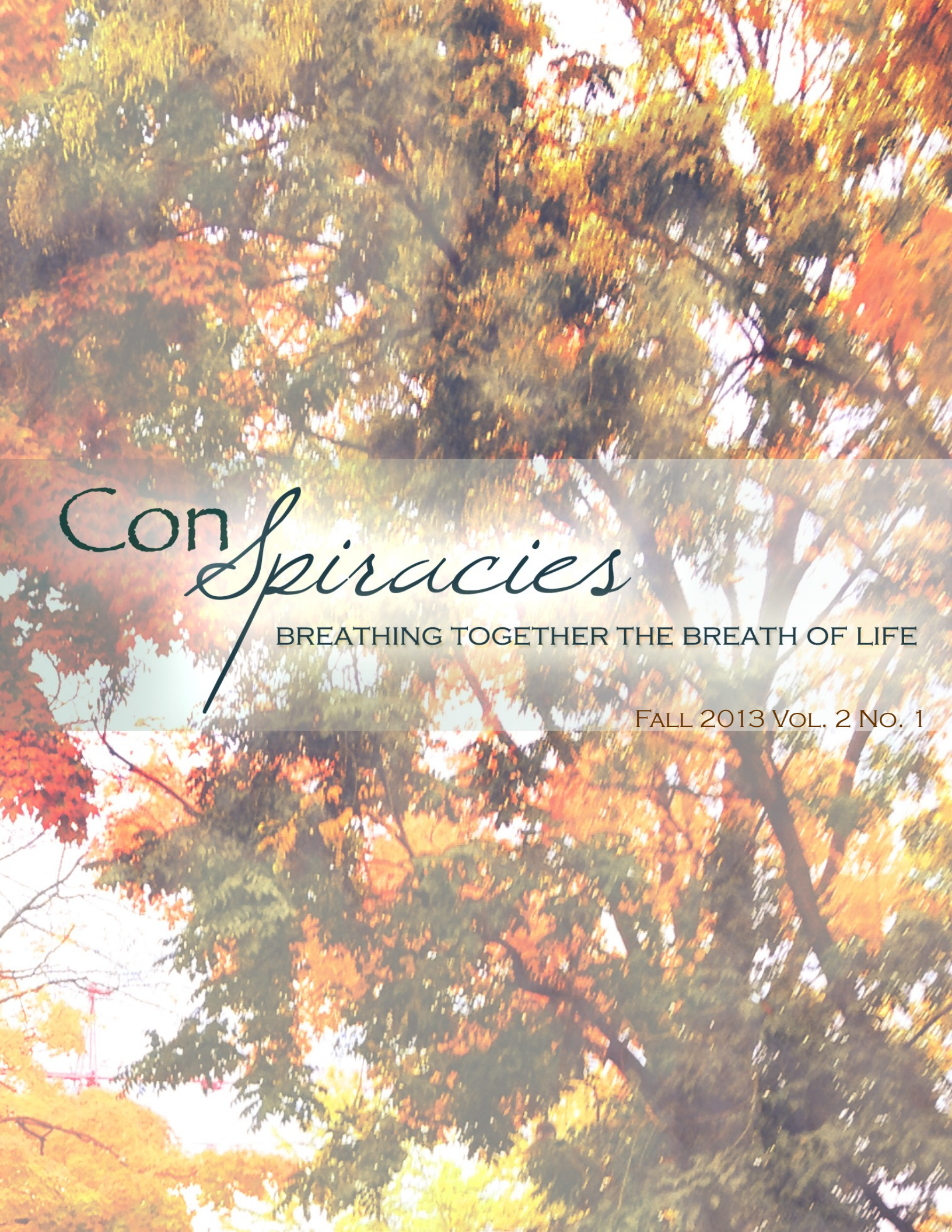




Con*Spiracies*

BREATHING TOGETHER THE BREATH OF LIFE

FALL 2013 VOL. 2 No. 1

Con*Spiracies*

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WILD IN OUR BREAST, MIRACLES AMID RUINS

KERRY A. MALONEY

DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

As the 2013-2014 academic year begins, we find ourselves immersed in deeply challenging and profoundly disturbing global events. Egypt is, at the moment, imploding; Syria continues to descend into ever deeper violence. U.S. drones circle the airspace over territories deemed to be enemy; and the enemy of racism at home appears to have been strengthened in recent months by both the Supreme Court and Florida's Seminole County Court. Unprecedented wildfires and drought are alternating with flooding rains across our country in a climatologic lament for and enactment of the devastation we have visited upon the planet; whole species disappear each day as do more and more segments of the polar ice caps and permafrost. In Cambridge and Boston, the summer following last April's bombings of the Boston Marathon has proven almost as deadly, with homicides and gun violence continuing to devastate entire communities. And despite the occasional optimistic reports to the contrary, the worldwide financial crisis lumbers on, rolling on with a depressing inexorability, leaving millions in utter deprivation.

Of course, the world has ever been in tumult and trouble; there is nothing really new under the sun. But the extent of our current chaos seems to have been matched in recent years by our declining ability (or our mounting refusal) to engage it proactively with vigorous civility, rigorous imagination and radical love. The persistence of the Congressional deadlock in Washington is but one of the many signs of this failure.

In times such as these, the study of religion and ministry may seem frivolous, even self-indulgent. Spending our days bending over difficult texts, laboring through complex translations, debating ideas, crafting

arguments, interrogating claims, and serving just ten hours each week in field education sites can seem a luxury when there is so much dire human and planetary need at hand. But it is our claim, and our experience, at HDS that there may be no more urgent tasks in these times—or any time—than to think complexly, to read closely, to argue carefully and to pray and meditate attentively. In a world riven by religious misunderstanding and misappropriation, teaching and learning in the field of religion may be one of the most necessary and constructive responsibilities before us. While of intrinsic value on their own, they also shape and inform the arduous work of right relation; indeed, the advancement of hope, justice and wisdom—all in apparent short supply of late—may well depend on them. Three “local” examples from recent weeks in the summer of 2013:

In the hours after the verdict acquitting George Zimmerman of the murder of Trayvon Martin, thousands of preachers and activists, like our own Willie Bodrick II, MDiv '14 (see page 11), took to pulpits and the public square to call out the racism that continues to corrode our nation and our souls.

On an early August day this summer in the war-ravaged country of Afghanistan, the [Afghan Mobile Mini Circus](#), founded by Zach Warren, MDiv '07, oversaw a children's juggling competition in Kabul. The Circus aims to restore joy to—as well as to develop leadership skills and genuine agency in—children whose youth has been shattered by constant violence. And even after the state legislature had recessed, Moral Mondays continued throughout the summer in Raleigh, North

Carolina. Every Monday, thousands of North Carolinians took to the streets of their capitol to witness for basic rights such as education and health care in the face of budget cuts to human services. [HDS's Rev. Jasmine Beach-Ferrara](#), Executive Director of the Campaign for Southern Equality based in Asheville, NC is one of the great religious leaders for social justice in that state and throughout the country.

As she inspected the chaos and violence around her, the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova refused the allure of despair. Among the ruins everywhere at hand, she discovered that “the miraculous comes so close.../something not known to anyone at all/but wild in our breast for centuries.” In this issue of *ConSpiracies*, we hear the witness of HDS students, faculty and staff to the wild miraculous in our own time.

*Everything is plundered, betrayed, sold,
Death's great black wing scrapes the air,
Misery gnaws to the bone.*

Why then do we not despair?

