

## ADDRESS

President Robert Weisbuch, Provost Pamela Gunter-Smith, Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar, Bishop Jeremiah Park, Bishop Hee-Soo Jung, Bishop John Shelby Spong, the Rev. Dr. Hae-Jong Kim, members of the Board of Trustees, fellow Deans and Presidents of the Association of United Methodist Theological Schools, Deans and Presidents of seminaries, delegates of academic institutions and ecclesial bodies, especially the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, colleagues on the Cabinet, faculty and staff, alumni and students, and distinguished guests, greetings in the name of Jesus Christ and of all that is holy!

I stand before all you today keenly aware of the enormous honor and task that the communities of faith and higher education have conferred upon me. I stand in a long tradition of significant presidents and deans of the Theological School. I am honored by the presence of three of my predecessors, Dean Fishburn, Dean Sweet, and Dean Yardley.

I am grateful for the presence of my family with me today from the Bay Area, Australia, and Singapore. I hope that my late parents are smiling upon me this day. My parents grew up in Malaysia during the Second World War and never had the educational opportunities that they eventually made sacrifices for all their eight children to have. My father would always tell all of us that the inheritance we would receive from him is our education and so he worked hard so that he could send all of us abroad for our college education. I wish they could have lived this day to witness their son serving as Chair of the Division of Higher Education of GBHEM and installed as the Dean of a university's theological school. By conferring this high honor upon me, you join me in honoring the legacy of my late parents.

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As a child growing up in Malaysia, I had a particular fascination with the Chinese legend and folktale, *Journey to the West* (*Xī Yóu Jì*; 西游記), also known as the legend of the Monkey King, Sun Wukong. This is a fictionalized story of the journey of a famous Chinese Buddhist monk, Xuanzang (玄奘), who set out on a journey to India to retrieve the Buddhist sutras of “transcendence and persuasion for good will” back to the East in order to help deal with the endemic greed and evils of his society. On his way, he met and took on four disciples, most notably, Sun Wukong (孫悟空) and Zhu Bajie (豬八戒), Monkey King and Pig respectively. As a child, I was most fascinated with Monkey King, who is bold, daring, mischievous, and rebellious. He has also mastered the art of polymorphic transformation.

This story reminds me of my own journey into theological and higher education, one I would describe as a *Journey to the East*. It all began with a call to ordained ministry when I was 17. My journey took me slightly eastward to Singapore for my theological education. There I was known as a mischievous and rebellious seminarian. Returning to the Malaysia to serve as a pastor, I quickly discovered that I needed to expand on my learning, and so with boldness and daringness as a young adult, I uprooted and took my family eastward, crossing the Pacific Ocean to the United States, first to Dallas, and then to Atlanta, where studying the sacred scriptures became the focus. That journey would take me westward to teach at Pacific School of Religion for almost twenty years. Since then, I have crisscrossed the four directions so much that it is hard to tell which is “east” and which is “west,” let alone “north” and “south.” In defiance of any GPS system, I am beginning to see that what I am called to in this *Journey to the East*, much like the fictional journey of Monkey King, is a calling to the pursuit of “transcendence

and persuasion for good will.” In the lingo of theological schools, we say it is a calling to prepare leadership for the transformation of the world.

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Whenever we hear “trip,” we are bound to ask for a “destination”; when we hear “journey,” we likely think of laborious wilderness wanderings. However, as it is found in all great stories and histories of our human experience, we all know that there is never a fixed “point of arrival,” and the adventure lies in Monkey-King-like polymorphic transformations on the way. “When do we get there?” seems secondary to “how?” and “why?” In higher and theological education for the training and preparation of religious and academic leadership, we call this the obsession with “content” and “method.” Put differently, how do we as theological educators help our students embark on their journeys and how do we walk alongside them in their journeys?

