

Religious Education

The official journal of the Religious Education Association

ISSN: 0034-4087 (Print) 1547-3201 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/urea20>

White Religious Educators Resisting White Fragility: Lessons From Mystics

Mary E. Hess

To cite this article: Mary E. Hess (2017) White Religious Educators Resisting White Fragility: Lessons From Mystics, *Religious Education*, 112:1, 46-57, DOI: [10.1080/00344087.2016.1253124](https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2016.1253124)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2016.1253124>



Published online: 29 Dec 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 85




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=urea20>

WHITE RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS RESISTING WHITE FRAGILITY: LESSONS FROM MYSTICS

Mary E. Hess 

*University of St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

Abstract

Decades of work in dismantling racism have not yielded the kind of results for which religious educators have hoped. One primary reason has been what scholars term “white fragility,” a symptom of the structural racism which confers systemic privilege upon White people. Lessons learned from Christian mystics point to powerful ways to confront and resist the siren call of such formation and instead to make resisting racism an integral part of Christian identity for White people.

Maggie Ross writes that a mystic is someone who lives ordinary life through transfigured perception (Ross 2014, 104–05). In this article I want to explore just what doing so could mean in the midst of racial oppression, as someone who carries White privilege and wants to participate in dismantling the systems that confer it.¹ In doing so I hope to explore what might be unique about the resources a religious educator can bring to this task.²

Bryan Stevenson is someone whom I believe is a mystic by this definition. He is a longtime activist and lawyer who has been working on criminal justice issues in the United States for decades, and yet who continues to believe that real change is possible. He has identified four practices that contribute to transformative change: getting proximate to the challenge, changing the narratives, finding where your own hope lies, and embracing discomfort (2014).³ These may not sound like “mystical” practices, but they parallel very closely what I am continuing to learn from mystics in the Christian tradition (Bostic 2013; Jantzen 1995). In the rest of this article I intend

¹I have argued elsewhere, that “color-blindness” colludes with racism, and that instead we need to be “color conscious” or “color brave” (Hess 1998). Mark Hearn makes this argument as well (2009).

²I am writing this article from a very specific location: as a Catholic religious educator who bears White privilege in the United States. My hope is that people who listen in from other spaces might find something here that provokes them, perhaps even invites dialogue or argument, but my fierce urgency in writing grows out of my social location and is oriented to other people who find themselves in a similar space. I write very specifically using examples from recent episodes involving Black persons in the United States, but I believe what I argue for here is relevant for White people in relation to multiple and differing communities of color. That is not to say that the issues are the same, but only that I believe the stance White people can inhabit in resisting White fragility and other elements of systemic racism ought to open us to listening to the distinctive concerns of many differing communities caught up in the system of racialization in the United States.

³A brief and easily accessible entry point to these four is: <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/news-events/news/alumni/bryan-stevenson-discusses-his-four-elements-for-creating-change> (2015).

to explore how these four practices can make visible what White⁴ religious educators need to be doing as we seek to confront and dismantle systems of racialization.

GETTING PROXIMATE

Stevenson writes eloquently about the challenges of “getting proximate,” beginning with the narrative of his own move in law school into working with people on death row. His experiences there utterly transformed his life, leading to his conviction that we need to: “Get close to the things that matter, get close to the places where there is inequality and suffering, get close to the spaces where people feel oppressed, burdened, and abused. See what it does to your capacity to make a difference, see what it does to you.” His words resonate with me personally, as well as with Christian understandings of a preferential option for the poor, leading me to claim a place for him within the long tradition of mysticism.

What does “getting proximate” mean to me as I reflect on issues of racial justice and transformative learning in the United States? As someone who inhabits a world infected with oppression that is structured in part through racialization, “getting proximate” begins for me with coming to awareness of my own history within this system, and then building relationships that are truly accountable with people who are located quite differently.

In several of the classes I teach—all of which occur within settings claiming Christianity as their base—I begin by asking students to fill out a “race attitude source discussion guide” developed by a colleague.⁵ This autobiographical task invites students to consider their own racial awareness in terms of their earliest memories and experiences of race, as well as to reflect on how, if at all, those attitudes have shifted over time. I am always struck by how many of my White students’ constructions of race are based on commercial pop culture, in large measure because in the settings in which I teach most students do not grow up in racially diverse settings. While they may have gone to school with people of color, rarely are they in relationships of the kind that support trust, respect, and mutual vulnerability. This segregation was certainly true for me. I grew up in Oshkosh, Wisconsin and until I went off to college I had only one close personal friend who was not White.