*By day, from the surrounding woods,
cherries blow summer into town;
at night the deep transparent skies
glitter with new galaxies.
And the miraculous comes so close to the ruined,
dirty houses—
something not known to anyone at all,
but wild in our breast for centuries.*

-Anna Akhmatova

A SERMON FOR ORIENTATION

KIMBERLEY C. PATTON

PROFESSOR OF THE COMPARATIVE AND HISTORICAL STUDY OF RELIGION



In this Fall issue of Con/Spiracies, we revisit a sermon delivered by Professor Kimberley Patton at HDS's weekly Wednesday Noon Service during Orientation on September 12, 2007.

Characteristically of Prof. Patton, her remarks were as timeless as they are sweeping. They are good words under which to begin any academic year.

With the greens of summer beginning to die, autumn is upon us. In the otherworldly, golden light seen only in September and October, and most astonishingly in New England, we prepare to begin again. For every scholar—that's each of you, by the way—who was once "only a student," the early fall, I imagine, still conjures that primordial back-to-school complex of excitement, nerves, and fresh notebooks. For us professors, I will share with you that it is all that *plus* a lot of seasonal anxiety dreams about teaching, vivid and unpleasant, some of them much worse than the basic one about having to lecture with no clothes on.

A few of the world's great religious traditions actually start their liturgical calendars in the fall, not in the spring: Eastern Christianity on September 1, Judaism on Rosh Hashanah, which begins this evening—the New Year, a time of apples and honey, of the shofar's call before the purification of Yom Kippur. With its colors of red, gold, and fire, fall seems to summon the energy of the phoenix—Dumbledore's beloved Fawkes, for example, who weeps on Harry Potter's basilisk wound and heals it; Fawkes who envelops his master in flames and saves him from the plots of the wonderfully-named Professor Umbridge. The phoenix is a noble bird, which Herodotus tells us the Egyptians

believed lives for 500 years, until it begins to deteriorate and the time comes to fly to Heliopolis. There the phoenix self-immolates in its funeral pyre of spices, burning itself to death. The pyre is also the nest out of which the same phoenix, now tiny and brand-new, is born. This is a threshold time when it feels as though anything is possible.

New beginnings are necessary for the human soul. We need, periodically, to re-make ourselves. This is how we avoid being dragged under the river of our own history with all its loves, losses and myriad memories: its powerful patterns of habit or perhaps of bad behavior, its midnight buffets of shame or nostalgia. For many of you entering Harvard Divinity School, this time might be an especially thrilling new beginning: a time to become part of the roster and life of a great university, to embark at last on the study of the interests dearest to your hearts, freed from college curricular requirements, to begin your vocation of ministry or of university teaching. For others, it is a chance to fulfill a life dream long-deferred and now realized at last, like finding the Hesperides, the garden of bliss at the far reaches of the world, where the great river of Okeanos flows in an endless circle.

But new beginnings like this one, the hour of the phoenix, also have a seductive quality, something beyond mere hope. There is an ecstasy that carries with it the deception that *this* time, with *this* new era, everything is going to be different—"when I paint my masterpiece," as Bob Dylan sang. Perhaps this time, we subconsciously think, everything *is* going to fall into place. Perhaps

this time there will be no obstacles and no disappointments, or at least, none that can truly impede us. Perhaps we will beat our wings in glory, make only wonderful new friends, write only brilliant, coherent term papers which we will finish in time to revise in multiple drafts. Right. *This* time we will impress our professors while staying true to our own visions, worship together in peace and mutual understanding, undertake meaningful assignments in area churches and mosques, minister to the suffering in area hospitals without stumbling once or suffering any injury ourselves. We will keep up our yoga and hip-hop and running, eat only organic foods, and always tell the truth. We will consistently speak out against racism and homophobia inside and outside the School. We will self-actualize at HDS, finishing the course to graduation in health and triumph, with our parents glowing and proud grandmothers dabbing their eyes.

This noontime, I want gently to remind us all, including myself, that this is not how life works. Ever. As my funny brother Geoffrey loves to say, "Every project has six stages. First, enthusiasm. Then, disillusionment. Then, panic. Followed by: Search for the guilty. Blame of the innocent. Finally, honor and praise for the non-participants." Ain't that the sad truth? The phoenix does not live forever in glory after its wonderful birth. Instead its cycle of vitality is followed by sad decline and smoky destruction. The Buddha knew this, and asked us to contend with the fact that all is in flux, that it is our caring desperately about things staying the same or "working out" that brings us so much pain. Islamic, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Christian teachings remind us that everything happens in God's time, often in ways that are

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PROFESSOR OF THE COMPARATIVE AND HISTORICAL STUDY OF RELIGION

unrecognizable to us as we strategize, set sail on our projects, and are rudely thrown back by the waves, wondering what on earth God is doing. “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord in Isaiah 64:5. Native American traditions testify that true healing powers are born only from the hardship of illness, the sorrow and starvation of widowhood, the loneliness of “crying for a vision” on the butte or on the ice floe. It is only then, *in extremis*, when one is stripped of power, that the Powers are sure to pay attention and grant their gifts.

Every new beginning, no matter how full of ecstatic promise, whether wedding, baptism, or first noontime service of the fall, is eventually tarnished by the complexity of real life. Seduction is always followed by betrayal. Real life must be lived in these perishable bodies we indwell, acted out by these byzantine personalities we all possess and do not even ourselves understand. Real life must be dealt with in this imperfect institution of which we are all now a part, as well as part of a greater world that is at best precarious and at worst downright dangerous. Soon enough our phoenix feathers will begin to droop and fall out. The golden light of the autumn will give way to the dull grey of November and the bitter darkness of winter.

Sooner or later this year, *something* will rise up in each of your lives and in my own to cause disillusionment, panic, frustration, or worse, despair. You may be let down or misunderstood. The professor you came to work with may turn out to be cold or difficult. You may get a grade the likes of which has never tainted your transcript before. The MDiv Review Committee may

not see things your way and you will have to take that semester in Hebrew Bible instead of the third course on the Upanishads you were hoping for; you may find yourself gnashing your teeth as you read about Leviathan and Armageddon instead of about Atman being Brahman. Your CPE assignment might be a nightmare. Your roommate may be unbearable. Your long-time relationship may disintegrate, and this, by the way, will definitely take place during exam period. The magnitude of the break-up will be in direct proportion to the amount of academic pressure you are under. Racism and homophobia at HDS may not be so easily eradicated as you had thought. You may decide you do not want to be a minister or get a PhD after all, to your family’s bewilderment. You may fall ill, or worse, someone you love may fall ill and tear you between pursuing your degree and love’s duty. God forbid, the one you expected would be there cheering at graduation may pass away, and you will come to your bright moment with a hole in your heart.

I say these things not to wreck the party but only to remind myself and you not to burden this new beginning with expectations it should not have to bear. It *is* true—I can promise you—that your time here at HDS will not unfold exactly as you expect or hope it will. The past may reassert itself or the unexpected may occur, and you will find yourself continually adjusting your course across the waters, unsure why this is being asked of you or why you came in the first place.

But I can also promise you that before you are done at HDS you will feel satisfaction and even wonder. You will encounter the in

-breaking of grace, as well as intellectual and spiritual experiences of depth. You will meet persons who themselves are revelations, maybe the very ones you had written off the first week or month as having nothing to offer you. I can promise you that you will look back on your years here and understand *how* you were being formed as a scholar or a minister or a human being—how strange angels were shaping you and forging your consciousness. What you thought was so important at the outset was, in the end, not at all why you were here. You will see that it was something else entirely, something so precious and integral you cannot imagine yourself without it. You will find that you were part of a purpose far greater than yourself, “a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one,” as George Bernard Shaw wrote.

