How my mind has changed

Washed in grace

by Emilie M. Townes

I GREW UP IN A WORLD in which the folks around me valued language. Family and neighborhood storytellers and teachers in grade school and Sunday school filled my days and nights with words, ideas, Bible stories and conversations. Before I knew the term *poetic*, the poetic world helped me negotiate Durham, North Carolina, in the late 1950s and 1960s.

I grew up in a transclass neighborhood. My playmates' parents were teachers, principals, tobacco factory workers, secretaries, lawyers, home-based hairdressers, professors at North Carolina College (later to become North Carolina Central University), stay-at-home mothers, women of ill-repute, doctors, police officers, nurses, dentists, and those who "kept" the children of parents who both worked. We participated in school plays, diction competitions and church Bible contests and were judged on our knowledge of the Bible verses *and* on our diction.

It is by living and dying that one becomes a theologian, Martin Luther said. With that comment in mind, we have resumed a CENTURY *series published at intervals since 1939 and asked theologians to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, questions and hopes as people of faith and to consider how their work and life have been intertwined. This article is the eighth in the series.*

This wonderful and sometimes maddening world of words taught me much about ideas and how to shape and own them. I was taught to listen closely to and watch carefully the adults around me, so that I would learn to be responsible for what I thought and how I said it, and know how to do it well.

This was a deeply black religious world. It was filled with the smell of lemon polish on church pews and with nurses in white uniforms who helped revive those who got caught up in religious ecstasy and then collapsed. It was a world of fiery preaching and quiet preaching, good sermons, pitiful sermons and exceedingly bad sermons. The choirs of my growing-up years ran the gamut from the marvelous to those that made a joyful *noise* to the Lord. In Sunday school, we were taught about the miracles of the Bible, the importance of faith, and that Jesus loved all the little children of the world—"red and yellow, black and white, we are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world." I believed this (and still do) with all my heart and soul.

It was a religious world in which testimony was a way to cleanse one's spirit, and there was a decided difference between testifying to the joys and sins in one's life and bragging about what you have and what you'd done. It was one in which I was taught the importance of doing one's first works over. This meant periodically reexamining one's life—from beginning to the present—to tell the truth of who you have been so that you have a guide for where you should go. This request to think about how my mind has changed (or not) is such an opportunity.

In this rich world of words and religion, I tended to be a quiet child who watched and listened closely. I listened to the wonderful interplay of words that were at times sacred, at times irreverent, at times full of deep emotion, and at times humorous, with incisive wit and social commentary. I was a black middle-class girl in the South. I learned about racism from the black and white folks around me. It was an education that puzzled me, because racism made and continues to make absolutely no rational sense.

My parents taught me about racism without pointing to it directly. Every evening my mother would sit me down in front of the television so that she could watch the news while she braided my hair for the next day. I listened to Jesse Helms, who later became a U.S. senator but who was then an executive with the Capitol Broadcasting Company, spew racist diatribes against the integrationists and the "nigras" on WRAL-TV. As I became aware that he was referring to the loving and hardworking folks that I knew, I realized that there were (and are) people in the world that dislike and even hate me because I am darker than they are. That struck me as odd and sad at the time. As I've grown older, it has struck me as tragic and a tremendous waste of time and energy. Trying to understand hatred has been one of the most formative things I've done in my life, and I now know that it will remain a challenge until I draw my last breath.

I discovered at an early age that one must learn how to survive the small and sometimes large daily indignities of racism—and I learned how to negotiate them with creativity and sometimes humor while maintaining one's integrity and sense of self.

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This is where the church of my youth was so important, for it continually reinforced the message that I was receiving from my parents, my grandmother and the adults in my neighborhood and school: you are a child of God, God loves you, God will protect you, and you are a child of worth who can do anything you set your mind to. In short, I was surrounded with loving and caring people; they were far from perfect, but they were relentless in passing along their care, and they taught that we must do likewise with others—that this was fundamental to being a Christian.

