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You Have to Find Your Voice: James H. Cone's Commitment to Theological Education

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ABSTRACT

This reflection is on the teaching philosophy of James H. Cone (1938-2018). It connects Cone's personal journey towards self-realization as a black theologian to his deeply held commitment to helping his students find and cultivate their own theological voice. The essay shares best practices from Cone's methods within the classroom. It also describes his passion for teaching and love of his students. This is one of several short [essays](#) presented by recent students at a public forum at Union Theological Seminary after his death in 2018.

KEYWORDS

James Cone, theological voice, black theology, pedagogy, theological education

James H. Cone's impact on theological scholarship cannot be overstated.¹ He is considered by many to be the most important theologian of the past fifty years. A foundational figure within liberation theology, Cone is respectfully regarded as the "Father of Black Theology." He argued that at the heart of the Christian faith is a message of liberation for black people and all of the world's oppressed. Over the course of his lifetime he published numerous books along with countless articles. Through his works he achieved international renown. Yet Cone was as equally committed to pedagogy as he was to producing texts. As Kelly Brown Douglas explains: "Cone's legacy goes beyond his writings, it extends to the opportunities it provided for others to find their own theological voice. He didn't want disciples. He wanted those who would bring new perspectives to understanding and doing God's work of justice in the world" (Union Theological Seminary 2019).

For six years, I had the privilege of working closely under Cone as his research and course assistant. I observed Cone's deep commitment to theological education firsthand. What follows are my reflections on what made him such an effective teacher and worthy of emulation.

At the heart of Cone's teaching was a desire to empower students to speak out of their own particular experience and to find what he called "their theological voice." This philosophy reflects Cone's personal journey towards self-discovery and vocational formation. It is therefore important to first consider his background and the social context that shaped him.

Cone was born in 1938 and grew up in Bearden, Arkansas. This was the segregated south of the 1940s and early 1950s. Black people were forced to attend segregated schools and churches. They had to watch movies from the theater balcony and enter

¹ This essay is dedicated to Victoria Furio, Dr. Cone's administrative assistant of eighteen years.

the homes of white people through the back door. Blacks could only drink from “colored” water fountains.² These Jim Crow laws were enforced by lynching. Between 1877-1950, in Arkansas alone, 503 blacks were lynched (Equal Justice Initiative 2015). The 1955 murder of Emmett Till in particular had a profound impact on Cone. Yet despite the horrors of white supremacy, Cone was undergirded by the love of his parents, Charlie and Lucy, the support of his local black community, and the faith he found at Macedonia A.M.E. Church. These were the sources of love that gave him the strength to press on with dignity and courageously face the injustices of the world.

Cone was also greatly influenced by the political currents of the 1960s. Both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements pushed him to find the nexus between his Christian faith and the black freedom struggle. He pondered how to use his seminary training and subsequent position as a professor to teach and write in a manner relevant to the lives of those suffering in the world and in need of a message of hope. He drew inspiration from those he would later affectionately refer to as his “Intellectual Trinity”—Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin.

In King, Cone found a model of Christian identity which reflected his own religious disposition. This expression of Christian faith was committed to justice and political transformation. From Malcolm X, Cone received his love of blackness. Cone described Malcolm X as culturally transformative in that he nurtured in black people a revitalizing sense of self-esteem and pride. As Cone explains: “Malcolm taught me how to make theology black and never again despise my African origin. Martin showed me how to make and keep theology Christian and never allow it to be used to support injustice. I was transformed from a *Negro* theologian to a black theologian” (1999, xxi). Baldwin wrote that “one writes out of one thing only—one’s own experience” (1998, 8). His works inspired Cone to not only become a great writer but one who wrote from a particular social location.

It was through the context of Cone’s own experience that he was able to acquire his theological voice and articulate a black theology of liberation. In turn, helping his students find their voice became the bedrock of his teaching philosophy. In practice, this was achieved through a variety of means. Cone valued the diversity of his students and intentionally created space for the multitude of their perspectives to enter into the classroom. Through written assignments and classroom discussion he encouraged his pupils to connect the topics of the class to their own experiences and social location, to make meaning for themselves and their communities of accountability. A constant refrain from students throughout the years was an appreciation for the emotionally cathartic and “safe space” Cone’s classes afforded them. For instance, his seminar on James Baldwin was especially popular and meaningful for students of color as well as those in the LGBTQ community.

But diversity is not a given. At times, it must be fought for. When Cone first arrived to teach at Union Theological Seminary, NY in 1969, the institution up to that point had never admitted a single black PhD student. Cone became instrumental in increasing black student matriculation into the school and its doctoral program. He also worked to recruit black faculty. Cone recognized the importance of representation long before it became a buzzword. And he toiled to help make it a reality.

Another way in which Cone elevated the voices of his students was through the structure of the class itself. For instance each of his seminar sessions would typically be divided into halves. Class would start with student presentations and then discussion. The second half began with Cone’s lecture for that day followed by further conversation. In a very real sense, this order helped democratize classroom dialogue. While Cone always facilitated the discussion, the topic of each lesson was initially framed and significantly shaped by the students’ own perspectives and wrestling with the assigned material. The result was increased student participation, buy-in, and personal stakes.

A key component of Cone’s teaching was providing the proper historical context in which to understand the subject matter, be it the chronological development of a discipline or the time period out of which a specific thinker wrote. To this end, in addition to Cone’s lectures, he would frequently use part of each class to play archival video and audio recordings. He would also invite special guest speakers to class. For example, a recurring presenter for his seminar on Reinhold Niebuhr was Niebuhr’s last teaching assistant and Niebuhrian scholar, Ronald H. Stone. In Cone’s course on James Baldwin, David Leeming, Baldwin’s former assistant and biographer would make frequent appearances. Cone was always thinking of dynamic ways in which to enrich classroom discussion and student learning.

Cone possessed an intense passion for teaching. I have never seen a professor as devoted to the craft. During the semester it was his number one priority. In the classroom he displayed an uncanny sense of enthusiasm and vitality which never waned, even while undergoing chemotherapy during what would become his final semester of teaching. This energy within

² Cone describes these experiences in his book *Risks of Faith* (1999, ix-xi).

the classroom was matched by his preparation outside of it. Cone was constantly revising and updating his lectures and tome-like syllabi—each a vast wealth of knowledge and accumulated wisdom. He never rested on his laurels but worked tirelessly to improve as an instructor.

This enthusiasm was rooted in a love of his students. Cone writes: “My teaching is defined by my love of all students. . . . Teaching is profoundly connected with love. Without love for one’s students, it is impossible to teach effectively” (2018, 110, 112). This is not to say that Cone was a pushover. On the contrary, he was a stern taskmaster. He worked hard and thus demanded a lot from his pupils. But this stemmed from the seriousness with which he took theological education. He believed in its value for society. His zeal also reflected the hope that he placed in his students to find their voice and become agents of positive social change in the world.

Cone was an effective teacher and worthy of emulation because he believed in the virtue of the discipline and of its transformative power. He inspires other educators through his example of hard work, commitment, and excellence. Teaching was his joy. His legacy will carry on in the countless students he loved and whose voices he helped set free.

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FORUM ON DR. JAMES CONE

Editor. 2020. “Introduction to the Forum on Dr. James H. Cone as Teacher and Mentor.” *The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* 1(2): 79–80. <https://doi.org/10.31046/wabashcenter.v1i2.1501>.

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