To borrow a well-known Sufi image, I promise that one day you will contemplate the messy back of the carpet that was your time at Harvard Divinity School. You will notice all the threads that are knotted, frayed, disconnected or criss-crossing one another to pick up dropped colors. But you will also see that on the other side of the carpet, the side now visible only to the Great Spirit but that one day will be shown to you too, there was, all the time, an intricate, marvelous pattern being woven of your struggles, your *ennui*, your self-doubt, and your triumphs, a tapestry of rich color and symmetry. So I say to you, do not dread these messy threads in the rug; expect them to appear and see them without fear. On the other side, there is grace and purpose being woven out of *all* you will experience here, ongoing and quite unknown to you. The hidden design is your own, unique, salvation.

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Let me close with a poem by D. H.
Lawrence, who, it turns out, wrote much
more of note than *Lady Chatterly's Lover*,
although that was surely his most fun work.
This poem has been stalking me for some
months, popping up in unexpected places,
so perhaps through my reciting it now, it
will give me some peace. It is called *Song of
a Man Who Has Come Through*. This is what
each of you will be by the time you are
finished here, men and women who have
come through. And you will be splendid.

Not I, not I, but the wind that blows
through me!
A fine wind is blowing the new direction of
Time.
If only I let it bear me, carry me, if only it
carry me!
If only I am sensitive, subtle, oh, delicate, a
winged gift!
If only, most lovely of all, I yield myself and
am borrowed

By the fine, fine wind that takes its course
through the chaos of the world
Like a fine, an exquisite chisel, a wedge-
blade inserted;
If only I am keen and hard like the sheer tip
of a wedge
Driven by invisible blows,
The rock will split, we shall come at the
wonder, we shall find the Hesperides.

Oh, for the wonder that bubbles into my
soul,
I would be a good fountain, a good well-
head,
Would blur no whisper, spoil no expression.

What is the knocking?
What is the knocking at the door in the

night?
It is somebody wants to do us harm.
No, no, it is the three strange angels.
Admit them, admit them.



Credit: Steve Gilbert



Credit: Steve Gilbert

ON THE STREETS OF CAMBRIDGE

THE REV. TOM HATHAWAY

MDiv '11



Tom is the Executive Director of the [Outdoor Church of Cambridge](#), which serves our neighbors who live outside. Through the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, HDS maintains a lively relationship with the Outdoor Church, preparing and distributing Saturday meals. Our many campus religious and spiritual organizations raise the funds for the meals and staff the distribution.

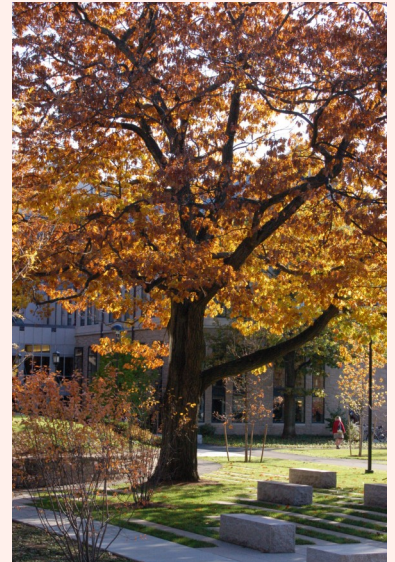
Earlier this spring, I accompanied a group of teenagers from an affluent suburb of Boston as they walked through Central Square in Cambridge. We were distributing sandwiches to the homeless men and women we met as part of the Outdoor Church's Saturday Evening Meal program. As we walked our usual route up and down Massachusetts Avenue, we came across an older African American gentleman sitting in the doorway of a

bank. We'll call him "Roger."

After offering Roger our usual wares—sandwiches, juice boxes, fresh fruit—we asked him how he was doing. With little hesitation, Roger shared with us a short account of his life before he ended up on the streets. He told us that his father was a Christian minister and that he himself was a person of deep faith, faith that buoyed his spirits even during hard times. He told us about his own children and how worried he was about his eldest daughter, from whom he had long been estranged. After listening to all that was troubling Roger's heart, we offered to pray with him and he gladly accepted. When we parted ways, he had tears in his eyes.

We, a group of teens and their chaperones walking around with an oversized cooler full of deli meat sandwiches, were not the most obvious people to bear witness to Roger's suffering. We did not know Roger, nor he us, before our paths crossed that day; however, our presence and willingness to listen that evening meant that Roger would not have to bear his pain alone.

I believe that the God who calls the church out onto the street is the God of Incarnation, the God who *con-descends* (literally, “comes down with”) to be radically beside us and decisively for us so that we don't have to bear our pain alone. The whole of the Outdoor Church's ministry is premised on this incarnational logic; the simple, loving, listening presence we were able to offer Roger that evening is the very heart of who we are and what we do.



Credit: Kristie Welsh



Credit: Steve Gilbert

BUDDHIST MEDITATION AND MINISTRY FORMATION

JOHN WINTER
MDiv '14



John is an MDiv candidate in Buddhist Ministry. In the 2012-13 academic year, he served his field education internship in the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life at HDS.

Buddhism is a colorful tradition with many practices—including, principally, the practice of meditation—that are meant to uncover basic genuineness, gentleness, and open-heartedness in an individual. In the beginning of the meditative journey, we learn to get acquainted with our own mind. We start to work with the chaos and confusion we would otherwise much prefer not to look at. We sit with our frustrations, our self-blame, our feelings of loneliness and everything else we would rather avoid. In time, we learn not only to accept these parts of ourselves, but we also begin to get curious and even to invite them further into our awareness. When we welcome back the feelings and emotions we have habitually avoided, we start to regain access to parts of ourselves that we hadn't even realized we had lost touch with, and we begin to gain confidence in all the different aspects of our experience, whether "good" or "bad." Everything becomes further fuel for our journey. We realize that trying to feel safe causes most of our problems. We can afford to relax and stop seeing the world as a threat.

What, then, does meditation have to do with ministry? How does this basic relaxation and appreciation of experience help others who are suffering? As the great meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche writes, "A great deal of chaos in the world occurs because people don't appreciate themselves. Having never developed sympathy or gentleness toward themselves, they cannot experience harmony or peace within themselves, and therefore, what they project to others is also inharmonious and confused." So from the Buddhist perspective, the first step in relieving suffering is to come to peace with ourselves so that we projecting our own conflicts onto other people and being a hassle for them. This might seem obvious, but our projections onto other—and the effects we have on them—can be very subtle, and we can unwittingly perpetuate aggression even while performing ostensibly helpful activities. According to the traditions of meditation, we must work on our own minds *first* before trying to help others because we can harm and confuse others when we ourselves are internally conflicted.

Finding internal harmony is not a matter of convincing ourselves that everything is okay. We truly have to be willing to sit and be *with* our own suffering until we no longer resist it. Actually being with our own pain softens us, opening our hearts and preparing us to work more directly with others. With this new sense of sympathy toward ourselves and our own pain and confusion, we can relate to others out of this same sympathy. We could be counselors or teachers, or we could just as easily be car mechanics, bar tenders, or hospital administrators. The actual job is not important because our involvement is not necessarily goal-oriented. Regardless of what we do in this world, we are able bring a sense of softness and sympathy to our responsibilities and to the people with whom we work.

Of course, every situation brings further challenges. We find ourselves getting annoyed with people or frustrated with the interpersonal and institutional dynamics at work. We constantly want to shut down or resist the emotions that our daily situations provoke in us. Whatever it is—from an angry co-worker or judgmental boss to the latest news of social injustice—we are constantly challenged to feel our emotions *fully* without dismissing them and without drawing unwarranted conclusions.

