

Thriving (Not Just Surviving) for All: Re-envisioning Theological Education

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When many of us think about theological education, we think about what happens in our classrooms. We think about the programs and curriculum we develop to equip our students who are preparing for various forms of ministry, religious leadership, and so forth. We think about field education, internships, international immersion experiences, and lectureships. We think about papers, assessment, exams, and submission deadlines.

However,

If we are preparing our students to lead and serve communities of faith we must strive to be – for them – the types of communities we want them to lead, positively shape, and serve.

We must strive, every day, to be communities in which all of God's people – staff, faculty, and students – thrive.

We teach our students that God created all of humankind in God's image and all should be treated as the children of God they are. Yet, we treat some children of God better or differently than others. Students see this. We preach and sing about justice and mercy in worship, yet we do not always live into our justice commitments in our day-to-day communal lives. Students see this. Faculty are often accorded more privileges and respect because of their education and position. Students see this. Staff are often made to feel like cogs in the wheels of our institution who exist solely to make the institutions run effectively and efficiently. They may not get the recognition, pay, and benefits they deserve. Students see this. Students, staff, and faculty who do not fit the white, cisgender male mold that many theological institutions were originally developed to educate and support still face discrimination and roadblocks that prevent them from living into their full potential. Students see and experience this.

I have had the privilege of being part of the daily lives of four different theological institutions. I was a student at three and staff member at two on the West Coast. I began my work at Louisville Seminary fifteen years

ago and currently serve as academic dean. Each institution has mission statements that guide their educational commitments. Each one has tremendous strengths – written commitments, policies, and practices that attract faculty, staff, and students to study and work with them. Each one has its shortcomings – lived commitments, policies, practices, and aspects of their cultures that fall short of their written ones. Some of the shortcomings I have observed over the years include:

- Failure to attract, retain, promote, empower, and/or tenure faculty of color
- Failure to honor the diverse voices, worldviews, and experiences of students, staff, and faculty of color and LGBTQIA+ folks
- Failure to attract, retain, promote, and empower staff and faculty of color into every level of the administration
- Failure to discipline staff, faculty, and students who verbally harass, belittle, or demean others (i.e., women, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ people)
- Failure of faculty and administrators to adequately facilitate difficult conversations about race and LGBTQIA+ related concerns inside and outside of the classroom
- Failure to incorporate cultural traditions and academic scholarship of people of color and LGBTQIA+ folks into dominant culture of the institution and curriculum
- Failure to meet the academic/programming needs of students who work full-time
- Failure to expand and diversify the donor base to include people of color and LGBTQIA+ folk and their allies

Each of the institutions in which I have worked have admirable mission statements and policies. However, living into their mission statements and policies has been challenging. Each of them has failed to live fully into their own ambitious goals. At the core of each of these failures are people – administrators, staff, and faculty who come to their work with education, life experiences, world views, ideologies, and biases that shape their abilities and willingness to make meaningful change, while simultaneously preventing them from making the physical space and mental space for those who are different. Each of these institutions was originally founded to educate white, cisgender males for ministry. Though they have all welcomed women, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ folk to some extent, none of them have been able to fully overcome the oppressive structures of their original, dominant culture (with its many presumptions of white supremacy and patriarchy). For example, one institution schedules its courses for evenings and weekends to accommodate the work schedules of its predominantly African American student body. This is excellent. At the same time, they have failed to recruit, hire, retain, and tenure African American faculty in numbers representative of (or even close to) the numbers of African Americans in its student body. Yet another institution only regularly incorporates the worship traditions of African Americans during the month of February – Black History month. During the rest of the year, the worship ethos and tradition of the founding white denomination serves as the default worship tradition.

At another of the aforementioned institutions, when one white, tenured faculty member was charged with regularly verbally demeaning African American students in her classroom, the institution chose to give her an unscheduled paid sabbatical rather than confronting her misbehavior, demanding that she cease and desist belittling students, and holding her accountable thereafter. These and many other incidents reveal a disconnect between the written commitments and lived realities of these institutions.