Asbury Temple Methodist Church (now United Methodist) was a small black mission church in one of the black public housing neighborhoods, or "the projects" as we called them. My earliest memories of Asbury Temple are from the time when Douglas Moore was the pastor. He preached sermons that made sense to a little girl who had a lot of questions. Sunday mornings were a time when the church was attended

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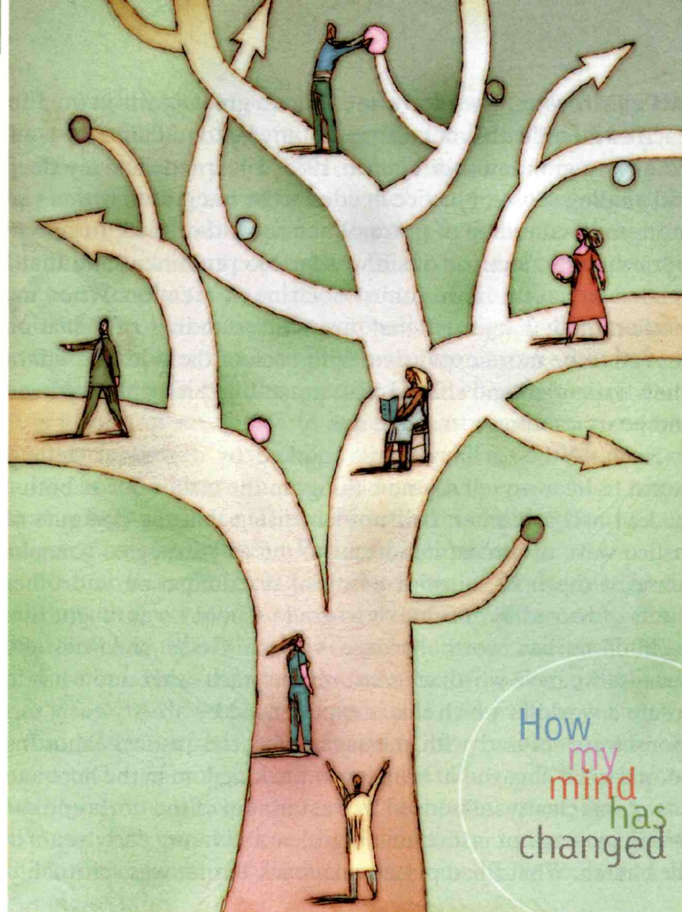

by many students from North Carolina Central, where my parents were teachers and eventually administrators. Reverend Moore taught us about a God of righteousness who does not tolerate or condone racism and segregation. He reminded us of the power of prayer and spoke about developing a strong moral soul. The church was alive with debates and strategizing and the Holy Spirit. It was in this space that I learned that the church could and should combine a lively and soul-deep spirituality with a vital and active social witness. This example has stayed with me over the years; when I refer to "the church" it is this model of church that echoes deeply in my soul. It is this church that I try to work with others to build.

As I grew up in this church, the war in Vietnam and school desegregation were twin backdrops to daily life. The Kent State massacre occurred in my last year of junior high school—Ohio National Guardsmen gunned down four students as they were protesting the U.S. invasion of Cambodia in April 1970. That fall I entered high school under a court-ordered desegregation plan. It was an enormously difficult year. Although Durham liked to think of itself as a progressive city, white flight took over. White parents refused to send their children to schools that did not have a white majority of students. The Ku Klux Klan, Black Panthers and communists were all active in my high school, trying to recruit and radicalize students. That first year was filled with tension and fear but no violence.

When four white students were gunned down at Kent State, I became aware that not all lynchings necessarily involve black folks. That was the first time I began to see the linkages between what we do at home and global realities. There were young black men in my neighborhood who went to Vietnam and Cambodia and came home in coffins. We did not demonize them or their service. We marked their deaths as service to our country. They were tragic heroes for paying the high price of defending our freedom and that of others.

But we teenagers did begin to question why. I not only saw but felt the deep connections between that distant war and what was happening in my neighborhood and high school involving issues of class and race. I learned that little happened in my neighborhood that did not have some connection to another part of the globe. I began to put together the ways in which hatred can create deadly structures that treat others as less than human and that sanction violence and war. I began to understand that I am part of a global family. It became important to understand how to put all of this together with my faith.

The changes in me and around me have often coaxed changes in what I think and how I respond. I use the word *coax* very intentionally, as my life and thought have usually been a matter of unfolding into change rather than a series of aha! moments. I tend to listen more than I talk. My friends and acquaintances are a rather eclectic mix, but I have always been drawn to people with strong opinions and lively minds who also have a great sense of humor and a deep spirit of caring. This has been a good thing throughout my life because I too have strong and definite opinions.

Perhaps the most profound experiences in my life that have caused me to look again at my beliefs are the deaths of my maternal grandmother, Nora Jane McPhatter McEachan McLean Jackson, and my parents, Ross Emile and Mary Doris

McLean Townes. They were and remain great spirits in my life. Each of their deaths rocked me past my heart and into my soul. When my grandmother died in 1983, I learned that my deep and abiding sense of justice needed to be integrated with a vigorous understanding of grace. When my father died, I came to learn that my doctrine of sin was far too prominent and that I needed to have a more robust doctrine of creation. When my mother died, I learned that my understanding of salvation needed to be more expansive. With each of these losses, what I knew expanded and shifted. This grace-filled interplay of head and heart continues to shape me.