Just as being with our own pain during meditation is a path toward further openness, so too is being with pain in the world as it surprises us in its myriad forms. From a Buddhist perspective, this is where the conceptual mind can prove unhelpful. Usually we shield ourselves by drawing conclusions about the person or situation we are encountering before we have a chance to feel the pain that actually exists in that moment; but when we work on softening and opening ourselves and on letting other people express themselves without our own projections—to be completely who they are—we realize that they're actually giving us an opportunity to be completely who *we* are because those people are reflecting something in *us*. By working in this way over time, our capacity to truly *be* with others strengthens, our defenses soften, and our own sense of authenticity, humor, and joy begin to emerge.

BUDDHIST MEDITATION AND MINISTRY FORMATION

JOHN WINTER
MDiv '14

In this sense, Buddhist ministry formation is less concerned with learning the forms of a particular vocation than it is with embarking on the journey of personal transformation that leads us naturally to bringing benefit to other beings, regardless of where one finds oneself in the social world. In my own case, my field education in the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life at HDS is giving me an opportunity to discover the ways in which I hold back from others or impose my own agenda on them. My job is about supporting the religious and spiritual life of the student body, not as a “helper” who is ready to advance what I think the community needs; rather, my work in this placement is a formative template for the ministry I will pursue beyond HDS. I am practicing here the art of being open to the pulse of a community, of learning from it, and of responding with compassion in authenticity and freedom.

1 Trungpa, Chögyam. *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*. Boston, Shambhala Press: 1984: p. 35



Credit: Jonathan Beasley

THE Q WORD

HARRY L. HUFF
MDiv '14



Harry Huff, Director of Music and Lecturer in Ministry Studies at HDS, delivered these remarks at one of HDS's weekly Wednesday Noon Services,

this one hosted by HDS's student organization Queer Rites, a group devoted to LGBTQ rights and to the exploration of gender and sexuality in religious and spiritual life.

What's in a name? Does a rose by another name really smell just as sweet? Words . Words are so important. Words have the power to build up and the power to break down. Words have the power to heal. And they have the power to destroy.

I was aware of word—and labels—at a very early age. Growing up in the Cold War rural South of the 1950's I heard every word imaginable to label people who were different in any way. I heard the "P" word for the Irish, the "W" word for Italians, the "F" word for the French, the "K" word for the Germans, a different "K" word for the Jews, the "C" word for the Chinese, the "G" word for the Vietnamese, and of course, the most incendiary of all, the "N" word, although there were plenty of other nasty, derisive labels for people of African descent. I would add to this list of alphabet epithets one that you might find amusing and hard to believe, that being the "Y" word for anyone born north of the Mason-Dixon Line. In the small backwards town in which I grew up, no one seemed to have informed the inhabitants that the Civil War had actually ended a hundred years earlier, and that "Y" word was spit out with as much venom as the "N" word!

So that brings me to the "Q" word. I have

always found it derogatory and offensive, so I choose not to say it aloud. And no matter how many times I could force myself to say it—just as an exercise in exorcism of its bad connotations—and no matter how many times I hear it used, embraced and presented as the currently appropriate umbrella term for all sexual minorities, I will never feel that it has been cleansed of its negative connotations. When I hear it, I shrivel inside. However, for the purpose of this brief reflection, I will say it: QUEER. *Queer* was the term used in hushed disapproving tones by "good Christian church people," and *queer* was the term used in the screaming, singsong taunts in the schoolyard during recess.

When I was a budding young pianist, at age 13 I was sent to the University of Tennessee to study with a master teacher who was to prepare me for the concert stage. *Queer* was the term my mother used when, after hearing the rumor that the teacher "kept" a young boy, she yanked me out of lessons with him.

When I was 16, I would hear some of the jock guys at the high school telling of their favorite pastime: driving down to the big city of Knoxville on Friday nights to the adult theater, where they would "roll queers," that is, lure men into the bathroom with promises of sexual favors, only to beat them up and rob them.

Queer was the term throughout my adolescence used to describe my much older cousin, a brilliant pianist and organist himself, who definitely danced to the beat of a different drummer. He would wear to school see-through bell-bottoms with matching bikini briefs...in the 1950s, mind

you! He had a poodle and painted the dog's toenails red. When the poodle died, he had a Requiem Mass said for it. Now, you might be thinking, "How fabulous is that?" It wasn't fabulous. He was queer. And I'm going to slip into conjecture and say that I suspect that "queer" was the term flung at him when, much later in life, his throat was slit and he was left to die in a dumpster.

I had an uncle whom I never got to know, but he was talked about with great love and sadness by my mother and all her sisters. They referred to him as "little Bud" and it didn't take much imagination for me, even as a child, to gather that he was a "sensitive" type. My mother never forgave her older brother who, determined to "butch him up," forced him to enlist in the Army at age 18. He was killed in 1942 in WWII in what the Army reported as "friendly fire." In truth, he was shot by a fellow soldier in a bar in India, and once again I will conjecture that the word "queer" helped speed that bullet into his heart. *Queer* was the term used when a certain female gynecologist was literally run out on a rail from our small town. My mother's gentle but telling response was, "Well, those people need to live in the larger cities."

Well, *this* "people" indeed moved to a larger city immediately after graduate school. Actually it wasn't necessarily my plan, but God planted me in New York City to launch my career. Within the first few weeks of landing there, I began to collect a family of mostly Southerners, mostly gay men and straight women—all of whom "needed to live in larger cities." We became a true family, much deeper and stronger than any single one of us had ever had with

THE Q WORD

HARRY L. HUFF
MDiv '14

our own blood kin. We rejoiced in each other's triumphs; we wept for each other's losses; we shouldered each other. We did not move to a "larger city" to hear the word *queer*.

Those were heady days in the late 1970's in NYC, a full decade after the events in a small bar in Greenwich Village rocked the world. That "one small step" by men at the Stonewall Inn was the "giant leap for mankind" that fueled a global revolution. By the time I arrived in town, sexual liberation was the byword, for both gay and straight people. The most important political action of the day was to have sex with as many partners as one could, sometimes several encounters in one evening. I equate it to the waning days of Weimar Berlin, a window in time of absolute abandon, a true Bohemian era. None of us had any money. Much of the time we didn't have heat. Some of us lived in cold-water flats. We would order Chinese food on Sunday night, then eat on it the whole rest of the week. But there was art, real salons every night of the week. In loft, music being composed that very day and performed that night. Painting, poetry, dance, stilt dance. Classical drama performed on a high level in drag. But just as Berlin in the late 1920's was careening towards the very precipice of "fabulous" excess before the hell of Nazism caused it all to come crashing down, we were careening towards *Gottterdammerung*, "The

"The Twilight of the Gods." Demon AIDS reared its ugly head, ruthlessly invaded my family, and erased from the earth virtually every gay male friend I knew, each of them a brilliant young artist, leaving our straight female friends "widows," and leaving me to wonder how and why I was spared. Thirty

years later, I'm still asking myself that question.

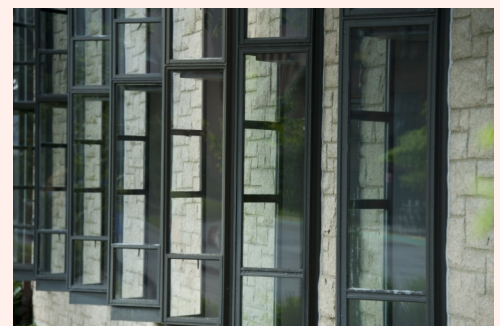
I paint this scene for you simply to say that in those days, I never heard the word *queer* on the lips of those dying men, never heard the word *queer* on the lips of those bereft widows.