All seminaries and divinity schools are theological communities which claim to have God at their center. As such, we need to live out the commitments we teach, sing, preach, and pray about. This is why being against racism is not enough. Being against gender discrimination is not enough. Being against sexism and ageism is not enough. Even being against all discrimination and injustice of any kind is not enough. We must be clear about what we are for. We must have an ultimate goal or vision that serves as guide for our educational efforts. What if our ultimate goal is thriving for all?

What is the difference between focusing on thriving – what we are for – rather than what we are against? Motivation. Focusing on what we are for motivates us to see the potential and possibilities of and for every person, group, and situation. When we focus on what we are against, we are constantly looking for what is wrong by using a hermeneutic of suspicion. We see the faults and shortcomings of people, cultures, and institutions rather than what is good, helpful, and positive.

Educator and activist Bettina L. Love offers us a way forward as we strive to actually live into our stated commitments by creating communities in which all people thrive. Love is an African American, openly lesbian woman who serves as the William F. Russell Professor at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York City. She was born and raised in Rochester, New York to parents who believed that education was the key to a bright and successful future. Her experiences in several school systems in New York and one in Atlanta, Georgia – as a student, educator, school board member, parent, and chair of a charter school – informs her writings. Though her critique of education is focused on public primary and secondary schools, many of her observations and recommendations are relevant to theological education. In her book, *We Want to Do More Than Just Survive*, Love contends that the goal of public school education should be the ultimate thriving of all who pass through its doors. Though she wills the thriving of all, she centers her definition of thriving in the well-being of black and brown people, which can be helpful for our work:

For dark folks, thriving cannot happen without a community that is deeply invested in racial uplift, human and worker's rights, affordable housing, and food and environmental justice, land rights, free or affordable healthcare, healing, joy, and cooperative economic strategies, and high political participation that is free of hetero-patriarchy, homophobia, Islamophobia, transphobia, sexism, ageism, the politics, of respectability. These structural ideologies police who is worthy of dignity in our communities.

Note that Love's definition of thriving incorporates both what people committed to the thriving should be for, and against. People should be for movements, policies, and benefits that provide opportunities for good and fulfilling lives. They should be against ideologies that impede movements, policies, and benefits that provide opportunities for good and fulfilling lives.

Love believes that when educational entities strive to be places where dark people can thrive, all can thrive. Every human who lives and moves and exists in the world does so within socially constructed intersections. People of African descent have been and continue to be victims of oppressions that converge at the intersections of race, gender, gender identity, class, ethnicity, age, religion, and so forth. It therefore follows that when attention is paid to the growth and development of people of color (whose identities converge upon all of these and other intersections), the well-being of all can be addressed.

In order for African Americans and other people of color to thrive, Love contends that they need a village who sees and protects their many unique gifts and potentialities. Her observation of the need for a village is informed by her personal experience of having her own village of support throughout her life, who identified and nurtured her intellectual potential, and valued and protected, encouraged, and supported her athleticism and development as a basketball player. For Love, every child needs to be surrounded by people who see their gifts and potentialities and do what they can to make sure they have opportunities to gain the knowledge and skills they need to reach their personal goals. Every staff and faculty member, student and administrator needs a village. The village must be composed of people at every level of the institution. Each person must be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to move the institutions forward. Love offers several concepts to help us reach our goal: closing the teacher education gap, identifying and addressing dangers of the educational survival complex, ending the tendency toward spirit murdering, and centering the need for mattering.

The Danger of Being an Educational Survival Complex

When I started this program,
I was told by other black students
to put my head down.
Do the work.
Don't make trouble.
Do what you need to do to earn the degree.
– Anonymous Master of Marriage and Family Therapy Student, Louisville Seminary

The words above were shared with me when I was serving as Associate Dean at Louisville Seminary several years ago. Reflecting on them now, while engaging the work of Bettina Love, I wonder for whom our institution has been or has become an educational survival complex? Love defines educational survival complexes as entities which uphold Whiteness while simultaneously offering one educational reform model after another that, in praxis, uphold the very discrimination they propose to address. Until and unless reforms actually dismantle, displace, and replace Whiteness with practices and policies that support the dignity and worth of all, people of color in particular are forced to find ways to survive their educational experiences rather than thrive within them.

