

For God Did Not Give Us a Spirit of Timidity, but of Power
Women Seminarians' Struggles to Claim Authority and Giftedness

In the first chapter of his second letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul tells Timothy that he is grateful to God when he remembers him in his prayers. He tells Timothy that he longs to see him so that he may be filled with joy. Paul says that he remembers Timothy's sincere faith; a faith that lived first in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, and that now lives in him. Then Paul states in verses 6-7, "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of hands; for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."¹ I thought of this passage when deciding on the title of my project for two reasons. First, one of the primary motivating factors of this project was my sense that many women seminarians quickly forget the "gift of God" that is within them shortly after their arrival at Duke Divinity School. The strong sense of call they had, which led them to this place often gives way to doubt, insecurity, and "timidity." I have witnessed many women hide their brilliant questions, insightful comments, and leadership gifts. I have noticed a deep and difficult struggle on the part of many women to claim their authority, intelligence, and voice.² This has troubled me. Through this project, I hoped to do for the women of the Divinity School what Paul did for Timothy- to help remind them of the power that God has given to them.

The second reason I decided on this passage was to honor Lois and Eunice, Timothy's mother and grandmother. In all of my years attending worship, Sunday School and youth group, I never once heard that the faith of Timothy- the very faith, which inspires Paul to give thanks to

¹ New International Version

² I think it is important to state that I count myself among the women who have struggled to claim these gifts.

God- lived first in his mother and his grandmother. Lois and Eunice’s invisibility struck me as related to the phenomenon I had begun to notice regarding women seminarians and their struggles to claim their giftedness. When women seminarians hide their gifts, or when the community fails to draw out and appreciate their gifts, they remain invisible like Lois and Eunice. As I’ve started to pay attention to this phenomenon, I have seen it at work in other areas of my life; therefore, I want to say upfront that I do not think it’s a phenomenon unique to Duke Divinity School. That said, as I’ve begun to pay attention to this phenomenon at work here in this place, I’ve grown increasingly convinced that a failure to explore this struggle would mean that numerous gifts and talents might continue to remain hidden. This, in my opinion, amounts to unfaithfulness on the part of our community. As a place that exists for the explicit purpose of forming and equipping ministers, I believe it is our responsibility to ensure that the *imago dei* in every person is being fostered.

Essay Outline

To begin this paper, I will discuss the goals and methodology of my project. Next, I will put forth a theological framework for both the project and the paper. Following the theological framework, I will describe noteworthy patterns and observations based on the interviews, including three striking patterns of which I will offer a tentative analysis.³ To conclude the paper, I will suggest other patterns and observations that warrant further consideration.

³³ I state that the responses I offer to each pattern are “tentative,” because I believe that in order to make more certain claims I would not do a significantly greater amount of research and analysis, which is beyond the scope of this project. (I would need to explore such questions as: How insecure were the students *before* entering divinity school? How much of this is part of a larger cultural problem?)

Goals

My desire to honor the legacy of Lois and Eunice through the title of this project relates to the first of the project's three goals. First, by asking the women I interviewed to share and reflect upon their experiences at the Divinity School with me, I hoped to provide a platform where their voices were heard and their experiences taken seriously. Secondly, through qualitative interviews with women, I hoped to explore in greater depth my sense that significant numbers of women struggle with confidence in themselves and with their ability to understand themselves as leaders, and 3) Through these interviews, I wanted to see if any patterns would surface; patterns that might point to deeper systemic issues or help us better understand how to support women at the Divinity School.

My third and final goal was to invite a conversation about the issues addressed in the project. The goal of *conversation* is worth emphasizing because my intention has not been to make absolute claims or to suggest that the experiences of the women I interviewed for this project are universal. I do not wish to suggest that the experiences of the women I've interviewed or the patterns I see among them are universal to *all* women at the Div School, nor do I wish to suggest that men at the Divinity School do not face similar struggles. Contemporary feminist theorists debate among themselves whether or not we can even point to a *universal* experience shared by all women, and even among the 13 women I interviewed a diversity of experiences was present.⁴ Rather than drawing definitive conclusions or making absolute claims, my hope has been that by exposing *some* of the struggles faced by *some* women at the Divinity School, a

⁴ In her book, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, Lucy Atkinson Rose writes on p. 128, "Feminists have undercut many claims about 'common human experience'...shifting from what is 'human,' they have turned their attention to describing 'women's experience.' This new naming, however, has been equally imperialistic because, again, of claims to universality."

larger conversation would be started; a conversation about how we affirm the gifts of women and men in our community, how we make space for *all* perspectives at the table, and how we can respond faithfully and sensitively to those who feel on the margins (whether for reasons related to gender, race, tradition, age, or otherwise.)