Pop culture is an ambiguous and ambivalent way to learn about race. It comes to us through structures of economic privilege, as well as within ideological streams that seek to enforce a status quo that is unwilling, perhaps unable, to acknowledge the gaping wound which in the United States is the original sin of racism (Wallis 2016). Pop culture can be a place to “lurk,” a place to begin to hear faint echoes of the other realities that exist in the United States, but it is also a place in which racism is represented primarily as an interpersonal act—language to use or not use, music to listen to or not listen to, memes to share or not share—rather than as a thoroughly institutionalized element that structures our neighborhoods and larger communities.

⁴In this article I am choosing to capitalize both “White” and “Black” as a way to call attention to them as social constructs.

⁵This resource is available at: <http://meh.religioused.org/RaceAttitudeSource.doc>

In the more than two decades I have been doing this kind of exercise, there are positive signs of change, including more and more students who are living in multiracial communities. Still, far too many of the students in the predominately White settings in which I teach have had to seek intentionally to “get proximate” to discussions of racial justice, rather than encountering them in ordinary incidental daily ways.⁶

Without accountable, daily relationship it is possible to become enclosed in spaces that insulate White folk from racial awareness. Are there ways to grow past such segregation, to move from “lurking” in the background in popular culture as one’s sole source of information on racialization, and instead seek intentionally to grasp opportunities for engagement, relationship building, and accountability?

Of course! But to answer that question fully I need to bring in recent scholarship that seeks to offer explanations for the continuing ineffectiveness of dismantling racism education in White communities. After all, religious educators have been seeking to dismantle racism for a long time in the United States.⁷ Nearly every major religious institution, for instance, has an explicit statement condemning racism. Yet in predominately White churches, race is still not “seen.” Or when racial segregation in church settings is observed, it is often experienced as a source of shame to be decried and then ignored, rather than as a spur to action.

The theories I find useful here coalesce around descriptions of White fragility and micro aggression. Robin DiAngelo, for instance, published a catalytic paper that appeared in the *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* in 2011. DiAngelo is a White woman trained in multicultural education⁸ who has focused specifically on issues which intersect with White privilege. She writes:

White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. (DiAngelo 2011, 1)

White fragility is a kind of *habitus*, a formation, into which dominant culture invites White people to participate. It powerfully reinforces White supremacy, all the while erasing routes to awareness of itself. Practices that could raise consciousness of these systems and that would help White people to dismantle and deconstruct them, are subtly discouraged by White fragility. White fragility erects barriers within White people that push off opportunities for engagement with other communities, that narrow the range of our emotional response, and that deaden our hope.

In its simplest form, White fragility is an excuse for avoiding proximity. Who actively desires to “feel bad”? But avoiding such feelings leads to a series of actions

⁶I have learned so much from the work of Myron Orfield, who heads the Institute for Metropolitan Opportunity at the University of Minnesota, and whose work documenting rapid segregation through housing, as well as the effect of charter schools on segregation, is nationally known (<https://www1.law.umn.edu/metro/index.html>).

⁷For a glimpse of the enormous amount that has been written, recorded, and in other ways shared, see the Racial Justice Collaborative in Theological Education’s online bibliography: <http://rjb.religioused.org>

⁸This is the label she uses, as is evident in her website’s biographical information: <http://robindiangelo.com/about-me/>

that cause harm to others. Micro aggressions, for instance, are one common symptom of White fragility. These apparently casual comments, which include nonverbal responses, have the impact of marginalizing people who inhabit particular categories (women, people of color, women of color, people with disabilities, etc.). They are “micro” because in many ways such actions appear, from the standpoint of the speaker, to be benign or even complimentary while at the same time marking the person at whom they are directed as “lesser” “marginalized,” or in some other way “apart from” the speaker. Micro aggressions make the speaker “feel better,” while harming those at whom they are directed.⁹

White fragility is often accompanied by White guilt. It is worth remembering that shame is an emotion attached to ontology. That is, shame suggests we *are* bad, while guilt attaches to action: guilt suggests we *have done something* bad. White fragility holds off awareness of guilt while inviting shame in its place and then expresses that shame through anger and fear. Yet guilt can actually be a useful emotion, because when White people “get proximate” to the system of racial oppression, when we open up to the harm of our actions, when we start to perceive how this system functions, our desire to move into resistance to it can *grow*, rather than being swallowed up in misplaced shame.