We should ask ourselves questions such as, "Are new faculty and staff of my institution told or do they quickly perceive that the best strategy to adopt for their own well-being is 'survival mode?' Will they suffer repercussions and backlash if they dare to question current policies and practices? Should they just concentrate on doing the work they need to do and focus on building up their vitae or resumes until they can find a job in an environment where they can thrive? Are there students who enrolled because of our published commitments also doing what they need to do to survive? If they become disillusioned after experiencing differences between our written commitments and our lived reality, is survival mode the best coping strategy?"

By focusing on thriving, Love aspires to reimagine and revision educational systems as places in which people of color no longer have to focus on survival. She contends that survival skills are needed for children of color to endure the many iterations of character education that have been purchased by and integrated into public schools to address the belief that students of color and poor students "lack good character." While most people agree that children need good character, "character education" is actually anti-Black ideology that overlooks or undermines the actual history, culture, and values of African Americans and their communities. Love asserts that character education has replaced civics education in many public school systems. As a result, students no longer learn how democracy works and the ways in which citizens can engage with local, state, and federal government officials and processes to bring about change. Instead, students learn how to be compliant and to attest to their commitment to have "grit" or determination to overcome obstacles to succeed in life in spite of the obstacles that are put in their way.

What if ...
theological Institutions focus on thriving –
thriving for all of God's people,
thriving for students,
thriving for staff,
thriving for faculty,
thriving for administrators.
What if ...
we actually live into our widely publicized theological commitments –
not just inside of our curriculum,

not just in the scholarship of our faculty,
but
in our community worship,
in our hiring practices,
in our Board compositions
and decisions,
in our staff meetings,
in our classrooms,
in our pay and benefit packages,
in everything we do.

What if...?

Closing the Teacher Education Gap

When working to ensure the thriving of people of color, our seminaries and divinity schools will work diligently to identify and dismantle structural ideologies such as patriarchy, racism, white supremacy, and homophobia that impede and obstruct the development, application of gifts, and potentialities. Thriving communities not only dismantle and eradicate impediments, they also create opportunities for development of gifts and potentialities by providing the resources members of their communities need to learn, work, and grow. Love highlights the limitations of existing teacher education programs that do not equip teachers with the tools they need to work with diverse student populations. For example, she writes that the programs do not force teachers to be open and honest about race, racism, Whiteness, and their personal locations within the systems of privilege and oppression. Though many scholars preparing to teach in theological institutions receive some academic instruction on various ideologies, seminaries and divinity schools cannot take for granted that new hires have the tools, skills, and experiences they need facilitate difficult conversations about race and how to shape and change institutional culture to be more welcoming and inclusive of all.

Spirit Murdering

Love believes that institutions that force students to adopt a “survival” strategy are “spirit-murdering” institutions. By spirit murdering, Love is referring to institutional practices and policies that maintain white supremacy as the dominant ethos, even as they may publicly embrace inclusive policies and practices. For example, during a worship service at Louisville Seminary several years ago, a guest preacher, who happened to be African American, repeatedly referred to God using exclusively masculine language. We teach our students to use expansive language about God. Our belief is that the language we use for God can also influence human relationships in substantive and impactful ways. By referring to God with exclusively male language, we reinforce patriarchy and its many manifestations. During the sermon, a white, female faculty member was so upset by the preacher’s use of masculine language that she got up from her seat and stormed out of the sanctuary. Her actions were highly offensive to other worshippers. They were especially offensive to African Americans in general and to students who were members of the guest preacher’s congregation in particular. No apology was ever issued by the offending faculty member or by the institution. The incident itself and the lack of response by the institution was spirit-murdering for students who had been assured that our community affirms and embraces their worship traditions. Our commitment to inclusive language about God was, in actuality, exclusive. Our policy was intolerant of everyone who did not adhere to our practice. Our faculty member embodied our policy in a hateful and insulting way. But she did embody our policy. Since this incident, we teach our students to use “expansive” language for God that can include masculine language.

