

Conspiracies

BREATHING TOGETHER THE BREATH OF LIFE

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Conspiracies

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KIMBERLEY C. PATTON

PROFESSOR OF THE COMPARATIVE AND HISTORICAL STUDY OF RELIGION

On Wednesday May 25, 2016 on the eve of Commencement, HDS gathered for our Multireligious Commencement Service for the Class of 2016. On this annual festive occasion, we join across the many religious traditions represented with our School and the year's graduating class. We gather in joy to give thanks for and to celebrate the diverse ministries, vocations, and aspirations of our graduated. Prayers, readings, and music for the service, drawn from the wide array of faiths and backgrounds which animate the intellectual and spiritual life of HDS, are selected by the students who lead the service. We also hear one final address from a beloved faculty member chosen by the graduating student body, this year, Professor Kimberley Patton. Below, scenes from this vibrantly holy gathering, including [a Gospel solo from Sonia David MDiv '16](#), along with Professor Patton's address on kindness.



Dean Hempton, members of the faculty, honored guests, alumni and alumnae, members of the Class of 2016, families and friends:

I would just like to admit defeat before I begin. Dean Hempton managed to smuggle in his own commencement address, while disparaging the very genre of all commencement addresses. Rhetorically awesome! And so HDS! So this is my footnote to his address, definitely Chicago

Kimberley C. Patton, professor of the comparative and historical study of religion
Photo: Justin Knight

-style. And I am grateful for the honor.

It is a remarkable thing to look out from this high pulpit at your faces: the graduating classes of MDiv., MTS, ThM, and ThD candidates at Harvard Divinity School, and those of the staff who every day tirelessly support our work. It is also moving to be able to see behind and above and surrounding all of you, your friends and family, revealed at last. Welcome, friends and family! And welcome to our ancestors, with whom we have never lost connection.

They are the great cloud of witnesses, the tribes whence you came, who up until today have remained mostly invisible as we undertook our work together in ethical reasoning and Hebrew Bible and early Christian mysticism, second-year Sanskrit and the Gospel of Mary and the *Tiruvaymoli*, Buddhist compassionate care of the dying and the histories of racism and the politics of sexuality. And of course the wildly overenrolled ancient Greek athletic sanctuaries. The French socialist Charles Pierre Péguy, who later in his life became an unhappy Roman

Catholic, said in 1909, "Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics." Péguy would have been perfect at HDS, someone we would call a seeker, thoughtful, evolving, restless. And having had the privilege of teaching at our school for almost 25 years, I might answer Péguy that everything also begins in politics and ends in mysticism. "What is it like to teach there there?" I am sometimes asked. I usually answer, wearily or humorously, depending on the day, "God bless them, they are all trying to save the world."

How weird and wonderful to see you world-savers today and tomorrow not as independent, self-actualizing graduate students, but instead tenderly encumbered, trailed by your nearest and dearest. Your matrix. Today your tribes dwell not only in your thoughts as you toil far away in Cambridge, but now out in plain sight, like dreams suddenly manifest in the waking world. Loving you, annoying you, photographing the life out of you and sometimes anxiously asking us, behind your backs or maybe right in front of you, "What on earth will she do with a divinity degree? Especially in this economy?"

This week, just when you seriously need them to behave, smile, keep quiet, and keep their opinions to themselves, families and friends have an irrepressible way of *not*.

We faculty have been listening to the anxiety for weeks now. In the past, we have heard things like this: "My grandmother is coming from Albuquerque; she insisted; but no one knows her real age. I hope she doesn't collapse." "A friend told me that no one is supposed to applaud until everyone gets their diploma, but my whole family is coming from Nairobi, and they are bringing cow bells to ring when I get mine. We are not talking silver jingle bells. These are going to drown out everything." "My parents gave their two Tercentenary Theater tickets to my fifth-grade teacher and her husband because she said I was smart even though I mostly just goofed off in her class." "My dad is a Vietnam vet with PTSD. So he'll be checking the perimeter. All day. That's what he does. I'm just hoping he doesn't freak out the Harvard



Procession of graduates at the Multireligious Commencement Service
Photo: Justin Knight

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police.” “My father can’t come because my brother overdosed last month. He just got out of rehab and Dad has to drive him to meetings every day.” “My mother won’t be here because she is jealous of anything I achieve.” “My parents are both coming but they haven’t seen each other or even been in the same room since I was twelve: no, I mean *literally* in the same room. *Literally.*” And we faculty kindly don’t say, “So you *didn’t* mean *metaphorically* in the same room?” And, every year, as graduation nears, we hear more than one person say, “My family would love to come. They can’t afford it. But they are really proud of me. No one in my family even went to college.”

You have spent years in training to become scholars and ministers, to become literate in what has always been one of the oldest and most persistent realms of human experience, the one that calls the shots for all of the rest of them. There is no chronic injustice or pernicious evil in this



Procession of graduates at the Multireligious Commencement Service
Photo: Justin Knight

world that can be solved without understanding the profound role that religion, culture, and ideology, intertwining as they do, play in its action. And after HDS I would be willing to say that are few problems that you will face with any other than a self-aware and self-critical

way, a way that does not polarize, or over-simplify, or reduce the views of others to ignorant bromides. And when others interrogate or reject your thinking, however you engage them, I also know that you will not need a placemat to tell you how to answer. Because you will instead ask them to tell you why they think that. And you will listen. That is the beginning of a real conversation.

2016 is a special year for Harvard Divinity School. It is our bicentennial, the 200th anniversary of the founding of the first non-denominational seminary in the United States. The election of the Unitarian Henry Ware to the Hollis Professorship of Divinity in 1805 broke the dominant grip of Calvinist theology at Harvard, the legacy of its Puritan days; Harvard College overseer Jedidiah Morse led an exodus of disaffected orthodox theologians to found Andover Theological Seminary in protest. In 1838, in the beautiful small antique chapel on the third floor of Divinity Hall that you can visit this afternoon, HDS alumnus Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered a commencement address on a sweltering July evening that indicted the failures of what he called “historical Christianity” and

exhorted the graduating class to “cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity”—a deity to be found as much in the natural world, in dreams, and in the communion of one’s own soul as in Scripture. Emerson’s speech drew the ire of theologians, especially in the Unitarian *Christian Examiner*, which called it “utterly distasteful.” HDS has been widening the non-denominational circle ever since, which at its founding meant different kinds of Protestantism, and now means many kinds of religious traditions, including paganism, humanism, and atheism. Like the bumblebee, we should not be able to fly.