CHANGING THE NARRATIVES

The second of Stevenson’s elements, “changing the narrative,” is one of the most pertinent tasks White Christian religious educators can undertake. We need to understand how the narratives with which we have constructed and sustained our identities in fact and deed have led us away from the heart of the Gospel, rather than deeply into it. Willie James Jennings argues in his book *The Christian Imagination* (2010) that the social construction of race—at least insofar as we understand that construction in North America—originated with Christians. He traces the stories of Christian community through time, inviting us to ask how it is that a community of people gathered around Jesus, a community that included Gentiles who had literally fallen in love with another people’s God, a community committed to being thoroughly inclusive, could grow into a tradition that used its internal discursive terrain as a resource upon which to create “others,” designating the peoples whom colonial powers were meeting as “sub-human beings,” suitable for enslavement and genocide.

His answers to that question are complex and rooted in multiple narratives drawn from primary historical documents. I apologize in advance for oversimplification, but a central element of his argument is that orthodoxy—understood doctrinally as “right belief”—came to be more important than engaging in right relationship. “Right belief” grew into a way to avoid and even deny the specificity of right relationship, particularly when it was rooted in very specific places with very specific peoples. That emphasis solidified, in turn, a worldview that refused to embrace and cherish the vast diversity of God’s creation and incarnation and breath (Jennings 2010, 63ff and 83ff).

⁹A humorous “take” on micro aggression circulated on the net a few years back: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWynJkN5HbQ>; you can also find similar pieces by doing a search there for “If [Latinos, Blacks, Asians, etc.] said the stuff White people say.”

In short, the wholistic and integrative forms of knowing and relationality embedded in the scriptures and practices held dear by those in the movement following Jesus were transmuted through time and in the hands of supersessionism and colonial powers, into an epistemological stance that favored hierarchy and sought to suppress situated forms of knowing. Doctrine trumped communion by positing a “universal” stance defining what it was to be human, with that “universal” narrowly defined as White.

The victory of constricted epistemologies is a story traced by many other theologians. Maggie Ross has identified multiple ways in which this shift occurred as she traces the small, but still visible, journey of contemplatives throughout Christian tradition. Rather than speaking of “mystics” or “contemplatives” she prefers to talk about the “way of silence”:

The simmering conflict between hierarchy and silence erupted once again in 451 at the Council of Chalcedon. Institutional and imperial advocates sought to nail down definitions so that everyone would believe in the same way. They were opposed by those who understood the provisionality of language, who sought to restrain the temptation to define, categorize, and politicize the indefinable, which they regarded as blasphemous. (Ross 2015, 5)

This is Jennings’s point, too: that somehow the deep humility that permeated the communities following Jesus gave way to a grasping of “power over” people in the very language Christians used to pray and confess belief.

If we are to change our narratives around race—religious educators know well how narratives construct reality¹⁰—we have to go to the heart of our understandings of Christianity. Our identity as White Christians has been bound up with a deeply destructive narrowing of our imagination, which in turn has developed a profoundly distorted form of attention. Dismantling racism, indeed all that is involved in engaging race in religious education, is *not* a “technical” challenge: find the right diversity workshop, apply, and move forward. Instead it is a deeply adaptive challenge, and at the heart of that challenge is our need to change the way that we know, our epistemological commitments (Hess 2005, 1–2). We need to recognize how these commitments have come to be shaped through time into a particularly narrow understanding of Christianity, which built a pernicious construction of race.

Rather than bemoaning this problem, we can choose to see in it a rich opportunity to open up to the depth and breadth of what we mean by Christian identity and practice. Changing the narrative of Christianity from one that is about enforcing “right belief” to one that is about inclusive community centered in kenotic love is liberating. Students find new resources they had no idea existed within their faith, as well as new curiosity about the systematic theological arguments they want to challenge as well as to retrieve.