Mattering

Mattering to Love means being valued and supported in word and deed. Mattering is essential to human

existence. Everyone needs to know that their lives matter to someone. We all need to know that our thoughts, experiences, and worldviews are important to someone. To illustrate her point, she highlights the ways she mattered to people and communities throughout her life by their supporting her development, hopes, and dreams. Love mattered, first and foremost, to her parents who did not have college degrees but did everything they could, throughout her life, to make sure she received the education and opportunities she needed to get into the college of her choice. Her mother’s mantra was “give em hell,” which meant “never compromising my voice and my connection to how I mattered in the world.” Love and her parents never discussed the reality that she is a lesbian. Since her parents taught her to always be herself, her sexuality was accepted without the necessity of debate.

Love was taught by her first Black teacher in the fourth grade. Mrs. Johnson made Love and the other black students believe that their fates were tied into her own. Mrs. Johnson dared to be vulnerable with the children by sharing stories of her own life experiences when she was growing up in New Orleans that related to the life experiences of her students. Through her stories, Mrs. Johnson was able to foster a sense of solidarity with her students. Love emphasizes the importance and significance of having students by teachers who look like them and who can relate to their life experiences.

Love shared with her readers the knowledge and sense of community she experienced in FIST (Fighting Ignorance and Spending Truth). This local program was founded in Rochester by an African American single father who was a hip hop fan and a great basketball player, named Thabiti. Thabiti gathered kids in Love’s community together on Saturday mornings and some weekdays to teach them African American history. Through FIST, Love learned about Nelson Mandela, Angela Davis, the Black Panthers, and Black Liberation efforts in general. FIST taught her to be proud of being black and the importance of embracing a history of resistance. FIST politicized her at a young age by teaching her that social activism matters.

In addition to FIST, she found community and affirmation at the Boys and Girls Club and the Flint Street Recreation Center. In these centers, people nurtured the gifts and spirits of African American kids who each had unlimited potential to be the people God was calling each of them to be.

Love believes that when educational institutions work together to close the teacher education gap; identify and address the dangers of the educational survival complex; continually examine, critique, and modify practices and policies that lead to spirit murdering; and treats everyone as if they really matter, then and only then will there be widespread human thriving. If we spend our efforts, resources, and time facilitating the thriving of all, we may spend less time playing social justice whack-a-mole.

Social Justice Whack-A-Mole

Social justice whack-a-mole is an inefficient and ineffective way of handling issues and concerns as they arise rather than aspiring to realize an ultimate vision that can and must encompass all of God’s people.

The Black students are upset because

they discovered that some white students received benefits they were denied.

Faculty who identify as women are upset because

they discovered they earn less than faculty who identify as men.

Staff are upset because

they have not received cost of living raises in more than eight years.

The lone Mexican-American faculty-administrator is upset because

she was denied tenure

though other faculty-administrators who occupied her position in the past, and had her stellar qualifications, received it.

We force ourselves to employ social justice whack-a mole when we do not live into our publicly stated commitments. When our praxis differs from our written policies, members of our communities become disillusioned with our hypocrisy and failure. We know that none of us is perfect. As communities of fallible human beings, we often fall short of our aspirations. However, some of us fall short because we do not consciously recognize or acknowledge the ways our praxis is inconsistent with our policies or how our outdated policies fail to incorporate changes demanded by new cultural realities and lived experiences. At the same time, many of us fall short because though we have written down our policies and aspirations, we have not taken the time to envision what our communities should ultimately look and feel like when all of our policies are realized. What is our ultimate vision? By focusing on thriving for all, we create an image for which we can collectively strive.