Our school has been embracing, refining, rejecting, and refining theologies and methodologies ever since, pushing at the fetters of social and religious convention, including the fetters of the real enslavement of fellow human beings and the theologies that supported it. We continue to feel the pain of how very far we have to go to become truly a diverse community, not only in our religious, racial, and sexual identities but also in our points of view. In saving the world, we do not want to



Sonia David, MDiv '16, sings at the Multireligious Commencement Service
Photo: Justin Knight



become an echo chamber. On August 31 last year, Harvey Cox offered a convocation address in honor of his half century of teaching at

Procession of faculty at the Multireligious Commencement Service
Photo: Justin Knight

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PROFESSOR OF THE COMPARATIVE AND HISTORICAL STUDY OF RELIGION

Harvard and the coming bicentennial, noting that HDS was born in trouble, has often created trouble for Harvard University at the center, and needs to continue to be troublemakers in the outside world as it fractures and oppresses itself. “Theology by its very nature is, or should be, troublesome.” Theologians, ministers, and scholars of religion are not excellent sheep.



Choir at the Multireligious Commencement Service
Photo: Justin Knight

This past December, as the calendar stood poised at the start of 2016, the bicentennial year of Harvard Divinity School, a young Filipino man, one of my students from the Extension School, came to see me in my Dumbledore office. It is a Dumbledore office because Andover-

Newton Theological Seminary, the same one that represented the original dissenting group of theologians, left the campus of

Phillips Academy and purchased land from Harvard, on which they built Andover Hall, a neo-medieval building in an architectural style called “Collegiate Gothic,” a 19th-century style deliberately evocative of medieval Christian religious beliefs and unexpected, archaic ornamentation, neo-orthodox buildings with battlements, leaded-glass windows, esoteric symbols, and heads of saints, green men, and philosophers. When Andover-Newton exiled itself from this building unlike any other at Harvard, HDS, which had shared the building with our former detractors, took it over. Even in our main building we dwell in a world of mixed, eccentric heritage.

My Filipino student told me, “It was hard to find your office. I had to ask a lot of different people all over the HDS campus. Everyone was kind to me. Everyone is so kind here.”

I have been thinking about this ever since. “Kind” is not the first word that pops up in my mind when I think of any part of Harvard. But this was his first encounter with our School. And despite all our flaws and struggles, this newcomer found Harvard Divinity School kind.

This is something to be proud of, something to continue to aspire to while we are saving the world in synagogues, hospitals, prisons, mosques, and NGOs, while we are including the excluded into our theorizing, while we are re-writing the histories. Kindness is so often dismissed as the anemic, saccharine twin of its more robust siblings in the terminology of world religions—compassion in Buddhism, mercy in Judaism and Islam, love in

Christianity. Worse, kindness is often seen as a cowardly way to duck agonizing ethical dilemmas that involve the surrender of power, privilege, or capital; of systematic violence against female, brown, child, or gay and transgender bodies, as a way to hack the gnarly challenge of injustice while racking up gold stars for being nice. But kindness is not niceness. It is instead a powerful and subversive thing. It is something that anyone can perform even if she cannot bring herself to feel compassion, or mercy, or love. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said many times, “My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness.” Addressing a conference on family in Rome in 2013, His Holiness Pope Francis did not push away a little boy about four years old who ran onto the stage and sat on his chair and hugged the pontiff’s robes, even as cardinals tried to bribe him back with candy, but instead tenderly rested his hand on the top of his head for the rest of his remarks.

When my husband Bruce was a very young boy about the same age, visiting his grandmother who still lived in her Depression-era home in rural Ahaskie, North Carolina, he kept going in and out of the house onto the porch, slamming the screen door. Bruce’s grandmother, also named Bruce, said to him, “Bruce, if you slam that door one more time, I’m gonna wear you out.” Of course little Bruce did, and she picked him and laid him across her knee. He twisted around and looked up at her and said, “Grandma! The Bible says, ‘Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another.’” (Ephesians 4:32). Astonished, she stopped. “Lord,” she said. “I have never heard a child quote scripture against me.”

As a first-year MDiv at HDS, a thousand miles from home and dealing with his required class in meaning-making, my husband walked into a administrative office and asked if he could borrow a “gem clip.” The administrator mocked his Southern accent and said he could have one if he called it by its right name, “paper clip.” Bruce on that day determined to kill his accent, and it has stayed killed to this day.



Graduates listen to Dean David Hempton’s remarks at the Multireligious Commencement Service
Photo: Justin Knight

Let us try never again to be that school, sacrificing kindness in the face of difference. Let us instead be the school that Reynaldo found when he came. The school in which I teach where one day, after years of advocating for Muslims in

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the academic and public sphere, I looked up at the fifth meeting of a class I was co-teaching and called one of two hijab-wearing students by the name of the other one. I did that twice, when she did not respond.



Angie Thurston, MDiv '16 & Casper ter Kuile, MDiv '16 teach a song to the assembly
Photo: Justin Knight

Because it was not her name. I apologized immediately, but nothing could remedy the shame I felt. When I myself climbed the steep stairs to my Dumbledore office, there was the young woman whose name I had wrongly used to call on her classmate. I cringed, waiting for the polite but well-deserved rebuke from her. I began to apologize again. She interrupted me. "Please, Professor Patton. I'm not offended or angry and neither is Amira. I could see how upset you were. So I came to make sure you were OK."

The Arab American poet Naomi Shahib Nye wrote her iconic poem "Kindness" when she was stranded alone in a remote village in Columbia in 1978. The bus on which she

was traveling was attacked and one of her fellow passengers, an indigenous man, was murdered and left by the side of the road. With only the clothes on her back and her rudimentary Spanish, she was adopted by a street gang who protected her and fed her rolls for days until she was reunited with her husband.

