

The Rev. Wil Gafney, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Hebrew and Hebrew Bible
The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia
2008 Annual Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature, Boston, MA

Surviving and Thriving in the Biblical Academy

“Hebrew Bible is the last realm of despotism in the civilized world.” So spoke the senior white male scholar, who noticed and nurtured my gifts when I was a seminarian, Gene Rice of the Howard University School of Divinity. Dr. Rice’s characterization does not fit the totality of my experience in graduate school or on a seminary faculty, but there are moments where it most certainly applies.

In my scholarship and personal religious life, I am a pluralist. In that spirit today I will exegete some extra-canonical texts and offer some trito-canonical commandments.

A reading from the prophecies of Billie Burke: “To survive there, you need the ambition of a Latin-American revolutionary, the ego of a grand opera tenor, and the physical stamina of a cow pony.” I don’t know where Burke’s “there” is, but I know the text fits the biblical guild.

A psalm of Irena Klepfisz:

These words are dedicated to those who survived
because life is a wilderness and they were savage
because life is an awakening and they were alert
because life is a flowering and they blossomed
because life is a struggle and they struggled
because life is a gift and they were free to accept it.

A reading from the Epistle of Ernest Hemingway: “Survival, with honor, that outmoded and all-important word, is as difficult as ever and as all-important to a writer.”

The gospel according to Gloria Hull: “All of the women are white, all of the blacks are men, but some of us are brave.”

Our email invitation asked us to “share both some highlights and lowlights of [our] experiences that [we] would feel comfortable sharing in public.” There are some stories that I simply cannot share in public. Of those that I can, highlights include having senior white faculty whom I read as a student and taught as a professor come up to me

after my first SBL paper, invite me to apply for a job, send me a book to review and bring me in for a prestigious endowed lecture. Thank you Johanna van-Wijk Bos. Lowlights include being told by a noted white female scholar that I didn't write well enough to go to graduate school. Having that scholar refuse to speak to me when we were on the same panel was more highlight than lowlight.

In reality, the faculty who were most supportive for me from seminary to my doctoral program are women and men, white and black. Perhaps the most significant mentoring I received came from the late, and perhaps sainted, Roland Murphy, who decided that I was going to Duke and refused to write any letters of recommendation for me unless I put in a Duke application. The man white-mailed me.

While it is true that I have been supported as a student and well-received as a colleague by black and white scholars, it is also the case that some of my most difficult moments have been with white women who call themselves feminists. I am particularly disappointed at the white women colleagues who ignore the race privilege that accompanies their gender peril. It has not been my experience that my black male colleagues expect me choose blackness over my gender. And, last year's panel on the experiences of so-called women in the biblical guild was actually a discussion of white women's experiences. My remarks in that setting may have something to do with why I am here today.

In my institutional context, I have benefited from close relationships with the black women who comprise much of our administrative staff. It has been important for me to have black women in my workplace with whom I can have lunch and decompress.

I have had wonderful moments with my students of all ethnicities and genders, some challenging moments and some truly painful ones. This year I directed our Prologue to Theological Education, becoming particularly fond of our entering class. The feeling seems to be mutual; they surprised me with roses and wine on the last day, unlike any of the past directors. I find at this point in my teaching, the fifth year, I am not experiencing some of the inappropriate behavior that I experienced from students in past years framed around my ethnicity and gender. In the past I have had white male students call me by my first name and then savage my evaluations, claiming that I was too authoritative after I insisted that they address me as they do our most senior and

occasionally grumpy, white male scholar. I have had white female and male students copy me on email ridiculing or castigating me, and calling me incompetent. I've had white female students congratulate me on "looking like a regular person rather than some kind of fancy African lady," and write me a six-page, hand-written letter – on the first day of class – telling me that I cannot teach, need to take lessons from her high school math teacher because I told them to explore their Hebrew textbook, looking for the *alphabet*, glossary, etc. rather than give them page numbers.

I've also experienced students using their own voices to silence sexist behavior directed towards me by a black male student. He interrupted me in class to call for a meeting of all the students – without me – immediately after class. I didn't say anything. Later I asked a black woman who had taken five courses in six semesters with me if she was comfortable telling me what happened, unless it was confidential. She laughed and explained: the instigator told the students that I was biased against black men and failing him intentionally. Then the black men who were excelling in the class told him that he needed to come to class and hand in the weekly assignments and they didn't appreciate the way he disrespected me. The black women accused him of disrespecting the white women faculty as well. The white women joined in the chorus, followed by the white and Latino men. My female student told me they "had my back" and would never let anyone treat me badly. I was stunned and amused.