¹⁰The literature on narrative, identity and religious formation is very wide and complex. Of particular note for the purposes of this article are: Anderson and Foley (1998); Avest, Bakker, and Miedema (2008); Avest and Bakker (2009); Baker (2005); Baker and Mercer (2007); Bischoff (2011); Clark and Dierberg (2013); Clark (2005); Conde-Frazier (2007); Court (2007); Dalton (2003); Davis and Weinshenker (2012); Erstad and Silseth (2008); Gilmour (1997); Irizarry (2003; 2008); Kaare and Lundby (2008); Mazzarella (2005); McQuiston (2007); Mercer (2008); Moore et al. (2010); Palmer (2003; 2006); Rogers (2011); Smith (2004); Turpin (2010); Wimberly (1994).

The refusal to see “original sin” as an empowering doctrine, for instance, a position held by many of my feminist students who rightly critique the ways in which that teaching has problematically constructed the category of “woman,” can be broken open. New lenses illuminate the possibilities that come in defining sin socially, and using the term “original sin” to describe the brokenness at the heart of U.S. White identity. Being born into such identity with no choice in the matter, that is, “originally,” gives rise to a fresh grasp of how repentance and forgiveness might function in opening up to new ways to understand God’s salvific love in the midst of today’s present heartaches (Hess and Brookfield 2008, 165–66).

One objection that has been raised to thoroughly open and inclusive community, to focusing on knowing wholeheartedly rather than knowing solely through careful explication of doctrine, has been that such a path becomes no more than a “cafeteria of options.” This argument contends that such inclusivity will lead away from the depth of commitment to which Jesus is calling us as Christians. I would counter that argument by noting that inclusive identity development builds on being centered in a specific identity—being “loyal but open”—rather than enforcing identity through impermeable boundary drawing (Rosenak 1987, 261).

Religious educators need to invite people to center themselves in practices of faith that see boundaries as creative constraints pushing to new understanding, rather than as hard markers that suppress questioning and learning. There are indeed many affordances for such learning to be found in engaging the vast diversity of our communities (Hess 2016, 54ff). Jennings writes that:

A space built on Jesus of Nazareth and the claim that he is indeed Israel’s Messiah, their Christ, is a space that cannot protect itself from any critique or ridicule. It is a space open to the nations and their desire. It announces a kinship network that cannot be verified but only enacted through discipleship and living together in communion with God. (2011, 272)

Creating this kind of new space—or retrieving glimpses of a past one and rebuilding it—requires a commitment to ways of knowing that are integrating, relational, grounded in place, and open to learning. It is a space that requires what Parker Palmer has labeled a “community of truth” epistemological model, contrasting sharply to one that he labels “the myth of objectivism” (1997, 100, 102). Such a commitment requires a wholesale changing of the narrative, a new story for describing how we come to know what it is to be Christian, and hence how we learn and teach with and toward such an identity.¹¹

When we begin to live into this way of knowing, when we embody the assertion that “the more diverse the knowers, the more robust the knowing,” we find ourselves opening up to the ways new understandings of our narratives can be transformative. This is a space in which deep work to dismantle racism can truly take root and grow, because by changing the narratives that we are privileging as being definitive of Christian identity, by moving beyond “right belief” to a situated and fully integrated discipline of seeking God, White people in particular (but not alone) can grow into a space

¹¹A brilliant example of one such retelling of a central Christian narrative is found in Mary Boys (2000), *Has God only one blessing? Judaism as a source of Christian self-understanding*, where she narrates the central story of the Passion while deliberately refusing supersessionist interpretations.

of learning that is centered in confessing Christ as the heart of our knowing rather than maintaining boundaries which exclude people.¹² And such a space leads directly to the hope at the heart of Christian proclamation. Bryan Stevenson's third practice lands precisely there—finding where your own hope and resilience reside in this work.

FINDING YOUR HOPE AND THUS YOUR RESILIENCE

Stevenson is clear about the necessity of naming and claiming the hope that sustains transformative work. Christian mystics point to God's transforming love as the heart of all knowing. For me one way in which I see that love at work, and thus my resilience is fed, comes through the epiphanies that happen in communities as White people find new relevance and depth in the theological and biblical languages we have struggled to learn or actively refused to use. Perhaps the single most important dynamic in learning in the twenty-first century has to do with finding the wonder that can ignite learning (Hess 2014, 18). Finding this wonder and allowing it to emerge in the midst of a learning setting requires deep respect for all who enter such a space. It is a truism that "there are no stupid questions." But I have been in seminary setting after seminary setting, church basement classroom after church basement classroom, Facebook newstream after Facebook newstream, where questions are met with scorn rather than respect. As I have pondered where that attitude arises from, I come back to Jennings's analysis, and the insight that underlying such scorn is a deep fear of "getting it wrong." If "getting it wrong" might mean damnation, then one surely must avoid doing so. Far too many White Christian communities have fallen into this false narrative, groping for "right doctrine" at the expense of deep communion. This fall is precisely what leads to White Christian communities sustaining White fragility rather than empowering White resistance to racism.