Methodology

As mentioned above, my research for this project was qualitative, rather than quantitative. I interviewed 12 women total; 9 students and 4 professors. I aimed for diversity in terms of race/ethnicity and age; however, I cannot say whether or not the interviewees reflected a perfect cross section of students in terms of race, class, age, and theological perspective. My approach was simply to invite *third-year graduating students* to interview with me with whom I had previous conversations that led me to believe they might have significant things to say about the topic at hand. In terms of race/ethnicity, five of the students were Anglo-American, three were African-American, and one student was Asian-American. They ranged in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties, with most falling in the age range of twenty-five to thirty-five. My approach to faculty was similar to my approach to students; I asked five female faculty members if I could interview them based on some sort of previous encounter or relationship with them. 4 agreed; 1 declined for personal reasons. Three professors interviewed were Anglo-American and one was English.

I should state that although I attempted to record each interview, problems occurred when I transferred the data to the computer program, which allows me to listen to the recordings. Due to the problems that occurred during the data transmission, some sections of the interviews were erased. Unfortunately, that required me to paraphrase some of the students' comments based on the notes I took. When I cite students' responses below, I used quotations for those comments

that are repeated directly. Those without quotation marks represent comments that are paraphrased. In order for the students to remain anonymous, I refer to the students using numbers rather than their names. I chose this route rather than creating fictional names because I feared I would lose track of the names and use someone's real name.

Theological Framework

In terms of the theological framework for this project, I drew heavily on Dr. McClintock Fulkerson's lecture on theological anthropology and the three different levels of agency.⁵ During her lecture, Dr. McClintock Fulkerson makes it a point to emphasize that we are *finitely good* creatures. And just as human beings are finitely good and therefore will inevitably experience loss and failure, so too, institutions and communities are *finitely good*. They may have good intentions and meet good ends, but inevitably achieving one good often involves ignoring or denying other goods. Dr. McClintock places this reality under the category of the "tragic"; not as in tragedies such as earthquakes, but the reality that as *finite* beings part of *finite* communities, there will always be an "unclosable gulf between desiring and the desired."⁶

In addition to theological anthropology, the Christian doctrine of sin also bears significance for my project. In order to understand how a doctrine of sin might inform a project focused on women's experiences, I drew on the work of Serene Jones In an essay entitled, "What's Wrong with Us?" Jones reiterates her understanding that living in sin is living in a state that opposes God's will for our flourishing. She then states, "Sin is thus a state, a general all encompassing condition, not individual acts—though a state of sinful existence certainly gives

⁵ I have had the privilege of hearing Dr. McClintock Fulkerson lecture on theological anthropology through my participation in the following classes: "Prophetic Ministry," "Feminist and Womanist Theologies," and "Gender and Strategic Leadership."

⁶ Dr. McClintock Fulkerson, Lecture Outline, Lecture entitled, "Theological Anthropology," given to the "Gender and Strategic Leadership" class on 3/18/09.

rise to acts that can be called “sins”...The Christian tradition asserts that this general state of unfaithfulness is universal in scope. Everyone is in it; no one escapes it.”⁷ An understanding of sin as social, or as a condition, is important for a project like this because in discussing unhealthy patterns I’ve observed here in this place, I am not suggesting that any person or any group of people is intentionally or maliciously hurting other persons. I’m suggesting instead that because we are fallen people, born into a fallen world with fallen institutions,⁸ we all have blinders. We are all quite capable of perpetuating harmful systems or acting unknowingly in ways that hurts others. For this reason, I believe it’s important from time to time to critically reflect on the health and faithfulness of our communities.