Kindness

Before you know what kindness really is you must lose things, feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness.

How you ride and ride thinking the bus will never stop, the passengers eating maize and chicken will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you, how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth. Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore, only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread, only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

Etymologies make humanities scholars suspicious, as genetics worries social and physical scientists; both can be twisted towards supremacist ends. But even Derrida used etymology as a tool of philosophy. The deep history of the word "kind," "friendly, deliberately doing good to others," opens up to a place of mystery. It comes from the Middle English *kinde*, which in turn comes the from Old English (ge)cynðe "natural, native, innate," originally meaning "with the feeling of relatives for each other." It has the same root as "kinship."

So can only relatives be kind to one another? Can only like-minded people treat each other tenderly and sacrificially? This is the way the world seems to be today. Religious traditions, clans, and classes coalesce; political parties draw in the wagons and protect their own, often while condemning their counterparts or even



A selfie at the Multireligious Commencement Service
Photo: Justin Knight

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politicizing kindness itself.

The astonishing news from human genetics is that all human beings living today descend, in an unbroken line, from one common matrilineal ancestor who lived between 100-200,000 years ago, almost certainly in East Africa in what is today Ethiopia. She is called “mitochondrial Eve.” The multiregional hypothesis turns out to be wrong. She was not the only woman on earth when she lived, but she was the grandmother of all



Maria Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa, ThD '16
Photo: Justin Knight

Let us surrender ideas of hatred, or profiling, and even when we differ to the point of breaking, to the point where we can only say, with Tevye, “No! There is no other hand!” let us nevertheless practice kindness, the gateway to compassion, the gateway to justice.

Even when there is no other hand, there is still our heart, set in motion when we were conceived, beating throughout our days without any help from us, the heart we all inherited from our Ethiopian grandmother, who does not want us to destroy one another or this beautiful earth we have inherited. She is not a distant relative. She is here and in this place, “where the living meet the dead.” As the Senegalese poet Ishmael Birago Diopp wrote, “*Les morts ne sont pas morts*” (*The dead are not dead*):

they're in the hut, they're in the crowd,
the dead are not dead.

The dead are never gone,
they're in the breast of a woman,
they're in the crying child,
in the flaming firebrand. . .
the dead are not dead.

homo sapiens sapiens. There is no one in this chapel or in any place in the world who is not our cousin. How would such a view change us from the inside out?

Why can we speak fairly of our relationship to our grandmother from Albuquerque in terms of identity politics, but not in terms of our grandmother from Ethiopia? Why do two generations define us and thousands of generations can be dismissed as a romantic concept that does not?

May all of us leave this beautiful chapel not as those who tolerate one another like doses of poison, but as relatives, however unruly. Let us give up, in the words of Jane Bennett, the “futile attempt to disentangle ourselves from one another.”

Let no one who is graduating today without their family present feel that they are completely alone. Your family is here. We are all around you. “Kind” comes from “kin.” We are all kin. This changes nothing. But it also changes everything. It is a radical notion that troubles and queers every division our world insists on creating and savagely patrolling. We have the same grandmother: Set-ii-yet, Bibi, Jiddah, Nonna, Lola, Omi, Bubbe, Obachan, Yaya, Tutu, Savta, Abuela, Patti, Nainai, Halmoni, Avo, Gi.

Dear Harvard Divinity School class of 2016, the only one to bear on your diplomas the year of the 200th anniversary of your school—your majestic, brave, and restless school—know how much we who will remain here will miss each of you. May you rejoice in all you have accomplished, and in the ways you have been changed. Even when the world in its cruelty afflicts your hearts, or you are lost in your own self-doubt, frustration, or despair, may you remember to be kind, one to another, and especially to yourselves. In the words of the Dalai Lama, “Be kind, whenever possible. It is always possible.”

May God, “Creator of the intertwined,” bless you all.



Dean David Hempton and Kimberley C. Patton at the Multireligious Commencement Service
Photo: Justin Knight

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Harvard Divinity School Class of 2016
Photo: Justin Knight

HOLY GROUND: THE HDS GARDEN BLESSING

On Wednesday April 20, the HDS's weekly Noon Service was held at the community garden behind Jewett House for the annual spring garden blessing. Produce from the garden is donated to Cambridge's [Faith Kitchen](#) at Faith Lutheran Church, pastored by Rev. Robin Lutjohann, MDiv '13. Visit the [HDS Garden Facebook](#) page for gorgeous photos and year-round updates.

Below, some poetry, songs, and scenes from the Garden Blessing. And a sermon by Katie Blaisdell, MDiv '16, chief gardener in 2015-2016.

I do not have to go
To sacred places
In far-off lands.
The ground I stand on
Is holy.

Here, in this little garden
I tend,
My pilgrimage ends.
The hummingbird moths,
The wild honeybees,
The flickering fireflies at dusk
Are a microcosm
Of the Universe.
Each seed that grows
Each spade of soil
Is full of miracles.

And I toil and sweat
And watch and wonder
And am full of love
Living in place,
In this place,
For truth and beauty
Dwell here.

- Mary de la Valette



Photo: Michael Naughton

Sex, Gardening, and the Religious Imagination

Katie Blaisdell, MDiv '16



Song of Songs 2:10-13, 4:13-16

My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

Your channel is an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all chief spices – a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon. Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden that its fragrance may be wafted abroad. Let my beloved come to this garden, and eat its choicest fruits.

Gardening is about seduction. In spring, you have to open the soil up, make it ready to receive new life. To be fertile, the soil needs the right balance of sour and sweet. It needs nourishment and oxygen. You have to put the seeds carefully into a hole to just the right depth. You have to make sure that it's moist, flowing with living water. The plants grow best when the gardener sings to them. Perhaps that's because plants love song, or perhaps it's because humans love and care for things better when they sing to them.