Deep communion, real relationality, the kind of fulsome respect that flows outward and through an entire community on the other hand leads to wanting to share, wanting to continue to learn, indeed, to "discipling" in the best and truest sense of that word.¹³ It feeds deeply and abundantly the journey of dismantling racism.

Hope grows from communion. Hope grows from communities engaging each other with respect, finding and naming the difficult truths in their midst. Hope emerges from identifying oppression in ways that allow it to be confronted. We know this in Christian community, or at least we confess it when we invite confession, repentance, and reconciliation. These are practices that are at the heart of Christian com-

¹²Here I cannot help hearing echoes of Paul's letter to the community at Corinth: "When I came to you, sisters and brothers, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive (words of) wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God." 1 Cor2:1-5, NAB.

¹³Here I would note that the Great Commission—"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (Matt 28:19-20)—is in essence a command to go and make *learners* (disciples). Every educator knows that to learn is to risk one's own understanding. This is a command to go out *and learn*.

munity, whether we make that claim from Christian doctrine—or, in what I believe is a much deeper confession—from real communion.

Engaging race—particularly with the goal of dismantling structural racism¹⁴—has to emerge from a deep respect for each other that is based on a clear respect for all of the whole-hearted ways in which we know. But this kind of respect is neither easy nor “safe.” It requires a thorough commitment to the kind of practices that we have referred to over time as spiritual disciplines. Particularly for those of us who carry White privilege, who have been formed in the *habitus* of White supremacy, who have been taught to lock away our empathy, to deny the pain and anguish and very real anger present in our world, we have to refuse to participate in White fragility. Instead we must seek this other kind of knowing, we must find ways into the *habitus* of Christian life centered in the Incarnation. Dismantling racism becomes the heart of Christian religious education for White people.

WHAT ABOUT EMBRACING DISCOMFORT?

Thus Stevenson’s fourth contention is that we must embrace discomfort. Perceiving racism, particularly in its nearly indiscernible—to White folk—forms of structural power, means being open to perceiving the pain and anguish, the anger and the despair, upon which these systems have been built. It means confessing the original sin upon which the United States was founded, and seeking both to repent of it and to join in renewed and reconciling community.¹⁵ Seeing racism requires me to embrace the discomfort of knowing that I am complicit in these structures, that my participation in bifurcated forms of knowing has cut me off from deep relationality, and has had an intensely painful result inscribed on the real bodies of real people (Coates 2015).

But that same recognition is also an opening. Embracing such discomfort is a place from which true relationship can begin. It might be a new space for many of us, but embracing it can bring joy. That, too, is an insight from the heart of Christian faith. Christian saints who were martyred did not *seek* pain or death, they simply accepted it when it appeared because in Christian faith death is not the end, joy is bound up

¹⁴It can be difficult to differentiate between “structural” and “institutionalized” racism, with the words being used interchangeably. In this article I am relying on a handout I frequently use in my classes, which comes from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and defines “structural” racism as an overarching category that “includes aspects of our history and culture that have allowed the privilege associated with ‘whiteness’ and the disadvantage of ‘color’ to endure and adapt over time. It points out the ways in which public policies and institutional practices contribute to inequitable racial outcomes. It lays out assumptions and stereotypes that are embedded in our culture that, in effect, legitimize racial disparities, and it illuminates the ways in which progress toward racial equity is undermined.” “Institutionalized” racism can then be more narrowly defined as: “ways in which institutional policies and practices create different outcomes for different racial groups. The institutional policies may never mention any racial group, but their effect is to create advantages for whites and oppression and disadvantage for people from groups classified as non-white.” Handout available here: <http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Working%20Definitions.pdf>

¹⁵I have found it essential—both for my own learning, as well as that of the communities in which I teach—to become much more familiar with the history of racialization in the United States. Toward that end I find these texts particularly helpful: Ignatiev (1995); Loewen (2013); Lopez (2006); Wilkerson (2010); Zinn (2015). Jones recently offered a particularly compelling version of this argument in *Time* (<http://time.com/4477582/heal-the-spiritual-pain-of-america/>) (2016).