I am a homosexual man. I've lived a very fortunate life because, despite a miserable childhood of taunts, I have never during my adult life experienced discrimination for who I am. But then again, I moved to one of the "larger cities." I am a homosexual man. I've never once been ashamed of it, never been especially proud of it. It is neither a mark of shame, nor a badge of courage. It's simply who I am, no more important than the fact that I have brown eyes, am left-handed and have virtually no hair on my head. It's who I am, but it's only one part of my complete mosaic. I've never minded the term *gay*, which has always had a light, if somewhat, frivolous connotation. I'm only a bit sorry that, since the term for decades now in this country universally refers to someone who is homosexual, it has lost the lovely—once again "fabulous"—usage it for so long enjoyed to describe having a good time. And it was a common adjective bantered about in the witty repartee of countless 1930's drawing-room comedy movies that gay men just adore. But I fear that now that "The Academy" has conscripted the term *queer* as the appropriate label for discussing all aspects of sexual minorities, the terms *gay* and *lesbian* will soon be relegated to the outmoded, un-PC box that has befallen the term *colored people*, even though arguably the most enduring engine of continued progress through the decades in civil rights has been the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People.

I in no way have any intention of passing judgment or condemnation on anyone who embraces the "Q word" as a symbol of liberation. I get it. I'm a Christian. We proudly bear the Cross as our symbol. I suppose if Jesus had suffered a different form of execution, we would be proud bearers of the Electric Chair, or the Rifle, or the Noose. We turn the instrument of torture into a symbol of victory. I get it. I just hope that anyone who proudly co-opts this word acknowledges the full implications of its power to both heal and to destroy and carries in their hearts the full, deep, visceral, bittersweet history of it.

My even bigger hope, my even bigger dream, my even bigger prayer is for a brighter day when labels are totally unnecessary. No need for the terms *gay*, *straight*, *lesbian*, *queer*, *Asian-American*, *African-American*, and even no need for the term *American*; or, to quote the Apostle Paul from his letter to the Galatians: "neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female"—just one big beautiful melting pot of human beings, each and every one of us unique, none of us able to be confined to a box.



Credit: Tony Rinaldi

TRAYVON MARTIN, GEORGE ZIMMERMAN AND US

WILLIE BODRICK II
MDiv '14



On July 14, 2013, the morning after George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder of Trayvon Martin, Willie Bodrick II, MDiv '14 was scheduled to preach at the Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury, MA. Twelfth Baptist had served as his field education site; now he serves the youth of the congregation as a part-time staff member. In solidarity with black and brown men throughout the country, Willie preached on that punishingly hot Sunday dressed in a hoodie. The next morning, the Boston Globe ran a photo of him in the pulpit above the caption, "This hoodie today is my robe because I am that little black boy." Later that day, WBUR, the Boston NPR affiliate, featured an interview with Willie about the controversial verdict in Florida. You can [listen](#) to that interview.

Founder of a nonprofit organization that mentors young men of color, Willie's commitment to the welfare of black and brown men is deeply rooted in his Christian faith. In April 2013, that commitment and the theology undergirding it were on vivid display at HDS when Willie was one of four finalists in the annual Billings Preaching competition. His sermon that day, "So They May Live," was based on Ezekiel 37:1-9, a text of the Hebrew Bible. You can [watch](#) Willie preach the paint off the walls of Andover Chapel. Here's an excerpt from his message that day:

As I stand before you today, I submit that if our world is ever to change, then our theological scopes must be able to foresee *life* where others see death. Our perspectives must be able to see *something* even when the naked eye sees nothing. Our theologies must force us to live in the realm of a God who is still able to do the *impossible* although the light of possibility may seem dim. And as I live in this country as black male and I see the plight of black and brown male bodies across this land, I hear the voice of God screaming into this 21st century, asking us, "Can these bones live?" Can the bones caused by mass incarceration live? Can the bones caused by socioeconomic and educational inequality live? Can the bones caused by racism, sexism, and homophobia live? Can the bones caused by drugs and gang violence live? Can the bones caused by fear of black and brown male bodies live? And, my brothers, and sisters I'm asking you as we stand together in the Valley of the Impossible, "Can these dry bones live?"



Credit: The Boston Globe

ADVENTURES IN RITUAL CUISINE: PERSIAN CHAROSET

LEIGH ANN HILDEBRAND, MTS '13
MDiv '14

Leigh Ann made this charoset for the Jewish Student Association's HDS Community Seder in the Braun Room on the final night of Passover, April 1, 2013, 22 Nissan 5773.

The first time I made *charoset*, it was part of an undergraduate take-home final exam. I was taking "Jewish Mysticism and Folklore" at San Jose State University, with Professor Mira Amiras, one of my mentors there. As part of the final exam, students brought a food or other hand-made project that represented something they had learned in the class. I had classmates who made clay tablets inscribed with symbols, cookies shaped like Hebrew letters, and illuminated manuscripts. My contribution was a Persian *charoset*—also called *ballaq*—with 22 ingredients, one for each of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

I chose this Persian version of a food that is a traditional part of the Jewish Pesach meal for several reasons. First, I wanted to highlight the rich culture and history of Persian Jews. Estimates are that between 300,000 and 350,000 Jews of Persian descent live around the world, with less than 9,000 still in Iran. A number of Jewish food traditions may have started with Persian influences. This recipe's Persian elements are the inclusion of dates, pomegranate seeds, several kinds of nuts, and a wide range of spices, including saffron.

Second, Persian *charoset* recipes often use a set number of ingredients corresponding to a number of special historical or mystical significance; for example, some versions use 40 ingredients, to commemorate the 40 years the Israelites wandered in the desert. I chose to include 22 ingredients to remind us of the 22 letters of the alphabet, which are distinct and, yet, combine to give us the full "flavor" of Jewish mystical thought.

Third, I chose the recipe because *charoset* has many associated *midrashim* (narrative explanations) that I wanted to highlight; for example, *charoset's* presence on the Seder table is often explained by saying that it represents the mortar used by the Hebrew captives in Egypt to build for their captors. Another *midrash* is that it represents the fruit and nut trees where Israelite women waited for their husbands during the times that the Egyptians prevented them from being intimate with each other. Another is that the apples frequently used are a reminder of the apple orchards that women hid in to have their children, so the babies would be spared and not killed by Pharaoh's soldiers. Because of this, *charoset* is closely linked in some *midrashim* to the nurturing and care that women give, which can make bad situations a little better. Finally, the sweetness of charoset can remind people that there were joyous moments even in Egypt, in part because the closeness of the people—like the comingling of ingredients—helped make some moments less bitter.

One of the *midrashim* about *charoset* is that the Song of Songs is a recipe—a recipe for *charoset*. The food, then, is the physical, edible embodiment of love and passion, a divinely inspired recipe from a divine source. Relevant verses include:
Feed me with apples and with raisin-cakes;

Your kisses are sweeter than wine;
The scent of your breath is like apricots;
Your cheeks are a bed of spices;
The fig tree has ripened;
Then I went down to the walnut grove.

Thus, the sacred text can be interpreted in many ways and on many levels. This *midrash* says that one of those levels is as a cookbook, so I have embodied the results as a reminder that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet can become so completely embodied in the world in which we can taste them. And they taste sweet!