The Cost of Being and Education Survival Complex

The cost of being an educational survival complex is high. Administrators, staff, and faculty who go into survival mode do not give us their best efforts. Many are just biding their time. Doing what they must to remain employed. We should want more for and from our employees. The strongest institutions are those that attract good people; give them the resources, authority, and space to do their jobs; listen to and value their voices, thoughts, and experiences; and hold them accountable for their work. Since humans are relational, we each function most effectively when we feel like we matter at work.

The institutional cost for students who go into survival mode is also high. Classroom interactions and every aspect of the learning process is strengthened by interactions between and among people with different worldviews and perspectives. We grow when we can hear and engage perspectives that are different than our own. When we fail to foster environments in which people can be who they are and feel free to do so, we short-change the learning experience for everyone.

In addition, students who adopt a survival mode do not recommend the institutions to their friends or ministry colleagues. In fact, they may do just the opposite. They are much more likely to advise people they know and respect against attending our institutions. And, as it relates to donations, forget about it. Students who go into survival mode will be the least likely of all of our students to donate in the future.

We should do our best to create an environment in which everyone in our communities can thrive because it is the right thing to do. But just in case that is not enough, remember that we pay a steep price when people choose to adopt a “survival mode.”

A Way Forward

In this essay, I have challenged seminaries and divinity schools to truly live into the policies and practices they already have in place with the goal of “thriving for all.” As a result, it is important to share a vision of what “thriving for all” actually looks and feels like:

- The board of trustees, administration, faculty, staff, and students reflect the diversity of God’s creation as it relates to gender, ethnicity, race, class, gender identity, and age. Proportions of representation of each group correspond with representations of the student populations of the institution, or wider society (whichever is more diverse).
- All personnel are paid a living wage. All employees are paid competitive wages and given cost of living increases as the resources of the institutions allow. Salary and wage of the lowest wage earners are increased when salaries and wages cannot be increased for all.
- Staff, faculty, and students uphold all of the policies and procedures of the institution that support

equity and inclusion. They work to change inequitable and unjust ones.

- Faculty are provided with tools and strategies to facilitate difficult conversations and conflict in the classroom (such as race, sexual orientation, etc.)
- The curriculum incorporates the work of scholars of many different races, ethnicities, genders, gender identities, denominations, and geographical locations.
- Staff and faculty are given the resources they need to develop, grow, and reach their professional goals as the resources of the institution allow.
- The culture of the institution incorporates diverse cultures and traditions to represent values of minoritized populations within the institution, denomination, or larger society through occasions such as worship, lectures, continuing education courses, and so forth.
- Everyone matters. All people are treated with dignity and respect. All voices and worldviews are valued.
- Faculty, staff, and students are held accountable for their actions. Grace extended to one is extended to all.

Re-envisioning our theological institutions as communities with “thriving for all” will be a major shift for many of us. However, as institutions founded to equip people for many different types of ministry, we need to be reminded that we ultimately answer to God for the work we do and the work environments we create. Our work environments should bear witness to the will of the God we serve. In our institutions, everyone should be treated with dignity and respect. Our teachers, as well as staff and administrators, should be educated and equipped with the knowledge, skills, and approaches they need to work effectively in and prepare people for ministry in a diverse world. In these institutions, everyone matters. No one should have to go into survival mode. No one’s spirit should ever be murdered. Let us work to ensure that all of God’s people thrive!

Notes & Bibliography

¹Bettina L. Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019), 65.

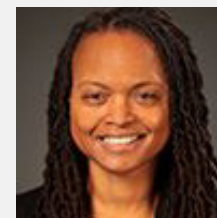
²Bettina L. Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, 70.

³Love, 69-70.

⁴Love, 69-70.

⁵Love, 44.

⁶Love, 42-68.



About the Author

Debra J. Mumford serves as Academic Dean at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and Frank H. Caldwell Professor of Homiletics.