with sorrow, and our deepest loves may also be the source of our deepest pain. This paradox is found at the heart of the Cross. As Jennings notes:

Life inside this new space, then, carries uneasiness and even a discomfort as those within it attempt to negotiate powerful cultural claims of kinship. It is in the face of these tensions that Paul's declarations of a new citizenship (Eph 2:19) indicate profound risk taking for anyone who wishes to claim identity in the new space, that is, to claim being Christian. (Jennings 2011, 273)

As Parker Palmer (2014) has written, standing in the tragic gap means standing in that place where *one can see what is* at the same time as *one can see what could be but is not yet*. Standing there will break our hearts. The question is not so much will our hearts be broken, but rather: can we make a choice between being broken open and broken into shards? Standing in that place—a place that Christians describe as the “already not yet” and the “kingdom of God”—is to stand in a place in which one can indeed be broken open, and brought into the place of profound humility that beholds God. It is a place in which we know deeply, irrefutably, that we are not alone and that we are loved along with all of creation.

This is the moment, the glimpse, the brief snapshot, the fleeting recognition of which the mystics speak. It is a moment in which we let go of the ego-self, and lean back into the deep communion that is beyond rationality and beyond cognitive capture. Maggie Ross describes it thus:

It is as if there is a hidden glory radiating from each person which will reveal itself only to those who have been able to focus outward and wait in generosity, thus allowing their own hidden glory—hidden especially from themselves—to pour forth. Even as the observing I/eye is elided, the glory pours through. (2014, 224)

The mystics have expressed and cherished this awareness, down through the centuries and into our present time, living the ordinary daily-ness of life with transfigured perception.

Such transfigured perception draws us into a profound communion that is deeper and stronger and more resilient than any ideological pressure or doctrinal assertion. It is a grounding, a place in which White folk—indeed all persons—can stand, that allows the release of White fragility, that ends the hierarchical machinations that result in micro aggression, that draws us beyond our constrained and blocked vision.

PRACTICING OUR FAITH IN THESE WAYS ...

Living from this “transfigured perception” is neither simple nor easily accomplished. It will take a thorough transformation of practices as religious educators, as persons of faith. But each of us has ways to begin. One of the simplest exercises I can do as a religious educator is to read a bible story, and then invite listeners to imagine themselves into the story. Yet far too many White folk, when hearing the story of the Good Samaritan, see ourselves in the role of the Samaritan, rather than that of the priest or the Levite, let alone that of the person attacked by robbers. What could it mean, I wonder aloud, if we are the Levite passing by? Can we imagine ourselves to

be the anonymous thieves who have robbed and beaten this man and left him to die by the roadside? Who is Jesus inviting us to recognize?

From there it is not too difficult a step to ask “What if you are Philando Castile? Or Alton Sterling? Or Eric Garner?”¹⁶ One of the more common ways in which White people have refused to see the systemic consequences of racism has been to vilify its victims, thus distancing ourselves from any shared risk or responsibility. In this process Michael Brown, for instance, “brought on his own death,” he became the problem because he had stolen something and resisted arrest. Tamir Rice “should not have been playing with such a realistic looking toy gun” and Trayvon Martin “should not have been wearing a hoodie.” But even granting the worst possible characterization of any person imaginable, no one— NO ONE—deserves to be summarily killed by police (or in the case of Trayvon Martin, a self-appointed neighborhood monitor). If I can imagine myself into the space of the families of these Black boys and men, I have to acknowledge that no matter the circumstances, there is no way I can condone such killing. Further, if I take an even more difficult step, and imagine myself into the heads of the men who pulled the triggers, there is no way to “go back” to a time before such death. These men too must be haunted by their actions in a society that taught them to see difference encoded by race as threat rather than gift.

This is the kind of imaginative work to which Jennings is pointing, the kind that draws us deeply into experience in the context of community. It is one of the fruitful paths of resistance to racism that is open to us in the White community. I hasten to add NOT because White people can somehow imagine ourselves into what it is like to be Black or to inhabit any of a rainbow of other racial categories, but because this kind of imaginative reflection invites us to go down deep inside and access those forms of knowing that connect us to real communion. This is only a first step, and we must be careful not to use it as an excuse to avoid accountable relationship, but rather allow it to open ourselves up to the communion into which God is always beckoning.