ADVENTURES IN RITUAL CUISINE: PERSIAN CHAROSET

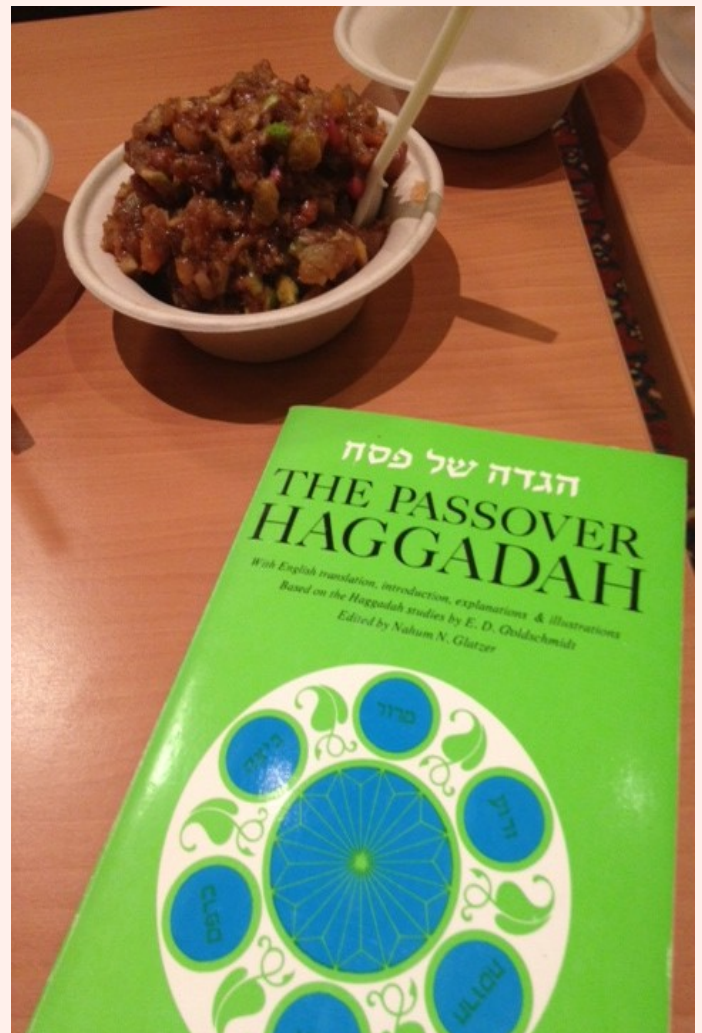
LEIGH ANN HILDEBRAND, MTS '13
MDiv '14

Persian Charoset

22 Ingredients:

Seeds from 1 pomegranate
1 quince, grated (I frequently use a good-sized chunk of quince paste, which can be found in the cheese department of nice grocers)
4 kumquats, chopped
1/2 pear, grated
1/2 apple, grated
1/2 cup red or green seedless grapes
1/4 cup unsalted pistachio nuts
1/4 cup coarsely chopped walnuts
1/4 cup coarsely chopped pecans
1/4 cup chopped blanched almonds
1 cup pitted Medjool dates
1/4 cup dried apricots
1/4 cup dried figs
1/4 cup golden raisins
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ground cloves
1 big pinch saffron threads
1/2 cup sweet wine
Freshly ground black pepper
1/4 teaspoon ground allspice
1/4 teaspoon cardamom
1/4 cup honey

Grind/chop/mix all together, then let sit at least a day so the flavors can come together. To make a 40 ingredient version, use this same template, but add multiple varieties of some items. For example, 2-3 kinds of dates (Medjool, Daglet Noor), 4-5 kinds of pears and apples, red *and* green grapes, seeds and pomegranate juice. I have a rainbow pepper blend I use that count as four ingredients because it contains black, white, pink, and green peppercorns.



A PRAYER FOR COMMENCEMENT

STEPHANIE A. PAULSELL

HOUGHTON PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY STUDIES



Source and sustainer and cherisher of all,
God all compassionate, all merciful, all wise:

We give thanks for these candidates
and the devotion that brought them to this day:
their devotion to the cell beneath the microscope's lens;
to the grammar of a new language;
to the poem whose mysteries deepen upon each reading;
to the mathematical problem that, after long struggle,
flowers into a solution.

We pray that their lives, and ours, will always be marked
by the passionate attention to what is other than ourselves,
the devotion that keeps us up late and wakes us up early.

We ask your blessing upon the families and friends
whose support made this day possible.
And we ask you to bless those whose names we do not know,
but on whose behalf these candidates have labored:
the student whose world will be opened
by the new teacher who graduates today;
the struggling parishioner
who will be accompanied by the new minister;
the community that will be joined by the new organizer;
the patient who will benefit from the work of the researcher.
We pray, O God, that the hours invested in libraries and labs
will bear fruit among our neighbors near and far.

Inspire these graduates, O God, to hold fast to what is good,
to render no one evil for evil,
to seek your justice,
and to show your mercy.

We pray for courage for them when the way is hard
and for humility when fortune favors them.
May the joy of this day give them confidence
and strengthen their desire to serve.

In all of your beautiful names we pray. Amen



Credit: Steve Gilbert



Credit: Steve Gilbert



Credit: Steve Gilbert

REFLECTIONS ON THE BOSTON MARATHON BOMBING

DAVE WOESSNER
MDiv '13



Dave was a finalist in the election for the May 2013 HDS Student Commencement Speaker. In his remarks, he reflected on the terrorist bombings of the Boston Marathon which had occurred just weeks before graduation. Dave is a teacher in the Samatha tradition of Buddhism and is currently preparing for ordination in the Episcopal Church.

Today, we mark the end of much hard work and discernment. First we take a moment to reflect upon where we've come from, and then we take the next few steps together toward the many divergent and unique paths ahead. I have nothing elaborate to say on these matters, but instead, I invite you to simply dwell on these two movements: standing still and moving forward. Today is a unique day in which these two movements are inextricably bound together. As we feel called to move on to our life's work, to get on to the next project, we take a day for pomp and circumstance, the deliberate slowing of our frantic strides toward the future, a consideration of our time at Harvard Divinity School. We pause. We savor. We might even revel. And in these moments, we see the overlapping motions of vocation. Whether your post-graduation plans are to become a minister, a scholar, an artist, to work for social change, or just to wander a bit, each of us is called to decide. Is this a moment to hold still or a moment to press forward? As people called to a life of service, these are the options. There is no turning back. I know that many of you will agree that your time at HDS has taught you this lesson.

These two movements have been demonstrated vividly in recent weeks. In the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings, much praise was offered, from both President Obama and witnesses on Boylston Street, to those brave women and men who ran toward the blasts into harm's way, pressing forward, heading into the unknown with nothing but their pulses pounding in their ears and the desperate urge to help. Thank God for those people who were first responders, both professionals and volunteers. Without them there would have been much more loss of life and limb than there was.

Part of our evolutionary success as *homo sapiens* has relied on our ability to track motion and determine whether we should move too. Our eyes and hearts move toward those in motion; it is a built-in mechanic of who and what we are. Thus, it is all too easy to overlook those who responded to the bombings by wisely standing still, holding their ground, and helping those immediately around them. I am personally grateful to the group of people who held their ground around my friend Bill Bradford (MDiv '13). Bill uses a wheelchair, and as the throngs ran for safety, he found himself buffeted and stampeded. Fortunately, some kind and wise people paused, saw the situation and formed a wall around him to protect him. If they hadn't taken that moment to see the situation rightly, Bill could have been another victim of the bombing. Thank God for those people who did not press forward, but who held in place.

In the days after the bombing, many found other ways to move forward. The One Fund Boston was created, blood drives were launched, and advocates for social justice began to look beyond the marathon tragedy. They called our attention to the other senseless, violent tragedies that unfold every day in Boston but receive little or no attention because they are gun crimes in parts of the city where many privileged people refuse to turn their attention. In their running forward, these justice-focused prophets brought hearts, minds and bodies to Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury to join in solidarity with those communities confronting the violence that has become so typical that it doesn't even make the headlines anymore. There are many ways to move forward.