Right now, it's hard to imagine the riot of green flowing abundantly over every surface. But in the swelter of summer when everything is in bloom, you can feel the desire of plants to be together as their pollen coats your skin, ready to turn flowers into fruit. They wait for wind to waft their sex around. You can smell their perfume calling to the honeybees to help them along. We don't grow henna and nard and saffron and cinnamon here; this isn't Lebanon. But we do grow lavender and lemon balm and an abundance of oregano, which are also plants beloved for their scent and their healing properties.

And gardening is also about healing. In the height of the growing season, we walk the garden every morning, ministering to the plants so that they grow toward the sun. We tend to their sickness, hoping to catch it before disease overtakes them and takes them from the garden. And we mourn when we fail, when blight overtakes the tomatoes and we watch them wilt on the vine, when we can never quite coax the zucchinis to fruit. The garden will teach you to be humble. No plant will grow without its consent; there can be no seduction by force in this wet earth.

But there is also a religious kind of ecstasy in gardening. We revel in every tiny cucumber, the taste of every sun-warm tomato scented with basil sliced over a bed of greens just cut from the plant and washed in hose water. Every sweet pea is a holy gift in my mouth. By the fruit of the vine, I taste and see that God is good. The sweat I pour into the garden, the dirt under my fingernails at the end of a long day of

HOLY GROUND: THE HDS GARDEN BLESSING

gardening are my offering of thanks for the glory of the wet garden. We have life, and we have it in abundance. And the garden's fruit tastes sweeter because we share it with strangers, neighbors who have no fertile garden, no shelter to call their own. This garden feels like mine, but it is theirs too, and it is yours.

So plant your seed in this garden. Coax it, with love and singing and a gentle stroke, to grow. Find your place here. Offer yourself in love and healing and find that you have grown up alongside the peas. Taste, and see the grace eternal. Taste and see that life is good.



Photo: Michael Naughton



Photo: Michael Naughton

PRACTICING DIVINITY, PRACTICING COMPASSION



Each Fall, the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life (RSL) hosts “Practicing Divinity,” a lunchtime series that features HDS students speaking about their expertise in and encounters with a particular spiritual practice. In November 2015, Lama Rod Owens, MDiv '17 spoke about “Liberation through Compassion: The Practice of Tara, the Mother Liberator.” In [“Woman, Hold My Hand,”](#) published in the Spring 2016 Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Rod summarized his Practicing Divinity presentation in print. He also published a meditation on the place of [poetry in his practice of Buddhism](#) in the April 2016 blog of Tricycle.

Practicing Divinity

Fall 2015

These lunchtime workshops feature HDS students sharing their expertise, research, and wisdom about a particular spiritual practice. In addition to enjoying a simple lunch of soup and bread, participants will have the opportunity to try out the spiritual practices each workshop leader will discuss. Feed your body, mind, and spirit! Join us!



Marisa Egerstrom, MDiv '16
*Interrogating God:
Studying Torture, Practicing Eucharist*
Thursday September 17, 2015
1:00-2:00 PM, Common Room, CSWR



Casper ter Kuile, MDiv '16
Singing as a Spiritual Practice
Tuesday October 6, 2015
1:00-2:00 PM, Common Room, CSWR



Rod Owens, MDiv '17
*Liberation through Compassion:
The Practice of Tara, the Mother Liberator*
Thursday November 5, 2015
1:00-2:00 PM, Common Room, CSWR

Sponsored by the Office the Chaplain and Religious and Spiritual Life and the HDS Student Association



A SPRING PILGRIMAGE

LOREN GARY

MDiv' 83, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF MAJOR GIFTS



Loren Gary, MDiv' 83, Associate Director of Major Gifts at HDS, offered this homily for the Noon Service hosted by the HDS Staff on April 6, 2016 in Andover Chapel. The focus of the service was spring pilgrimage, what we were leaving behind in the winter snows, what we were planting in the fecund spring soil.

When I take inventory of those areas of my life in which I want to create more room for the stirring of new growth, and those areas in which I feel a nudge to let go of some activity or even some relationship, all too often I am excessively ego-driven—by which I mean rationalistic—in my approach. So during this spring's pilgrimage, I'm trying to abide with such questions. To ponder them in my heart for a time, resisting the urge to produce a multipronged action plan in short order.

In addition to the cycle of the seasons, I've been under the sway of two other cycles of life. First, coming to work at HDS two years ago initiated a kind of reckoning. A reencounter with the 20-year-old me who matriculated here in 1980 right out of college because he knew just one thing: that he had to find some answers about his faith before he could go on to anything else in his life. Getting reacquainted with that impetuous young man has had its sweetness, but the reckoning has not been an unqualified delight. I give myself high marks for being able to improvise a life, but as for authoring one . . . not so much. I have fallen short of what I had hoped for my life, professionally and personally.

Added to this, the sudden death of my brother, who also was my best friend, carried away—irreversibly and in an instant—an imagined future and my role in it. I have stumbled punch drunk through more days in the past ten months than I care to admit.

These two cycles have impressed on me the limited degree to which I have been able to orchestrate my life, despite all

the anxious moments I've spent trying to do so.

The book *Kaddish* by Leon Wieseltier has been my constant companion during this time. It's a spiritual journal of a doubting son's acceptance of the traditional Jewish obligation to recite a specific prayer three times a day for the year following his father's death. When the old life is "no longer available to you," Wieseltier writes, "Transformation must be met with transformation. Where there was the old life, let there be the new life. Do not persevere. Dignify the shock. Sink, so as to rise."

The wisdom of the earth says: *All we have is each other, and all that happens is here.* Attention must always be paid to this insight; it's sturdy, dry-eyed, and it casts our human agency in high relief. But the religious traditions of the world, as I understand them at least, tell us there's something more: the possibility of transformation or enlightenment.

In my effort to pattern my life after Jesus, the ability to place my essential trust in God who not only knows but delights in us, and cares for us always, is integrally linked to my ability to be compassionate toward others, especially those who are unlike me. I continue to resist giving up so much control. Here in the middle of life's journey, however, my springtime resolution is to attempt to do just that.