I do not think it is a coincidence that at precisely the same point in history that White folk are waking up to the challenge of moving from White fragility into White resistance to racism there is a resurgence of interest in contemplative practices. These are the practices that hold such power for entering into the silence of which Ross speaks, for becoming connected to the deep communion of relationality. In the midst of the cacophony of so many of our spaces, processes of mindfulness promise room for breath, indeed room for the Spirit to act upon, within, and around us.

As I write this article my hometown of Saint Paul, MN is reeling from the extrajudicial killing of a young Black man, Philando Castile, who was shot by police during a “routine traffic stop” with his girlfriend and a 4-year-old child in the car. One day later, five police officers were gunned down by a sniper in Dallas, TX while they were guarding a peaceful #BlackLivesMatter protest. The depth of pain and anger that rages around me in the predominately White places I inhabit would have been unimaginable five years, or even three years, or maybe even one year ago. White people are waking up. My question remains: will we wake up into openness? Or will we be broken into

¹⁶Each of the names in this paragraph carry the anguish of communities of color with them, and the systemic violence which our current system of law enforcement too often uses. If you are not familiar with these names, type them into a search box at Wikipedia.

shards? Can we open ourselves to the deep working of the Holy Spirit, to forms of knowing that flow beyond and beneath our rationalist epistemologies? Can we learn to listen, to seek the silence that connects us to communion? Can White people learn to listen so deeply that we embrace whatever discomfort we might feel opening ourselves up to leadership from communities of color, rather than seeking to be in control ourselves? Such silence, the mystics tell us, leads to an even deeper peace:

... “stillness” is not stasis: it is rather a dynamic process. ... This is the peace that characterizes the person who has re-centered in the deep mind, so that the two ways of knowing, which are interdependent, flow together as they are designed to do in an integrated way of knowing, the whole being more than the sum of its parts. Peace in this context is not an affect but rather a way of being in the world. (Ross 2014, 196)

It is my hope that in waking up, White religious educators will indeed “get proximate” in the ways Bryan Stevenson urges us to do. That in doing so we will change our narratives, particularly those Christian narratives that have been so toxic to our interwoven humanity, and so destructive of our relationality. Hope and resilience will grow, then, and in embracing the discomfort that comes with awareness, White Christian folk will open ourselves to the transfigured perception of the mystics. In doing so, in standing in a place of deep humility while beholding God’s glory, we can come to embrace the rich diversity into which God’s love has been poured out. Resisting racism will truly become integral with our very understanding of ourselves as Christian.

ORCID

Mary E. Hess  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2219-0410>

Mary E. Hess is the Patrick and Barbara Keenan Visiting Chair in Religious Education in the Faculty of Theology, University of St. Michael’s College in the University of Toronto. E-mail: mhess@religioused.org

REFERENCES

- Anderson, H., and E. Foley. 1998. *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Avest, I., and C. Bakker. 2009. “Structural Identity Consultation: Story Telling as a Culture of Faith Transformation.” *Religious Education* 104 (3): 257–71.
- Avest, I., C. Bakker, and S. Miedema. 2008. “Different Schools as Narrative Communities: Identity Narratives in Threefold.” *Religious Education* 103 (3): 307–22.
- Baker, D. 2005. *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press.
- Baker, D., and J. Mercer. 2007. *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on their Cocational Quests*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- Bischoff, C. 2011. *Toward Tensegrity: Young Women, Narrative Agency and Religious Education*. PhD dissertation, Emory University.
- Bostic, J. 2013. *African American Female Mysticism: Nineteenth Century Religious Activism*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Boys, M. 2000. *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Clark, L. 2005. “The Constant Contact Generation: Exploring Teen Friendship Networks Online.” In *Girl Wide Web: Girls, the Internet and the Negotiation of Identity*, edited by S. Mazzarella, chapter 11. New York: Peter Lang.