Each of these changes was marked by a gradual shift—I began to hear myself say new things in the classroom as both a student and a teacher. It is not surprising that the contours of justice were of utmost important to me as I struggled to make sense of the bold injustice of racial discrimination and other forms of hatred. From church to grade school I was taught that each of us has worth because we are God's children, and because we have worth we must respect each other and work to create a world in which this is experienced by all. My early sermons were infused with messages of social justice, exhorting people to be engaged in bringing in the kingdom in the here and now. I was clearly influenced by the ferment of the times and the strong message of justice-making I learned in my early years in the church. What I had placed on a back burner was spirituality.

The Ethiopian eunuch

When he heard about the lamb laid out
before the shearer, he felt a cold ache,
a pressing-in, as if his own flesh
were buckling under the blade.

The chariot pitched over the stony road.
He imagined ragged fleece piling at his feet.
I could be naked like that. I could feel
the air pass over me like shale on my skin.

Wobbly-legged, he kneeled in the carriage,
the wedge of his shorn muzzle cutting forth
into the desert. *I have given my life*
to stacking money, to keeping the laws of the dead.

He could finally mourn the husk of his body,
the men with their downcast smirks,
the women he could never want
springing around him like curious fruit.

Why shouldn't I be baptized?
He could pull right then to the side of the road.
He could lie in the shallow leavings of the storm,
those swirls of dust, those sparking water striders.

Tania Runyan

The balance began to return when my grandmother died and a piece of my soul went with her. Her death was the first death of a close loved one in my adulthood. My grandmother was a rock in our family. My sense of being left behind to carry on was overwhelming. She had taught me well about the importance of living a faithful life and sharing the gifts I receive from God with others. Because she was certain, I was certain. Now I had to develop that certainty on my own and do so with the kind of integrity of faith she lived. Life for me was no longer so clearly marked out between good and bad.

As I mourned her passing, I began to look anew at the small group of black Christian LGBT folks I was working with as

It is the people in my churches and communities who have shaped me.

they tried to found a church. True, their lives revolved around issues of justice for all people regardless of race, sexual orientation or class. But they were also struggling with questions about their worth: self-esteem, family acceptance, body image and substance abuse. Justice was important, but I began to see that concern for justice must be tempered with grace. It was crucial that I helped them (and myself) to see the gift of unmerited favor from God and how this gift provides guidelines for living in which we must open up our hearts and lives to others with charity and understanding.

This experience has put me on a path of truly living what I first learned when I was a field-education student working with pastor and professor David Bartlett in the late 1970s: never speak a word of judgment without also speaking a word of grace. Both are required in ministry and in scholarship if one is serious about seeking wholeness for and with others.

Dad's death, just eight years later, was unexpected. My mother had noticed that he was declining but decided that she did not want to worry my sister and me. She called to tell me she had just found him in his favorite early-morning newspaper-reading chair. I asked Mom not to have Dad's body cremated until I could say good-bye. I rushed home in complete numbness and entered the funeral home with my mother and sister. I was struck with how small Dad was—he had shrunk some in death—and as I reached out to touch him, the first time I had done so with a dead body, I was surprised at how cool his body was. I kept hoping to see him draw breath again.

As we drove home, we began to share our feelings of those last moments with Dad's body and the ways in which he was wonderfully flawed. Later that night, as I struggled to feel past the numbness, the first chapter of Genesis began to blend with the first five verses of the first chapter of John. In the midst of my mourning, "and God said it was good" and "in the beginning was the Word" formed a prayer chant. It began to dawn on me that we spend far too much spiritual and theological energy on the doctrine of sin and not nearly enough time on the doctrine of creation. Yes, Dad was gone, but I began to real-

ize that part of what I felt in the funeral home as I looked at his familiar face and hands was similar to what I feel when I meet a newborn for the first time—the miracle of creation with its endless possibilities for us.

Mom's death in 2003 was heart-wrenching. She had fallen ill over Christmas break and died in January. When I arrived from New York, I had no idea that Mom had suffered three massive strokes the night before and that paramedics had rushed her to the hospital. They revived her after each stroke—against her medical directive. By the time my two aunts and I arrived at the hospital she was having seizures, and it was difficult to get answers from the nurse on duty. It took most of the day before a doctor would explain what had happened. As my sister rushed home from Provincetown, Massachusetts, where she was in an artist-in-residence program; I cared for Mom by wiping the spittle from her mouth, and I talked with her as it became clear that she was dying.