To give up trying to persevere in my old life—whether it's the one I had planned on, the one I envisioned, or the one I actually had. To dignify the shock of loss and failure by allowing my heart to shatter for a time. And to visualize that I am somehow being held by a benevolent force, always near at hand, that is steering me toward new ways of being that beggar my imagining.



Photo: Ainsley Tucker

ENGAGING THE NONES: TRACKING THE HIGHLY ENGAGED RELIGIOUSLY UNAFFILIATED



Angie Thurston MDiv '16 and Casper ter Kuile MDiv '16 have become minor rock stars in the field of religious studies. Authors of [How We Gather](#) (2015) and [Something More](#) (2016), their pioneering work interrogates the growing, often deeply transformative and ethically-driven communities of religiously unaffiliated people in the United States, a group representing the largest sector of the population under the age of 30 according to a [2015 Pew Research Institute](#) study. Thurston and ter Kuile's work, which focuses on the pursuit of meaningful community among young people, has captured the attention and significant support of the [Fetzer Institute](#), which recently arranged a two-year partnership with them during which time they will continue their research, based at HDS, on spiritual innovation among Millennials. Read one example of Casper and Angie's research, on the "theology of CrossFit," on the [On Being blog](#). You can also read about [Angie and Casper's presentation of their work](#) to the HDS Dean's Leadership Forum in April or, better still, [watch them](#) speak with a room full of Methodist bishops about their research in November 2015 at the Texas Methodist Foundation. Everyone, it seems, is interested in their work! Of course they are. Who wouldn't be? We assume we'll all be keeping our eyes on Angie and Casper for some time to come.



Angie Thurston, MDiv '16 & Casper ter Kuile, MDiv '16 teach a song to the assembly
Photo: Justin Knight

THE FRAGRANCE OF HER PERFUME

TAMMY HOBBS MIRACKY
MDiv '17



Tammy Hobbs Miracky MDiv '17 preached this sermon at the weekly Monday Eucharist of the HDS Anglican/Episcopal Fellowship in Andover Chapel on the Monday of Holy Week in the Christian calendar.

“The house was filled with the fragrance of her perfume.” (John 12:3c)

My generous sister-in-law lives in NJ and has a house on the beach in South Carolina. Each summer we spend a month there while she's not using it. Time slows down, there is, really, no schedule other than making sure we get the dog to the beach before the off-leash hours end. That and Tuesday afternoon, when the farmers' market comes to town.

Now, as many of you know, I grew up in a big Southern family. My mom is one of four sisters. Collectively in my family my Mom and her sisters they are referred to as “the Aunts.” Growing up we had pretty good food, often fresh out of my grandmother's or one of “the Aunts” gardens. It was all you might think about if you imagine traditional southern cooking.

One afternoon at the farmers' market in South Carolina, I decided to try something I hadn't cooked before. I had been noticing it at the market for a few weeks – small, fresh, field peas husked and washed and stored in small bags. I thought I would give it a try. I took them home, looked at them for a bit, and thought what would “the Aunts” do with this? Clearly they needed to be put in a pot with water. Equally clearly, I needed to put some form of pork in the pot with them. It might be bacon grease, salt pork, or a ham hock, but some form of pork was required.

I put them on and after a while, when “the house was filled with the fragrance” of the peas, it hit me. The smell transported me back to my grandmother's kitchen. I had had field peas before, probably many times. Then suddenly I knew: I have to cook cornbread now. This must be served over cornbread. That's just how it's done.

Smell can move us, perhaps as no other sense can. It can help us “know” in a way that goes beyond conscious cognition. Had I sat down with those peas and thought about what to serve them with – and I did – I would never have come up with “cornbread.” It was the smell that prompted that knowing in me: smell evoked something my brain had not accessed on its own.

John, of all the Gospels, is seen as a “particularly ‘sensual’ Gospel”. His Gospel emphasizes sight – with its metaphors of light and darkness, of sight and blindness.

We encounter touch: here in this scene with Mary of Bethany wiping the

ointment from Jesus' feet with her hair. We also find touch later in the Gospel when Jesus forbids Mary Magdalene to touch him following His resurrection, and when Thomas is invited to touch.

And the motif of eating and drinking draw out the sense of taste. Consider the Wedding in Cana, for example.

Furthermore, only John of all the Gospel writers explicitly draws out the sense of smell, and he does so in three places, which seem to be tied together. First we encounter the stench of death in Lazarus's tomb. In the pericope immediately prior to this scene in Chapter 12, after being greeted by Martha and Mary, Jesus arrives at the tomb of Lazarus. “Lord,” Martha says, “already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” The KJV puts it a bit less delicately: “Lord, by this time he stinketh.” Then we have this scene, in which John explicitly highlights the scent and the abundance of the anointing oil. Finally, we have the scene at the end of John's gospel, when Nicodemus appears at Jesus' tomb to apply aromatic herbs after his death. John takes care to present a very vivid picture. He identifies the specific herbs used, which would have evoked in audiences the strength of their scent. And he also calls attention to the “extraordinary quantity” (about 100 pounds!).

What are we to make of John's use of the senses – in particular the use of smell – in this story? What knowing might it evoke? To help us consider this question, recall that this narrative of Jesus' anointing appears in all four Gospels. Dominika Kurek-Chomycz, in her article “The Fragrance of Her Perfume,” suggests that the ways in which John's version differs from the others may help us understand his vivid sense imagery. The placement of this pericope in John is particularly important. The provocative reference to scent here draws a connection for the reader between this scene, with its overt signs of Jesus' kingship, to the previous scene – that of Lazarus' smell of death. As Kurek-Chomycz puts it, the stench of death is juxtaposed with “the smell of death-which-leads-to-resurrection”.

Additionally, Chapters 11 and 12 are seen, structurally, as the center of John's Gospel, as its turning point. Here we see the last and most powerful “sign” performed, with the raising of Lazarus, and we see the beginning of the transition toward Jesus' glorification. Up until now, we have heard from Jesus that “his hour had not yet come.” Yet, immediately following this chapter, in Ch. 13 v. 1, we are told that “Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father” (Jn 13:1). Thus, Jesus' ministry both begins with a meal and the senses – the Wedding of Cana, and the taste of good wine – and ends with a meal and the senses – this celebration of the Passover and the smell of genuine nard, mixed with the scent of Jesus' skin, combined with

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that of Mary's hair, and then stirred into the room as she dries the ointment from his feet.