- Clark, L., and J. Dierberg. 2013. "Digital Storytelling and Progressive Religious Identity in a Moderate to Progressive Youth Group." In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practices in New Media Worlds*, edited by H. Campbell, 147–154. London and New York: Routledge.
- Coates, T. 2015. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Text Publishing Company.
- Conde-Frazier, E. 2007. "Culture and the Production of Religious Knowledge and Interpretation." *Religious Education* 102 (2): 111–115.
- Court, D. 2007. "Glimpsing God on the Rocky Road of Culture." *Religious Education* 102 (2): 116–119.
- Dalton, R. 2003. *Faith Journeys through Fantasy Lands*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press.
- Davis, A., and D. Weinschenker. 2012. "Digital Storytelling and Authoring Identity." In *Constructing the Self in a Digital World*, edited by C. Carter Ching and Brian Foley, 47–74. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- DiAngelo, R. 2011. "White Fragility." *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 (3): 54–70.
- Erstad, O., and K. Silseth. 2008. "Agency in Digital Storytelling: Challenging the Educational Context." In *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self Representations in New Media*, edited by K. Lundby, 213–32. New York: Peter Lang.
- Gilmour, P. 1997. *The Wisdom of Memoir: Reading and Writing Life's Sacred Texts*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press.
- Hearn, M. 2009. "Color-Blind Racism, Color-Blind Theology, and Church Practices." *Religious Education* 104 (3): 272–88.
- Hess, M. 1998. "White Religious Educators and Unlearning Racism: Can We Find a Way?" *Religious Education* 93(1): 114–29.
- _____. 2005. *Engaging Technology in Theological Education: All that We Can't Leave Behind*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- _____. 2014. "A New Culture of Learning: Digital Storytelling and Faith Formation." *Dialog* 53 (1): 12–22.
- _____. 2016. "Teaching and Learning Comparative Theology with Millennial Students." In *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, edited by M. Brecht and R. Locklin, 50–60. New York: Routledge.
- Hess, M., and S. Brookfield. 2008. "How Can White Teachers Recognize and Challenge Racism? Acknowledging Collusion and Learning an Aggressive Humility." In *Teaching Reflectively in Theological Education: Promises and Contradictions*, edited by M. Hess and S. Brookfield, 162–89. Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Ignatiev, N. 1995. *How the Irish became White*. New York: Routledge.
- Irizarry, J. 2003. "The Religious Educator as Cultural Spec-Actor: Researching Self in Inter-Cultural Pedagogy." *Religious Education* 98 (3): 365–81.
- _____. 2008. "REA Presidential Address: Spaces of Inter-Cultural Provocation for Spiritual Formation." *Religious Education* 103 (4): 396–408.
- Jantzen, G. 1995. *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jennings, W. J. 2010. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Kaare, B., and K. Lundby. 2008. "Mediatized lives: Autobiography and Assumed Authenticity in Digital Storytelling." In *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self Representations in New Media*, edited by K. Lundby, 105–22. New York: Peter Lang.
- Loewen, J. 2013. *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*. New York: The New Press.
- Lopez, I. 2006. *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*. New York: New York University Press.
- Mazzarella, S., ed. 2005. *Girl Wide Web: Girls, the Internet and the Negotiation of Identity*. New York: Peter Lang.
- McQuiston, R. 2007. "Digital Disciples: Reconceptualizing Adolescent Confirmation Instruction by Combining Biblical Storytelling and Digital Media." D.Min. diss., United Theological Seminary.
- Mercer, J. 2008. *GirlTalk, GodTalk*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Moore, M., B. Lee, K. Turpin, R. Casas, L. Bridgers, and V. Miles. 2004. "Realities, Visions, and Promises of a Multi-cultural Future." *Religious Education* 99 (3): 287–315.
- Palmer, P. 1997. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- _____. 2003. *Trouble Don't Always Last: The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press.
- _____. 2006. *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class and Gender*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press.
- _____. 2014. *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rogers, F. 2011. *Finding God in the Graffiti*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.
- Rosenak, M. 1987. *Commandments and Concerns: Jewish Religious Education in Secular Society*. New York: The Jewish Publication Society.
- Ross, M. 2014. *Silence: A User's Guide*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Press.
- Smith, Y. 2004. *Reclaiming the Spirituals: New Possibilities for African American Christian Education*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.
- Stevenson, B. 2014. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. New York: Random House.
- Turpin, K. 2010. "Learning Toward Justice: Identity-Challenging Education." *Religious Education* 105(1): 20–24.
- Wallis, J. 2016. *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group.
- Wilkerson, I. 2010. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Wimberly, A. 1994. *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Zinn, H. 2015. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, Reissue.