Yet another group of people held in place, praying in the aftermath, walking through Boston's Back Bay when all of the trains were shut down. In the day immediately after the marathon, vigils and services abounded, providing spaces of reflection, silence, stillness, and peace. By taking that moment, by not rushing forward, many people sought to find a solution within, a solace and comfort in the eyes and embraces of their neighbors, a quiet place from which to pick up the pieces. Still others brought their scholarly craft to the service of the community, our own Dean Hempton among them, offering historical, cultural, and religious context for these senseless acts. They created much needed viewpoints from which we might try to make sense of what happened and determine how best to respond. These reflective moments, though lacking the instantaneous drive to move forward, were just as essential to helping and healing.

REFLECTIONS ON THE BOSTON MARATHON BOMBING

DAVE WOESSNER
MDiv '13

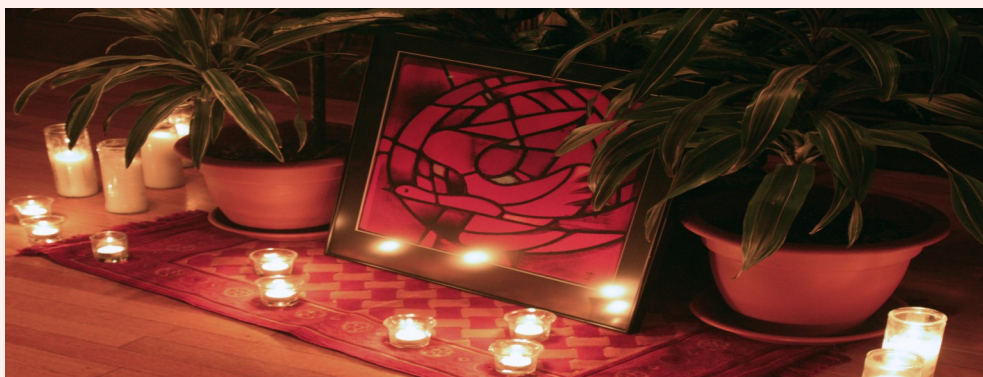
In my own reflection on the marathon bombings and the subsequent chaos of the following week, I found my mind returning to the events of September 11, 2001. I suppose I am not alone in this. My thoughts soon turned toward the events of September 12th. In September of 2001, I was a senior in college, beginning my final year. By the evening of the 12th, I had decided that I'd had enough of watching Manhattan from afar and rambling around campus having hazy, sad conversations.

I began to pack up my car. The plan was simple: drive as close as I could to Lower Manhattan, leave my car, carry the supplies I'd brought, and help in some way, sleeping in a church at night if I could find space. It was a moment of clarity. I'd heard the call to move forward, and I was barreling. As I plotted my route and thought of last-minute items to take, a report came on the news: Lower Manhattan was flooded with out-of-town folks who'd come to help but most of whom were just getting in the way.

This was shocking to me. It had never occurred to me that there was another option, besides sulking and feeling despondent. I was forced to stay put, forced to reflect, forced to face the recovery in the lives of my friends and neighbors rather than among the wreckage of the World Trade Center. In the weeks ahead, I decided that reflection would determine the scope of my life. I would spend my working years studying and teaching ethics and the importance of relationships in moral formation. I chose to stay put, to hold my ground, and to provide the safe space in which others could collect themselves and grow.

But life, it turns out, is not that simple. We do not choose once. Rather, life is a series of alternating calls reflecting and acting. These choices play out on multiple scales, daily, seasonally, and across decades. It is hard to discern which movement is right. From the vantage point of stillness, rushing forward can seem brash and dangerously uninformed. From the vantage point of pressing onward, remaining still can seem lazy, overly cautious, and disengaged. But these are illusions. Both modes are necessary for our lives and, when discerned well, the clarity of which is needed will appear.

In my own life, I sensed a call to move forward again, to press on toward the need, toward the chaos. I came to Harvard Divinity School to prepare for that. And I am prepared, as I know all of you are. We are equally prepared to move forward and to hold our ground. We are prepared in ways we cannot even fathom on this day. We have been formed in a crucible together, stretched and molded by our faculty's guidance, our ministerial mentors, our studies, and one another. We carry with us pieces of each other, in friendship, professional support, and solidarity, bridging our vast differences or religion, gender, race, nationality, sexuality, and political persuasion. We are bonded, and we have been shaped for purposes beyond our wildest dreams. We are proven, honed, and ready to serve. That is why I believe the only question that lies before us on this day is whether we are called to run forward or to hold fast, to face the world brazenly or to keep still in calm reflection. Once we truly know the answer to that question, everything else will follow. I wish you the best in that ongoing discernment, my friends. May you carry calm if you rush onward, and may you be invigorated if you pause in stillness. This is our choice. Whichever we choose, let us serve each and every person with love, pursue peace in all our endeavors, and continue to listen for our vocations.



Credit: Kristie Welsh

WRITING THEOLOGY

MAYRA RIVERA RIVERA

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY AND LATINA/O STUDIES



In March 2013, Professor Rivera made this presentation in the series "In Conversation." Sponsored by the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life at HDS, this series features HDS faculty members exploring their

intellectual and spiritual autobiographies with attention to the ways in which they have intersected, cohered, collided and deepened over the course of their careers. From these presentations and the ensuing conversations between the speakers and those in attendance, we aim to identify some of the key intellectual, spiritual and physical practices we all might develop to keep us supple and responsive to the urgent moral demands of this world and to the pressing responsibilities of professional and personal life.

When I decided to study theology fulltime—after working as an engineer—my father got upset. He did not tell me much about it, but apparently he told his brother. So when I see my uncle, he smiles at me mischievously, puts his arm around my shoulder, and tells me, "I hear your old man is not happy with you these days." "He surely isn't," I respond. And my uncle says, "Well, tell him it is not your fault. It is a spirit that haunts you." Hardly reassuring, right?

But I am beginning to understand what he was saying. So let me share with you the story of those spirits before I turn to the motivations and practices that guide my work at this point.

My paternal grandfather was a pastor of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, who started his ministry as a translator for the US Protestant missionaries who were in Puerto Rico as part of the colonial project. I did not know him well, but I know he was a stern,

intellectually gifted man who invented and produced chemical products when those products were not available in Puerto Rico because of the Depression.

My father grew up in a strict evangelical household and was himself active in church until his youth. Then he stopped going to church. But he remained deeply committed to ethical principles. He assumes those principles are biblical, but they are shaped by a mix of American Protestant ethics and ideas from the US civilizing mission. All his brothers followed this path—from evangelical youth to secular lives where Christian ethical principles remained central. To this day, my father speaks of my grandfather's faith with the utmost respect and admiration.

My love for theology was nourished by my mother's. She was born Catholic and converted to Seventh Day Adventist when I was very young. I grew up in that church and was schooled in Bible from an early age. But my mother joined a reformation movement in church. They were reading Luther, Calvin, and others. I read them with my mother and found them interesting and moving. And this got us all expelled from church. But that was not the end of theology for me because, for my mother, theology was about everything in the world. It was not only a source of ethical principles but also of joy and love for life—and of generosity. For instance, that God created through the Word meant for her that words had incredible power, and that power applied to everything one could ever say to anybody. Words are powerful!

From my strange family history I learned that theology cannot be easily separated

from the social. My grandfather encountered theology in the clash between empires, but it was also a way of life. It became his own contribution to the communities he served, and it was what sustained him and his family through very difficult times. That same theology was destructive rather than nourishing for a later generation. From them, I learned deep respect for those who do not care for church and yet find the fulfillment of religion in seeking to live ethically. From them also, I learned deep respect for those who may or may not be received in church and yet for whom theology is crucial for life.