Observations, Patterns, and Reflections

I noticed many themes and patterns, some very positive and encouraging, others troubling. I will begin by briefly acknowledge several positive observations, and then I will explore 3 strikingly prevalent patterns. Following each pattern, I will offer an analysis of the pattern. My studies of Christian theology, feminist theory, systems theory, and feminist homiletics will inform my responses to the observed patterns.

Many positive patterns and themes emerged from my interviews with the students. First, almost all of the students expressed that their time at Duke Divinity School had served to help them gain a greater knowledge of themselves. For example, in response to the question, “If you were going to choose a few words or phrases to describe your experience at Duke Divinity what

⁷ Jones, Serene, “What’s Wrong with Us?” in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, William C. Placher, ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 149.

⁸ On p. 31 of his book, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millenium*, Walter Wink writes, “Are the Powers intrinsically evil? Or are some good?...The answers seems to be: none of the above. Rather, they are at once good and evil, though to varying degrees, and they are capable of improvement. Put in stark simplicity: The Powers are good. The Powers are fallen. The Powers must be redeemed.”

would they be?” one student responded, “Had to get to know myself.” Another theme I heard repeated among many students was their sense that they felt much more equipped to fulfill their calling as ministers now than they did before they entered divinity school. Students also used the word “transformative” to describe their time at the Divinity School, especially in response to the aforementioned question.

Two positive themes emerged regarding the students’ confidence. First, the majority of the students expressed confidence in preaching skills. Most students attributed their confidence in preaching (or their growing confidence in preaching) as due to the instruction and practice they gained from preaching classes, as well as the preaching opportunities they had through field education. A second theme I noticed regarding the students’ confidence related to their significant growth in ability to speak up in class. The reasons for this growth varied, but most students who mentioned this growth seemed very pleased by it. Many described the process as gradual, stating that getting to know other students better and moving further along the track helped increase their confidence. One student, however, described a different reason. In response to the question, “Do you feel confident asking questions or making comments during lectures or class discussions?” this student responded, “Yes. I have not always felt confident, but in fighting to be heard and taken seriously I’ve become confident and I’ve learned to affirm myself.” In response, I asked her, “Do you think there’s freedom here to voice your perspective?” She responded strongly, “No, I don’t think there’s freedom, but that gives me reason to keep asking.”

Finally, another positive theme I noticed was that professors expressed a deep sense of gratitude for the opportunity to work with students and participate in their formation as ministers. My favorite statement to this effect was from a professor who stated simply, “The students are manna.”

As mentioned above, I observed three strikingly prevalent patterns. The first pattern that jumped out at me relates to students' experiences participating in field education and C.P.E. In response to the question, "During your time at Duke Divinity, do you feel your call to ministry has been affirmed? If so, how?" -*6 out of 9 students* responded by citing field education and/or C.P.E. as playing a significant role in their sense of affirmation. Three students almost mentioned the importance of C.P.E. or field education as being a place where they had opportunities to exercise their gifts and skills.

Several responses from students illustrate the prevalence of this pattern, especially those in response to the question, "During your time at Duke Divinity, do you feel your call to ministry has been affirmed? If so, in what ways?" In response to that question, students said:

- Student 4- field ed has been most affirming. Perception of perfect pastor shattered [in a good way] and the rituals I performed through C.P.E. was powerful.
- Student 3- CPE dealt with a lot emotionally. I felt affirmed because I got through it and didn't lose my mind!
- Student 7- "Oh, yes, I've been affirmed...by working in field ed and C.P.E...I was able to become more self-aware of my calling. Others evaluate you and after 3 or 4 times of evaluation you sense God's steering in your life, you sense how other people see you and what gifts in you they are being blessed by."
- Student 8- "Yes- used to think only track outside of ordained ministry was PhD- field ed changed this- It helped me to realize I was capable. Before field ed I was "terrified" seeing myself as a minister, especially because I wasn't baptized, but field ed affirmed/encouraged my call to ministry."