It is notable that John emphasizes the sense of smell at this point in the Gospel. Smell, of all the senses, is most tied to transition. Anthropologist David Howes, finds "a universal association between olfaction and transition...smell is the liminal sense par excellence." It marks change at the "logical level (smells are most noticeable at boundaries), the psychological level (given the effect of odour on memory and discursive reason), and the sociological level (smells synchronize the emotional and physical states of members of the congregation)". Through smell, then, John's readers are drawn into this liminal space – ἡ ὥρα, Jesus' hour, the beginning of the end of Jesus being with them on earth.

This week we, too, in our liturgical time, are invited to enter this liminal space, this time of transition. Jesus' time has come. The full significance of this week is impossible to take in. Cognitively, it is beyond reason. But John invites us to go beyond reason. John invites us to rest in Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection with all our senses. To take in the incense that hits us as we cross the boundary between the world and the sanctuary, to absorb Jesus' passion and death with our eyes, as we progress through the Stations of the Cross, to rest in the music, and to touch and taste his body and blood in the Eucharist. John invites us to sense this time, ἡ ὥρα, with all that we are. To know beyond knowing. Like John's readers, we are invited into this time of transition, into this liminal space. In this space we ask for God's grace:

As with Mary's anointing oil and her unabashedly intimate act of wiping Jesus' feet dry with her hair, may we rest into this time with all our senses.

As with Nicodemus and his use of an abundance of aromatic burial herbs, may we experience the abundance—the overflowing nature—of this time.

As with this room in which Passover was held, may we be filled with the essence of Christ.

Amen.

Kurek-Chomycz, Dominika A., "The Fragrance of Her Perfume: The Scent of the Anointing," *Novum Testamentum* 52 (2010), 334-354.

Ibid.

Ibid.

D. Howes, "Olfaction and Transition," in *The Varieties of Sensory Experience*, 128-147. Quoted in Kurek-Chomycz, p. 339.

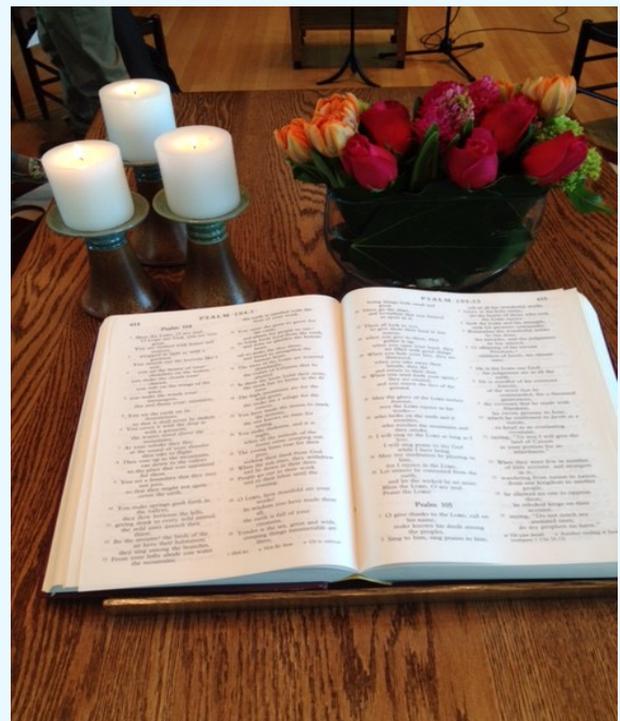


Photo: Xavier Montecel

HDS FOR FOOD SECURITY: 2015-16 IN THE OFFICE OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

"The passive American consumer, sitting down to a meal of pre-prepared food, confronts inert, anonymous substances that have been processed, dyed, breaded, sauced, gravied, ground, pulped, strained, blended, prettified, and sanitized beyond resemblance to any part of any creature that ever lived. The products of nature and agriculture have been made, to all appearances, the products of industry. Both eater and eaten are thus in exile from biological reality. Eating with the fullest pleasure – pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance – is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living in a mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend."

- Wendell Berry, *Eating is an Agriculture Act*

While HDS leads many efforts in [sustainability](#) and food security such as the [HDS Garden](#), the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life (RSL) took the lead in organizing many events around food justice during the 2015-16 academic year. Led in large part by RSL field education intern chaplain Naohito Miura, MDiv '16 and by Maggie Krueger, MTS '16, activities included a Multireligious Feast in which students contributed dishes of spiritual significance in their traditions to a potluck table, along with sacred texts and words of reflection; RSL's continued monthly Saturday outreach with [Cambridge's Outdoor Church](#) to feed our food insecure neighbors; and a first-ever partnership with Boston's Project Bread in recruiting many members of the HDS community to participate in Boston's annual [Walk for Hunger](#). Project Bread spotlighted HDS's work for food security in an [article](#) on their website this spring. In a related development, with three colleagues Maggie Krueger published this past spring a visually delicious and ethically evocative new resource [The Inclusive Table: A Multifaith Cookbook](#). Check it out!

she cooks to recreate a lost world and to prove that unimaginable loss is not the end of everything. She is motivated by duty to ancestors and descendants, by memory and obligation and an impossible wish to make the world whole. [...] Serious cooking is an essentially optimistic act. It reaches into the future, vanishes into memory, and creates the desire for another meal."

May we, by having cooked, by eating, by sharing food tonight, reach into the future, vanish into our memories, and make the world a bit more whole.



Shrestha Singh, MDiv '16, a Hindu student from California, offered these words as a blessing at the HDS Multifaith Feast:

Food, like faith, is enduring. By feeding ourselves, by going beyond ourselves to feed others, by retreating to the kitchen after a long and despairing day and chopping vegetables and throwing them into a pot with some spices and some salt, we are, in the words of the writer Elizabeth Ehrlich, "tending something ancient, and it matters."

