

Studying at a seminary is a kind of an odd thing to do – there are few places and times set aside in our modern world to delve into questions of ultimate concern, meaning and purpose, asking those philosophical questions: where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?

You know, the more I think about it, we enter into the dialectic of theological inquiry with good intentions to gain a broader perspective, solid grounding, and a deeper articulation of truth; yet it seems at the end of my program I have more questions than answers; I understand more fully now, than ever before, how much I don't know.

I am reminded of the Sufi Mystic Hafiz from the 14th century who writes this:

I have learned so much from God
That I can no longer call myself
A Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Jew.
The truth has shared so much of Itself with me
That I can no longer call myself
A man, a woman, an angel
Or even pure soul.
Love has befriended Hafiz so completely
It has turned to ash and freed me
Of every concept and image
My mind has ever known.

How I have come to understand the complexities and uncertainties in theology, in biblical exegesis, in the tangled thicket of religious and cultural history, is that by engaging and living into the deep questions of life that speak to the most profound realities of our lives, we are freed.

This educational liberation is one which frees us from the social framing that seeks to define and confine particular people based on constructions of gender, race, and class. This educational liberation frees our understanding to an awareness of the lenses through which we see reality, our assumptions and our prejudice.

This awareness then becomes a strength for us to work against the systems and cycles that create injustice and inequity. Educational liberation seeks to view truth and history and reality with a critical awareness of who has the power to control the narrative, and then lift up the voices who are marginalized and forgotten – to create agency for everyone. By being freed by the power of love of every concept and image we have ever know, truth springs forth anew – resurrection and transformation are always one new thought away.

So one thing I've learned – give a seminary graduate-to-be people who'll listen, and he'll start preaching.

But, of course, I think you have an idea of what I'm talking about.

I transferred here to United Theological Seminary. It was a big transition for me – moving from my first year in Lutheran Seminary, in preparation to be a Lutheran Pastor; a path I

had been on since 8th grade. The Paul Simon lyrics that came to mind during this transition were “so you see I have come do doubt, all that I once held as true – I stand alone without beliefs; the only truth I know is you.”

While in that first year my wife Jenna and I began attending a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and we found a new religious home. It has not been an easy transition with my family – my expected trajectory has taken a different path.

The seminary that I needed was one with an inclusive understanding of Beloved Community, a courageous heart for the work of justice. I longed for a place with people on different paths, from various traditions, to share a broad perspective on the challenges that religious communities face in our world today. I needed a place which could embrace my new religious identity and at the same time affirm my strong Lutheran Christian heritage. I need a place where I wouldn't stand alone without beliefs. And United does that – not only by providing classes, student groups and Unitarian Universalist mentors, but also collegial curiosity about each other's traditions and backgrounds. I can embrace who I have been and who I have come to be – and undoubtedly am yet to become.

We do not live in a segmented world. Each and every day we encounter the diversity our world has to offer in our places of work, in our communities, in our markets, in our political arena, in our homes. United seeks to embrace that global diversity in our local learning. It is a place with an ethos of inclusivity, a commitment to equity and a heart of compassion. We are a diverse community, with shared values and hopes. Our experience here as students shapes our perception of possibility in the world.

When we gather in one classroom, from various generations, various denominations or any other religious perspective, I have heard colleagues say, “I'm not sure what I believe right now, but I consider myself theologically UTS.”

Quite a phrase – UTS can become an identity for some, not because it has a monolithic perspective, but because its embrace is expansive enough to gather in the entire community.

That is what United has been to me. It has been an embodiment of beloved community, a place where hope is the narrative and justice is the norm, where I can live authentically, as who I am and who I am called to be; that is what I have come to expect of myself, and what I trust to be how I experience my colleagues. These colleagues will continue to be my partners in ministry.

Authenticity and ambiguity – those are our principles. Those are the values which I hold dear and they are how I frame my world. With reverence for this diverse world and hope for its future, I enter into the wider world of ministry more equipped to work across denominational lines to build the community for which we hope.

Freed from every concept and image, we enter the questions of life with courage and curiosity – so I leave you with this quote from Rilke:

“Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves...don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”