Another key illustration comes from a response to the question, “Have you had opportunities to exercise your gifts and skills at Duke Divinity School? If so, please describe some of those opportunities.” In response, Student 8 said yes, through CPE and gender-related classes. She felt especially affirmed through these experiences to explore her passion for ministry related to domestic violence. Another student stated, “CPE was crucial for me in learning you don’t always have to have the answers.” Finally, after describing an awful experience at her first field education placement, Student 5 expressed great appreciation for the freedom and responsibility she was given in her field education placement the following summer. During that placement she was given authority to write two Vacation Bible School curricula, and she also had many preaching opportunities. Regarding the VBS curricula, the student stated, “I did it. We used it. And it worked!”

I must make one caveat to the above claims regarding the first pattern. Although the majority of students expressed a sense of affirmation through field education and C.P.E., three students did mention having horrible experiences at one of their field education placements. One student stated that she was disappointed by the response from the field education office, and two students mentioned that it took them one year to recover their confidence after these experiences.

The following questions arise for me in response to this first pattern: first, what does it mean that women feel most affirmed in field education and C.P.E., both of which are *outside* the classroom? Second, is this prevalent among most students- women *and* men, or is there something unique about where, when, and how women students receive affirmation? I have no way of knowing whether or not male students also feel most affirmed through field education and C.P.E. since I did not have time to interview male students; however, I think it’s a question worth further consideration. Perhaps female *and* male students feel most affirmed in their call to

ministry in these settings simply because they are hands-on settings where students not only have the freedom, but also the responsibility to step into the shoes of “minister” and “pastor.” Another way of understanding this pattern might be to see it as simply a sign of how these particular women feel most affirmed. Many of the women responded to my request that they name for me their gifts and strengths by stating relational gifts (such as the ability to listen, be present with, etc.) Perhaps because of their heightened sense of their relational gifts, these women naturally feel most affirmed in situations where they are directly required to draw on these gifts.

On the other hand, I wonder if this pattern suggests an antiquated notion of gender and gender equality on the part of the Divinity School community. More specifically, might the fact that the majority of students interviewed felt most affirmed through C.P.E. and field education suggest that (consciously or sub-consciously) women at the Divinity School remain valued first and foremost for their ability to exhibit relational gifts? Could it be that women’s place at the table continues to be justified through the unique gifts we bring as “women”?⁹ Are we recognized more for our ability to nurture, express empathy, and work collaboratively than we are for our ability to think critically or engage in philosophical or theological dialogue? Again, I cannot come to any conclusions regarding this pattern due to the fact that I only interviewed

⁹ In their book, *Women on Power: Leadership Redefined*, Sue J. M. Freeman and Susan C. Bourque write on p. 15, “The assumed polarity between men and women has led some feminists to argue that women are better suited than men for contemporary leadership. They are that we need to assign new value to women’s purported emotional and empathetic qualities, and that a new and better form of leadership would emerge with an ‘ethic of care’ based on maternal values. We have sought to avoid this dichotomous thinking and attempted to depict women in their own right...We assume that men and women share the same capacity for intelligence, rational action, strength, and decisiveness. Thus, leadership capabilities ought to be distributed among both the male and female population.” I agree with Freeman and Bourque’s attempts to avoid dichotomous thinking and their view that women and men share the same capacity for intelligence, etc. I also feel that men share the same capacity for empathy, listening, etc. (the relational gifts women for which many women students felt affirmed), so on all accounts we should do as Freeman and Bourque suggest and appreciate the gifts and skills women and men have; not only those we think they should have.

women students. I do believe the questions above merit consideration, however, especially in light of the second pattern.

The second pattern that struck me may bear a connection to the first pattern. Upon reflecting on the interviews with students, I noticed that almost all of the students exhibited difficulty naming their intelligence and/or they expressed a lack of confidence in their academic abilities. Responses from students illustrate the prevalence of this pattern, especially those in response to the question, “Do you consider yourself intelligent?” In response to that question, students said:

