

Invitations to the journey

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I am a groupie. I am a groupie of writers and academics.

While my friends have cherished entertainers and athletes, my mouth fell open when I first met Toni Morrison, Thadious Davis, Henry Louis Gates Jr., bell hooks, James Cone and Gloria Wade Gayles.

When I read books that move me, the authors become heroes to me. Although I am older, my groupie-like nature has not changed. I am overwhelmed to be in the same room with the people whose books have changed my life, my theology and my spirituality. For me, the FTE conference is like one big fan-fair. I am ready to run up to the invited conference faculty and ask for an autograph or the privilege of shaking their hands.

At FTE, I see my heroes become human beings. Emilie Townes talks about the ways in which she researches. Traci West walks us through the challenges of interdisciplinary methodologies. Over

breakfast, I ask Linda Thomas about her use of anthropological method in the study of religion. After lunch, Dwight Hopkins and I discuss my impressions of his most recent book.

I notice that the scholars assembled among the conference faculty are not isolated teachers at different universities, but colleagues and friends. I look around at the other fellows, imagining us in six to 20 years. We, who sit here taking notes by day and watching the NBA playoffs together by night, will be colleagues and friends for the rest of our professional lives.

In three short days, I am reminded that being a religious scholar is bigger than the things that have occupied my mind during the first year of the doctoral program. This vocation, they tell me, is more than the presentation I have to give on Thursday, picking topics for my qualifying exams, formatting the footnotes for my paper on Wesley, and mastering the metaphysics of Whitehead. Being a religious scholar, they say, is



about academic integrity, professional development, learning from your peers, contributing to the community and truly enjoying your work.

This became most clear on the final day of the conference. After a compelling sermon by Emilie Townes, one of the fellows began to sing the spiritual, "Guide My Feet." We all chimed in – book publishers, faculty, Fellows and FTE staff. We sang several rounds: *Guide my feet Lord while I run this race.*

I saw then that my heroes are not far away from me at all. We are together, needing guidance, helping each other, enriching each other's research and diversifying our respective fields. They remind me that teaching religion is not being a celebrity.

Rather, it is an invitation into the same journey, a common path. I do not walk away from FTE conferences feeling like an adoring fan or a busy student. I feel like a younger sister, a future colleague, a co-journeyer.

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