipate future challenges relating to inclusion, thus promoting an adaptive and resilient community.

In times like these, we must invite different perspectives on difficult topics, including racial injustice, gender inequality and socio-economic disparities, and by facilitating these conversations, we promote a sense of belonging and responsibility shared among the members

of the community, which is essential to cultivate an inclusive environment. This shared commitment acts as a catalyst for change, as individuals will feel authorized to contribute to the continuous evolution of institutional practices. This iterative process strengthens the commitment of the institution towards inclusiveness and provides a framework to evaluate progress towards achieving these critical objectives.

As Lutheran institutions that promote an atmosphere of imagination and moral collaboration, we not only improve the global educational environment, but also fulfill our mission and common calling to prepare students to navigate and challenge the social dynamics they will meet beyond the university context. Therefore, ethical leadership is a crucial mechanism for instilling strong moral values and responsibility in future generations.

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ANN ROSENDALE

VLHE—Wednesday Morning Sacred Pause

"For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."
—Esther 4:14

The book of Esther in the Bible is a story about calling, or "vocation," we like to say, at Lutheran colleges and universities. It's a story about a calling that Esther discovers by understanding herself, understanding the moment, and seizing an opportunity.

In case you're new to the book of Esther, or need a refresher, here's a quick synopsis of the story:

Esther, a Jew, has been appointed queen by the King of Persia.

The king's advisor, Hamaan, is plotting to have every Jew in the empire killed because Esther's cousin, Mordecai, refuses to bow down and worship Hamaan, and that has left a bad taste in Hamaan's mouth for all Jews.

Mordecai, knowing that his cousin, now *Queen* Esther, holds a unique (perhaps even providential) place in the kingdom, convinces Esther that *she* is the one called to use her influence to save her people from destruction.

Mordecai speaks that famous line to Esther: "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

The story has a predictably happy ending. Esther reveals her Jewish identity, and Hamaan's heinous plot to the King, and Esther and her people are saved.

The title of our conference is "Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education," which suggests that it is not just individuals, like Esther or you or me who have a vocation; but that institutions, and even whole enterprises; this broad thing called "Lutheran Higher Education," has a calling.

And perhaps the vocation of Lutheran Higher Education, perhaps the calling of my beloved institution, and yours, is for just such a time as this.

We like to say that no other kind of institution is better positioned for such a time as this. We want to believe that we are the special ones. In the midst of challenges facing enrollment and finances, in the midst of changes in young

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adults, staffing, technology, educational models, values, the list goes on…perhaps *our* colleges and universities have been called to and for this very moment.

But what is it in particular that sets our institutions apart, and sets us up for this time and this calling?

We could quote *Rooted and Open* here, and list all the buzz words: liberal arts, freedom from and for, intellectual humility, service of neighbor, hospitality.

But there's another idea that we don't talk about all that much. And it may just be the thing that positions our colleges and universities best for this moment. It is the very Christian, very Lutheran notion of death and resurrection.

And just like "rooted and open," the hardest word in the phrase "death and resurrection" is the word "and."

Death *and* resurrection. It's both.

"And just like 'rooted and open,' the hardest word in the phrase 'death and resurrection' is the word 'and.'

Death *and* resurrection. It's both."

We are so often tempted into either/or thinking. Especially about death and resurrection. Either we live *or* we die. We flourish *or* we fail. It's one or the other.

But Jesus always says it's both. We don't have life without death. We don't have success without failure. And every end is met with a beginning. Everything old is met with something new that God is doing.

Death *and* Resurrection. Finding life *and* losing it. The "and" is the hardest part.

But ask any person, at any of our NECU institutions, and they are doing it. They'll tell you a story about how their institution is dying *and* how it is finding new ways to live. How their students are thriving *and* they are floundering.

I don't know of other kinds of institutions that can say this with the same honesty or the same hope. We live and we die. There is truth and promise in both.

Esther discovered her calling by understanding herself, understanding the moment, and seizing an opportunity.

Those last two we're pretty good at. We understand the moment, the stakes, and we're ready to seize every opportunity.

The reminder we need now is to understand ourselves; what it is that is distinctive about us as leaders, and about our institutions, that calls us into this very moment.

For Esther it was understanding her identity as a Jew.

For us it is understanding our colleges and universities as places founded on and fueled by faith. It is not lost on me that the book of Esther never once mentions God, which maybe gives us license not to talk about God too much at our institutions either. To be sure, at many of our schools it is becoming rarer and rarer to hear God's name uttered…and when we do talk about our church-relatedness, we prefer to emphasize "Lutheran" over "Christian," which I think is helpful to some of us because "Lutheran" feels, oddly, more specific and less specific at the same time.

But Esther needed reminders of her identity, and we do too. And I am of the (sometimes unpopular) opinion that naming God, out loud, as an active subject at our institutions is a good way to remind ourselves and others of who we are.

Friends, we are spiritual people. We are God's people. Our institutions are Christian places, even if the majority of the people who live and work and learn there aren't Christians. Our colleges and universities are not churches, but they are places where God is at work; where God is doing death and resurrection work. And the callings we have, they don't come to us out of thin air. Someone is doing the calling. We believe that it is *God* who calls us. We can, and should, give God credit for that.

For just such a time as this. We are called. By God. To live, to die, and to live again.

Intersections

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