Drew Theological School has been on a journey in theological education for more than 140 years. Along the way, there have been incredible polymorphic transformations, and such a legacy cannot be more *a propos* for theological education in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. As many of Drew’s distinguished faculty have expressed, in this increasingly plural world, in which localities are intricately linked in webs of global connection, theological education must find expression in multiplicity, communal and global partnerships, and such critical hermeneutic frameworks as pluralism, feminism, liberationism, postcolonialism, and ecological and environmental responsibility toward the pursuit of the flourishing of humanity and the Earth. Additionally, theological education must be attentive to the multiplicity and polyvalency of tongues, making necessary the particularity and centrality of voices from across racial, cultural, and religious demarcations. Taking seriously our shared lot in a global community,

theological education is not just interested in “small talk”—we strive for hard talk, demanding friendships, and challenging partnerships. This particular orientation of our journey in theological education requires polymorphic transformations of our cultural and theological imagination, as Taiwanese cultural theorist Kuan-Hsing Chen puts it, to “[diversify] our frames of reference, multiply our perspectives, and enrich our subjectivity.”<sup>1</sup>

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Drew Theological School is already positioned to respond to polymorphic shifts. We not only have a very diverse student body, but our mission statement also speaks succinctly about “historical commitments to African, Asian, African-American and Hispanic ministries.” We teach ministry as culturally contextualized because we understand humans beings and human communities to be culturally contextualized. De-centering monolithic centers, we robustly seek ways to develop polycentric curricula, to prepare “pastors, preachers and prophets, deacons, activists, and teachers” for changing cultural and religious landscapes in the U.S.

My hope as Dean is that our theological education here at Drew will increasingly become more global in its orientation. Expanding transnational teaching and learning relationships, I hope we can begin to explore together what progressive Christianity and progressive religion can look like in a global context. I am very confident that Drew Theological School’s pioneering legacy will help move us in our journey of theological education.

Founded by the audacious spirit of the Methodist Episcopal Church to establish a national seminary, Drew has been a pioneer in many aspects. It was this spirit that led to the appointment of Mildred Moody Eakin as the first full-time woman faculty in

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<sup>1</sup> *Asia As Method*, 255.

1932, to be followed by the appointment of Nelle Morton in 1956. It was this pioneering spirit that led the school to appoint George Kelsey as the first African American and non-white person on to its faculty in 1951. It was this pioneering spirit that led the faculty of the Theological School in 1986 to make an intentional decision to increase its women and racial-ethnic representation on the faculty. Today, our faculty is 45% women and 45% racial-ethnic. It was this same pioneering spirit that led the school to appoint Maxine Clarke Beach as the first woman to lead a United Methodist theological school in 2000. Here I stand today, a beneficiary of this pioneering spirit which has become a hallmark of Drew Theological School, a spirit of boldness and daringness to call me as the first Asian American to lead one of our United Methodist theological seminaries. It is this pioneering spirit that has allowed Drew to form numerous clergy, religious leaders, and scholars in these last 144 years, leaders who are in turn transforming faith communities and shaping new academic disciplines.

And it is all of this, my friends, which makes Drew Theological School “a very special place.”

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We have a responsibility as inheritors of this special place. We are accountable to our forebears who lived out Drew’s longstanding pioneering spirit. We have a responsibility to the church, to faith communities, to form religious leadership that is relevant and responsible to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are accountable to the academia for maintaining rigorous intellectual traditions that is freeing, equitable, and accessible. We are responsible to public life that our theological education leads to the dismantling of all forms of oppression exercised on account of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, religion, ability. We believe in these responsibilities because we are persuaded by the transcendence of the common good.

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In the conclusion of the story of the *Journey to the West*, Xuanzang, the monk, and Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, both are transformed and achieve Buddhahood. My *Journey to the East* which started with theological education and ministry and pushing me toward a global theological education has been a journey of polymorphic transformations. As I continue to head east and eventually coming full circle back in Asia, I am no longer the same person that began this journey 36 years, nor is Asia the same place that I left. Likewise, Drew Theological School is hardly the same school that began 144 years ago. In our respective and intertwining journeys, I hope that “we’ve been changed for the better” and that “we’ve been changed for good”!

Thank you...