Another black man in the class told me on the first day that he wanted to study the subject but he wasn't interested in any feminist stuff. By the end of the class he told me he might be a feminist and invited me to preach in his parish. I preached for him again this year and he introduced me as "the feminist prophet of our time."

And just this week an older white woman who is graduating and who was approved for ordination this semester gave me an angel sculpture. I realized that she had given me another one previously, but anonymously. I was quite surprised that she was my benefactor. For her initial ordination essay was so bad – completely lacking footnotes, exegesis, analysis or any indication that she had been educated, that a colleague and I required her to write an addendum. She reported us to the President for adding a layer to the process without the permission of the church. Yet here she was in my office, literally,

hugging and kissing me and with my bemused permission, holding my hands, praying for my continued teaching ministry.

I believe that I have benefited the most from relationships in my education and career. Mentoring and networking have opened doors and constructed entirely new buildings for me. Senior scholars and my peers in and out of bible, women and men, black, white, Jewish, Christian, lesbian and not, on and outside my faculty, have been such good friends and colleagues to me, across this nation and across more than a few international borders. Let me just name some names: Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Katie Geneva Canon, I've already mentioned Johanna Bos, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, Gale Yee, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Juan Floyd-Thomas, Stephen Ray, Randy Bailey, Valerie Bridgeman, Rodney Sadler, Angela Bauer-Levesque, Frank Yamada, Cheryl Anderson and more, have helped me to survive and thrive.

The organizations which have been most beneficial to me are: The Fund for Theological Education, the Womanist list-serve, the Association of Theological Schools Women In Leadership, the Association of Theological Schools Committee on Race and Ethnicity and the Wabash Center.

At FTE I met African American religious scholars who have become friends and colleagues for life. My FTE mentors have read drafts of my dissertation, introduced me to my eventual publisher, vetted my CV, practiced my interview skills, held my hand, consoled and prayed for me. Sharon Watson-Fluker is the mother of an entire generation of black religious scholars.

The womanist list-serve continues to be virtual church, classroom and public square. It has saved me and kept me saved.

The ATS programs have allowed me to form cross-cultural and interdisciplinary relationships in a safe, survival-oriented, strategizing space. Her Majesty the Queen, Marcia Foster-Boyd mentored and prayed me through my dissertation, the hiring process and continues to nurture and sustain me.

What can I say about Wabash? I'm only a third of the way through the workshop for non-tenured theological school faculty. But that third has redesigned my syllabi and revitalized my teaching. I feel prepared for my tenure process, and only slightly scared. Wabash has given me conversation partners without peer and gotten me on Facebook.

All of these experiences have led to my ten commandments for surviving the academy as a woman of color: *Torah b'yad Wilda Huldah miBeyt Gafni* ~

Thou shalt not allow anyone to divide thy person into the sum of its parts – ethnic, gender, orientation, religious affiliation or lack thereof.

Thou shalt not place collegiality or institutional loyalty above thine own career.

Thou shalt develop mentoring relationships with senior scholars on thy faculty.

Thou shalt develop trust-bearing relationships with scholars in and outside thy field of all ranks, genders and ethnicities outside of thy institution.

Thou shalt consult the elders before making stupid decisions because thou wilt not know that they are stupid until it is too late, but thine elders can see it coming.

Thou shalt manage thy time well and meet deadlines, developing strategies and/or schedules for when to write what.

Thou shalt pursue thine own research interests, while writing for projects requested by thy peers whether they interest you or not - for one day thou wilt need those colleagues to write in thy projects, not to mention for thine retention, promotion and tenuring.

Thou shalt covet time with the one or ones thou lovest.

Thou shalt mentor junior scholars and graduate students.

Thou shalt observe a Sabbath – religious or not – a time of rest for thy body. Thou mayest attend the gymnasium or spa on thine Sabbath. Thou mayest travel on thine Sabbath to mountain bike, hike, snorkel or otherwise enjoy thy gift of thy flesh.

Let me conclude with a reading from the Carolina-California Talmud, our sage Dorothy Allison taught us in *Survival is the Least of My Desires*, “I need you to do more than survive. As writers, as revolutionaries, tell the truth, your truth in your own way. Do not buy into their system of censorship, imagining that if you drop this character or hide that emotion, you can slide through their blockades. Do not eat your heart out in the hope of pleasing them.”