What is this ancient thing? Well, I wanted to read to you from the first pages of Elizabeth Ehrlich's memoir, *Miriam's Kitchen*: "My grandmother used to sit before her stove on a tall, four-legged stool, stirring sweet-and-sour cabbage soup in a white enamel pot, dishing out salty perceptions of life. She was a capable woman. She carried herself with dignity about the neighborhood, as befitted the pharmacists's wife. [...]"

But my grandmother's blue and white tiled Brooklyn kitchen, in which so much life had been lived, was her truest sphere. There she chopped, grated, salted, peppered. There she handed on traditions brought from the Old World and translated amidst the exigencies of the New. [...]"

My mother-in-law Miriam, born in a small village in Jewish Poland, survived the Holocaust. A keeper of rituals and recipes, and of stories,



HDS FOR FOOD SECURITY: 2015-16 IN THE OFFICE OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

SPRING 2016

Food Security and Justice

OPPORTUNITIES

OUTDOOR CHURCH

*Saturdays - February 27, March 26, April 23
2:45 PM - 6:00 PM*

Help the Outdoor Church of Cambridge and fellow HDS religious denominational groups serve those living without homes in Harvard and Central Square. To sign up, email Kerry Maloney (kmaloney@hds.harvard.edu).

SOUL FOOD TEDTALK: "BLACK CULINARY CULTURE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE"

*Sunday, February 28 at Fong Auditorium
1:00 PM - 3:00 PM*

A TED-style event featuring Therese Nelson, the founder of Black Culinary History, a "collaborative endeavor focused on being a living sanctuary for the collective history of black chefs in America." Tickets available at the Harvard Box Office for \$7, \$10 at the door.

WORKSHOP ON THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE WORLD'S FOOD AND FARMING SYSTEM

*Thursday, March 10 CGIS South Room S250
4:00 PM - 6:00 PM*

Michelle Jurkovich, Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Massachusetts Boston will present on "Who's to Blame for Chronic Hunger? Blame Diffusion in International Anti-Hunger Advocacy."

THE HDS GARDEN GROUP

Join the HDS Gardeners for March and April work days in the HDS Garden by contacting hdsgarden@gmail.com. The Communal Garden Blessing is scheduled for Wednesday, April 20 during Noon Service.

THE SPIRIT OF SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE CONFERENCE

Thursday, March 31 - Friday, April 1 at HDS

Come join a broad array of participants from all over the country, including keynote speaker, Nigel Savage of Hazon (<http://hazon.org/>) for a two-day HDS conference. There will be concurrent sessions, art displays and poster presentations. For more information, please visit: http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/spirit_of_sustainable_agriculture/home.

JUST FOOD? FORUM ON LAND USE, RIGHTS AND ECOLOGY

Friday, March 25 - Saturday March 26 at Harvard Law School

The 2016 Just Food conference will examine relationships between people and land, primarily through agriculture and food. Register through <http://foodbetter.squarespace.com/food-justice-conference/> by February 25 for early bird rates.

WALK FOR HUNGER

Sunday, May 1

Sign up to join the HDS Team throughout the semester by emailing Naohito Miura (naohito_miura@mail.harvard.edu) to walk to ensure food security in the Greater Boston area. Suggested registration donation is \$20 and you can sign up as either an actual Walker or Virtual Walker.

STILL HUNGERING FOR FOOD JUSTICE? CHECK OUT:

- The Food Literacy Project (<http://www.dining.harvard.edu/food-literacy-project>) and join their weekly newsletter "Eater's Digest"
- Contact our 2015-2016 HDS Food Fellow Kate Cottrell (katherine_cottrell@mail.harvard.edu)

AND THEN SOME

RYAN GREGG
MTS '16



Ryan Gregg delivered this sermon at HDS's weekly Thursday Morning Eucharist on January 28, 2016. He received the MTS in May 2016 and is staying on at Harvard as a PhD student with the Committee on the Study of Religion. His focus will be Christian theology.

In 2 Samuel 7, David asks a basic question: "How is it that I live in a cedar palace, while the ark of God remains under a tent?" And he arrives to this action step: "I will build the Lord a house." The term here for house, *בית*, is a common Hebrew idiom for "temple." In fact, today in Israel, the common term for The Temple Mount in Jerusalem is *הר הבית*, Mountain of the House. So David wants to build a house for the Lord, but Chapter 7 of II Samuel flips over on itself: When David says: "Lord, I am going to build you a house," a reply comes through the Prophet Nathan: "No David, I am going to build your house."

These two figures, David and the Lord, are insisting on building the other a house. What is the meaning of this reciprocity? And what is the meaning of David's response in verses 18-19, which we read just a moment ago? My plan for the next few minutes is to think together about David's reply to the Lord, considering what lessons it might hold for us, and then looking at the last moment to the Gospel reading from Mark 4. Verse 18 of II Samuel 7 reads: "Then King David went in and sat before the Lord and said, 'Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?'"

David is responding here to the affirmation of the covenant, the affirmation of

God's love to a little shepherd boy who was raised up to lead the people of God. And in the word of the Lord through the mouth of Nathan the Prophet, there is much talk of David's enemies and struggles; there is talk of the hard discipline which David's son will undergo. That is, this is not a soft or sanitized love we are listening-in on, divorced from the vicissitudes of a biography. Rather, this is a love fully contacting the absurd terrain of a human life. It is a rigorous, battle-hardened love. It makes me think about the Eucharist. The term, as many of you know, basically means "thank you." We gather around this table, and celebrate this crushed and crushing love—with gratitude. Perhaps we might even say with David: "Who are we, O Lord God, that you have brought us thus far, and loved us in this way?" Yet beyond this amazed gratitude, I also wonder what the Eucharist might mean for those of us in the room who are training to become spiritual leaders. Does the internalization—the ingestion—of this suffering love with the word "thank you" on our lips—can this do more than strengthen us, but actually permeate our spiritual cells, and become our identity?

Let me be more practical. I, like most of you, am perched on the edge of a new semester. I look over the edge... and I see much work. Early mornings, deadlines. But am I willing to let this become a eucharistic semester?—a semester

where love's willing gift of self is embraced in its inevitable swirl of pain and wonder, and my response is *thank you*? I'll return in a moment to the idea of the Eucharist.