Despite all this history, I do not think I would have become a theologian if it were not for one other experience.

It was a private room. It was very quiet, dimly lit, and smelling of chemicals. I trembled because I was cold, and because I was afraid. Everything else was still. And then my mother said, "I do not want to die; life is too beautiful." Her whisper still moves me twenty-two years later.

What she said made no sense. I had seen this woman experience more physical pain than I had thought a body could endure. What could it possibly mean for *her* to say that life is too beautiful? She surely knew better, I thought with the arrogance of my youth. Yet I sensed the significance of this statement—one of my mother's last.

I tried to understand what she meant. None of the knowledge I had received so far seemed to help me understand such a fundamental statement. I talked about it, and I refused to talk about it. I read, including the books she had been reading, like Rabbi

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Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Then I refused to read more. Years later, I came to realize that I needed to rethink everything in light of that moment: God, the structure of the universe, human relations, and the meaning of faith. I went back to school and started all over again—and kept starting over and over and over again.

I got no answer to my questions that day in that hospital room. The most challenging element was not why bad things happen to so many wonderful people; the challenge was to understand in the midst of such pain that life can be so beautiful. Maybe my mother was giving me knowledge she had obtained from the borderlands between life and death, or challenging me to go make sense of it by living. Perhaps she did not mean it as an empirical statement but a doxological one, akin to “And God saw it was good” repeated after each day of creation.

Whatever the case, that moment with my dying mother oriented me toward a seemingly absurd commitment to the love of life and of the world. I seek this orientation in theology because I didn't know any other way.

Theology is my path to such love of life and the world; writing, my practice. Surely, there are always scholarly motivations for writing—motivations that emerge from academic discussions and debates. But there are also other motivations that are strong enough and unsettling enough to sustain and move me through the lonely hours of research and writing, which induce feelings oddly similar to hunger or discomfort.

It is those deep motivations that are hardest

to describe. They are formed by our impossibly complex histories and they touch upon the inexpressible. How to write about what matters most without manipulating and distorting it?

I am currently writing about body and flesh. I am interested in how ideologies become incarnate—how words mark, wound, elevate, or shatter bodies; how social arrangements infect bodies, produce illness and death. But I am also interested in expressing how we are shaped by absence and longing, troubled by past memories and present uncertainties, moved by the elusive and fleeting touch of sensuality. Through writing, I attempt to speak the unspeakable—unspeakable because it is socially unacceptable or unspeakable because it transcends us.

I aspire to find ways to let my body-talk be challenged by the very particular experiences of a young woman who gracefully negotiates with physical disabilities; by the challenges and passions of queer people; by the pain and creativity of those who are racialized. My goal is not to *describe* the experiences but to expose my writing to them, to let it be unsettled and moved, to write truthfully from those places.

More generally, I seek theological language that is hospitable to wounded, unruly, vital flesh. I dream of a theology that not only begins there but that can stay in the midst of life's challenges and ambiguities—even in those intimate experiences of the flesh—and help us perceive and imagine justice and beauty in them. This affects both the content and the style of my writing. That writing is deconstructive and it is affirmative. The principle behind the commitment to a deconstructive practice is

simply that statements have effects and we bear responsibility for them, including responsibility for the victims of our liberative projects. This is a familiar claim. I want to add that those effects are not simply external, not only about others. They are just as much about us. I believe our words, even our repetition of the words of another, affect us. They shape us *in their image*.

Deconstructing harmful images and narratives is not enough for me; I am also interested in finding alternative visions, models that allow us to perceive the world differently. In my work, this entails attending to the poetic, imaginative elements of thought and language. I work mainly with theological language, but some of my role models are philosophers who venture into literary worlds and fiction writers who think philosophically: Hélène Cixous, Édouard Glissant, Jorge Luis Borges, José Saramago, Louis Erdrich.

Poetics evokes for me writing undertaken self-consciously as participation in the creative processes that permeate the world. It is about all-too-human engagements with the sacred but also with the creative power of words and stories. It entails awareness of our own roles in constructing worlds. It is not simply an appeal to beauty. Neither is it a flight from the horrors of the world nor from our responsibility for the damage that theology itself has inflicted on the world. It doesn't cover over the implication of theologies past and present in many rituals of violence. But it seeks to release the energies of images, stories, and metaphors.

Writing theology or philosophy in this mode is hardly a clean process, much less a creation out of nothing. It entails handling fragments of past creations—images, terms,

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stories—some wondrous, others with sharp cutting edges. These fragments may come from biblical stories or recognized theological texts, which one reads with attention to their poetic as much as to their conceptual character.

But cultural sources may be just as important. I am inspired by Derek Walcott's description of Caribbean poetry, in his Nobel Prize lecture:

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole... This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary...."

~Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory"

Even while it seeks to be attentive to the world in all its horror and beauty, theology is not simply descriptive, not limited to empirical data. Instead it places itself in the midst of reality and allows its knowledge to be contaminated by trust, its speech illuminated by doxology.

This is what leads me to write theology: my desire for a better world, my search to cultivate habits of hoping for it. The process itself is not self-evident; the damaged and bruised fragments do not come together easily. It is work.

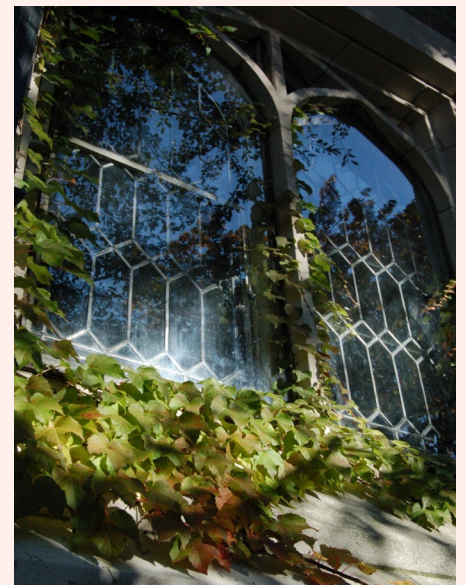
And for me it is embodied labor as much as intellectual work. I approach writing literally with pen and paper. I am not sure why I need to feel the friction of pen against paper. Perhaps the resistance I feel in my hand is a sensual analog of the tensions that the process of writing entails.

Gabriel García Márquez recalls that when he was a young journalist he asked a writer why he committed himself to writing, given how little financial future he could hope for. The writer responded that one should become a writer only if one cannot live otherwise. That is certainly *not* my case. I can live without writing, but nothing guides me to the level of attentiveness that writing does. I know of no other way to get precision about what I think than the slow process of writing. I don't think I could teach if I did not write, and I don't think I could write if I were not in sustained conversation with others. I have never understood the stereotype of the lonely writer. There is deep solitude in writing, but it would desiccate me if it meant permanent isolation. Writing is not a retreat from the world but a cultivation of attentiveness toward it. The task entails only temporary self-absorption, moments when the writing itself overwhelms me, literally, and it scares me, and I have to stand up from my chair afraid that I can't understand much less capture so much. But most of the time it is just a very slow process of one word after the next—gathering fragments.

I read and write, and rewrite and rewrite many times. I move things around, until I am exhausted and must let it go. And I do let the writing go....

I'm not sure what the spirits that haunt me would say about my writing. (I *can* imagine what my grandfather would say!) But once it

is written it is no longer mine. What is mine is the process and how it sustains and transforms me.



Credit: Kristie Welsh

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