My aunts—her younger sisters—kept a silent vigil as they watched another sibling slipping away from them. As the day wore on, I recalled an earlier hospitalization, when Mom had minor surgery and was struggling to recover from the anesthesia. I realized, as I fed her ice chips and urged her to progress to the popsicles, that eventually I would be in this position again. Now that time had come. As we spent that day together, I began to feel an overwhelming sense of God's salvation—more expansive and comforting than anything I had ever experienced. No, this was not the way that Mom had wanted to die. She had wanted no heroic measures and did not want to linger. But this was not to be, so God held all of us—Mom, my aunts, my sister and me—as we held her into death. God did not abandon us, and this was beyond a deliverance from sin or evil. I became aware of the tremendous rebirth we were experiencing as we moved from life to death to new life. This was painful, but it was also comforting. Today I try to integrate this profound power of rebirth more intimately with the gift of deliverance as I teach and live.

I have learned that my story of faith must always be held in tension with the stories of others. As my mind has changed over the years, I am increasingly aware of how important it has been that these changes or unfoldings take place within communities—religious and not so religious. I have not been a solitary Christian for most of my journey of faith, though there have been times of what felt like unrelenting loneliness. The experiences of mourning I have described have an intensely personal as well as communal dimension. Ultimately, it has been the communal textures of this mourning that have helped me walk through my grief to find ways to lament and then to integrate the losses into living.

From my early years, faith communities have been the most important formative places for me as a Christian. As I have watched the extraordinary amount of ecclesiastical infighting that has erupted in recent years, I have become convinced that we need to stop trying to decide who is more holy or more representative of God's will or more closely aligned with tradition and instead place more emphasis on listening to each other as we express the hopes and questions that we bring to God daily. It is a form of arrogance to believe that we are right beyond question and that God speaks only to a select few. When we do so, we box God in, as though God is a divine possession rather than a holy presence. This denies the incredible gift of God's ongoing revelation in our lives and in creation.

Rather than practicing tolerance, we need to practice the wisdom that comes from recognizing our humanness. If the churches and its seminaries are to experience a renewal that is about more than counting the number of bodies in the pews, the size of the building, the spaces in the parking lot or the color of the carpet in the sanctuary, they must abandon the need to be right and instead turn to God's call for us to be faithful. It is exploring this call to faithfulness that has shaped my ministry as I work with my students and colleagues to think through and feel through what it means to be part of the people of faith.

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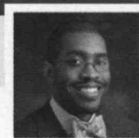

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The call to faithfulness can help us shape theological education that prepares folk for a world that is more Asian than Western, more female than male, more darker-skinned than white, and less Christian, less equitable and less well nourished than we are generally prepared to recognize. Churches and the expectations and needs of the people who are shaping them have changed and will continue to change. It is my hope that we have had enough of the pain caused by our need to impose narrow standards of acceptance and creativity.

I remain unconvinced that the mainline churches are in hopeless decline. I believe we are in the midst of a significant change in church and society, a change that many seminary and denominational officials and record-keepers ignore because it is altering the model of church we are familiar with. Churches are mega, tall-steeple, medium-sized or small, denominational or independent. They run the gamut from born-again to prosperity gospel to traditional to liberationist. Some are a combination of these identities. Too often our curricula support a pastoral model that no longer reflects what many churches are asking for or need. Yes, preaching and visitation are still important. But more and more churches realize that their ministries are calling for other skills, such as community organizing, political analysis, coalition building beyond religious organizations, and social strategizing.

Theologically, we need to think through what these skills require and how we prepare folk for leadership as we also continue to teach students about biblical reflection, about burying and marrying people, about denominational politics and about how to get the furnace started when the pilot light goes out. We need to help students understand—and to remind ourselves—that theology is done not only by Karl Barth, James Cone, Gustavo Guitérrez or Delores Williams. The children, men and women in our pews who come with overwhelming questions at times also do theology. Perhaps the most faithful thing we can do is not rush to answer those questions or stifle them but rather listen to them, then take an amazing leap of faith and let those questions dwell in us for a season. In short, we can practice discernment and allow God's spirit, rather than human intellect, to guide us.

As I reflect on how my mind has changed, it occurs to me that it has always been the people in my churches and communities who have shaped me. Somewhere along the way, I came to realize that valuing institutions above people is bad for theology and dreadful for moral decision making. It is important to figure out whether we are using what we call "faith" to abuse others and ourselves or are seeking to draw closer to God. We need an expansive sense of salvation and a robust understanding of creation, and we need to know that we are not dipped, we are not sprinkled, we are not immersed—we are washed in the grace of God.

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