In verse 19, David says: "And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord God. You have spoken also of your servant's house for a great while to come, and this is instruction for humankind, O Lord God." I see two lessons in this verse, and the first is a standard, Sunday School caliber thought. When David says—*This was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord God*—we hear again the challenge to wrench our perspectives a little wider, to think a little bigger and more imaginatively about what we mean by "divinity," and its capacity in our lives. What seems monumental to us as human beings is quite small in the eyes of God. But as I said: this thought about thinking new thoughts is a rather basic thought.

The second half of the verse is what really interests me. David says there: "You have spoken also of your servant's house for a great while to come, and this is instruction for humankind, O Lord God." Given the ambiguities and transience that I and many of my peers struggle with—this feeling that being a twenty-something in the 21st century, or even a thirty-, forty-, or fifty-something, means fragility and rapid changes that are

frightening—well, in light of this, perhaps this word about the longevity of the house of David is indeed "instruction for humankind." Like me, you may be trying to figure out how you are possibly going to survive until spring break, let alone summer.

But perhaps in this story we perceive that there is a longer-range vision on offer for us, a longer-range stability and



Photo: Kristie Welsh

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blessing. Of course, I am not suggesting an uncritical and rather self-serving appropriation of the Davidic identity. What I am suggesting, however, is a moment at the beginning of a new undertaking when, looking deep within ourselves, and deep within the Mysterious Love we are here to study, we inquire if there is not something greater, stronger, more profound, at work in us, through us, and perhaps most significantly—for us. Because in the end, this is why the Eucharist is the Eucharist—the great *Thank You*. Because although it may instigate within us new stirrings of sacrificial love, of service, of enterprises in study and society, the great promise in the ingestion of these morsels is that God is *for us*. That God has made a self-gift on our behalf, an extravagant kenosis, in relation to which our own kenosis can ever only be mimesis.

In verse 20, which was not in our reading, David's prayer continues: "*And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord God!*" This is one of those profound ideas I've spent much of my divinity school career trying to avoid, twirling around in elaborate parenthetical statements on the periphery of what really matters. Phrases like "God knows me," "God loves me"—these feel like primordial utterances, just barely breaking forth from an abyss of vital secrets, like a mountain under the sea, whose summit just barely breaks through water.

What more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord God! What can this mean? That there is a place where words end, because we are known. We might recall in this regard the end of that famous passage, I Corinthians 13. There, Paul, while meditating on love, pivots hard at the end to the topic of knowledge: Now I know in part, but then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

This is not an accidental or merely convenient intersection, love and knowledge. Indeed the Bible—not to mention theologians like Thomas Aquinas, whose feast day we are celebrating today—drives at it time and again,

and I believe we are standing here on the boundary of one of those fundamental truths of faith—that notwithstanding the serpentine nature of faith's path, and the warped mirrors that seem to border it, bending our own reflection in exciting but terrifying ways, notwithstanding all the Davidic cave slumming through which we all must go— notwithstanding all this, we are fully known, and fully loved.

There is an idea afloat out there that I have encountered a few times about an "epistemology of love." That is, love is a mode of knowing not fixated on the subjective / objective divide, because it is more concerned with transcending that divide with the deliberate gift of self. Love knows what is other not through formal epistemic verification, but through actual investment in, contact with, and celebration of what is other. It wouldn't be helpful, however, to say that this mode of knowing transports us somewhere else—this smacks too nearly of an escapist theology that would devalue or abandon the world. No, love is an epistemology that penetrates to a deeper order of reality. Wittgenstein writes, "It is love that believes in the resurrection." In this regard, we might say that the church, the community of love, never was a landing pad of prosaic expectations, but always was a launching pad of audacious new visions. It is not an asylum for those mentally unable to embrace the complexities of modernity, but a think tank for those able to perceive the hidden magic thrusting it forward.

I am mixing metaphors now, I know, but there is long theological precedent for such verbal lunging, such sloppiness that believes it is approaching the heart of an ultimate coherence. So bear with my free-style homiletics, and allow me to say in conclusion to the passage about David, and as a means of turning to the passage from Mark.

Perhaps love's self-alienation is in fact our only true homecoming. Perhaps the seed that waits patiently in our soil is the kenosis of love, telling us that only when we empty ourselves into

others do we begin to experience the miraculous germination of our very selves. Christ says in Mark's Gospel: "*With the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you.*" That little postscript—and *still more will be added to you*. That is, there is a synergistic quality to whatever Christ is talking about, and this puts me in mind of Soren



Photo: Kristie Welsh

Kierkegaard, who is emphatic that in the matter

of love, there is no such thing as transactional arithmetic. Love for Kierkegaard is rooted in infinity, which makes it utterly incommensurable with our arithmetic ways of thinking. "Burn the abacus," says Love, "for I am the equation that inheres in the very possibility of being."

What Christ says seems at first purely transactional: "*With the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*" It's simple reciprocity here, a legal and legalistic quid pro quo. Or is it? No—the gospel is far yeastier than that. It often employs what Ricoeur calls "limit-

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expressions,” which are instances of language that burst the very boundaries of language and logic. And perhaps something of that order is afoot here. “Oh yes,” Jesus says. “You will be repaid for what you have given... *and then some.*” The magic, the wager of faith, is in that little postscript. *And then some.* Yes, such a thing is perhaps madness. But it is a divine kind of madness. And so this is my exhortation for our first eucharist of the semester. Let’s give ourselves to this divine madness. Let’s give ourselves in love this semester—to our work, to the people in our lives, even to God. We’ll get out of it what we put into it—*and then some.* Of course, we should not forsake the mechanics of “success.” We should work hard, go to office hours, go the extra mile—because that’s how we roll at Harvard. But we must not forget what the gospel is whispering through all the cracks of its stories and teachings—the *secret sauce of love.* Let us give ourselves to love— you, me, right here, today—and watch as our black and white universe blushes outward into unspeakable, eucharistic colors. Amen.



Photo: Kristie Welsh

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