- Student 6- “I do...this place was the first time I thought my intelligence wouldn’t make it... but I don’t think, no time here at this place has made me feel not intelligent...but then, I guess I’ll often say my work ethic exceeds my intelligence...doesn’t come easy- may not be that my thoughts are so profound or so intelligent, but that I’m able to articulate them clear enough that people can understand them.”
- Student 2- “Other people think I’m smart, but a lot of times I don’t... I’m old enough now to know it is silly, but it’s ingrained.” (I should add that this student previously worked as a partner of a law firm for many years before attending Divinity School!)
- Student 7- [long pause]...My feelings of intelligence vary in different environments...I feel most intelligent in church and in a class I’m taking at another institution. (It’s worth noting that at one point during the interview, this student told me that after leaving the Divinity School twice- partly out of frustration related to the curriculum and her sense that the “African-American

voice” was missing- the administration suggested that she participate in a “limited program” through which she would only take 3 classes per semester. The student felt this was inappropriate because during her time at the Divinity School she made mostly Bs. She also told me another story about how when she had a problem with a preceptor, she was told to work harder. The student said she was already working harder than ever, so she got this notion of being perceived as a lazy black student, when in essence she got tired of working so hard. The comments made her very insecure and unmotivated for some classes. In response, she said her self-esteem was oftentimes built through the activities outside of school.

- Student 4- “No, I’m not intelligent...I’m a thinker, but not on a deep level.”
- Student 8- “That’s a hard question- yes, but not intelligent enough...doesn’t sink in...I’m intimidated in class because I’ll read the book and it won’t sink in, but others will read it once and have all sorts of things to say about it...although, I guess intimidated isn’t the right word because I’m also annoyed sometime b/c I think it’s posturing.”

Many students made other related comments, although not directly in response to the question regarding whether or not they considered themselves intelligent. In describing her call to seminary, one student mentioned that she has always had a fear of school and academic work; this despite the fact that later she mentioned having earned a 4.2 grade point average in high school. Another student stated early on in our conversation, it’s “not that I’m not intelligent, coming here I felt intimidated...other classmates applied to Princeton...I came here after doing

interior decorating...I never took greek or religion...Where I've felt the most insecure is in class here."

Professors made comments related to this pattern as well, especially in response to the question, "Have you noticed any significant differences between male and female students as it relates to confidence in their academic work, confidence speaking in class, and/or confidence in the gifts and skills required for pasturing?" Two professors' responses to this question relate:

- Professor 2- "Yes, yes, yes! I've only had one woman who over-estimated academic abilities/dozens of men who have...many women in classes have no idea how gifted they are; how they have the raw academic gifts."
- Professor 3- (Admitting she's speaking in *broad* generalizations) Male students...seem to understand their good grades or achievements as the fruit of their hard work; women students seem to understand it more as "that was lucky" or they didn't deserve it...female students will often say things like, "Well, that professor is just an easy grader" regarding a high grade they received for a class.

Professor 1 also made a comment, which relates to this pattern. She stated, "The Divinity School has a way of narrating itself as the only game in town...people who don't fit that profile because they're not playing the same game or at the same status level...it can do a serious number on you. Not all, but many women faculty at the Divinity School have no sense of their status as scholars outside of Duke." (The professor meant that due to dynamics within Duke Divinity, female professors often do not know how highly regarded they are by their fellow scholars outside of the Duke Divinity community.) The professor suggested that the experience of "being a real scholar" too often takes place outside of Duke, in other institutions, conferences, even other countries.

The first thing to state in response to this pattern is that certainly many factors may contribute to this lack of confidence in academic capabilities among the women I interviewed (such as socialization, family background, religious tradition, etc.) The relevant question for this project is to look at the Divinity School and ask if there are ways the Divinity School perpetuates this gap between women's affirmation in ministry and their sense of intelligence/academic capabilities. Are there ways we could better support women (and other men who feel this way) by altering our system somehow? Also, if we are all members of one body, then what do we lose as a faith community when certain populations lack confidence in their gifts?

Drawing again on the work of Serene Jones, I want to suggest that failure to address these "false identities" among female students amounts to "unfaithfulness." Expounding on Calvin's doctrine of sin, Jones states that like individuals, communities and institutions can be bereft of the double gifts of grace (justification and sanctification) and hence live in a manner contrary to divine purposes.¹⁰ She defines an unfaithful culture as "one in which the social and institutional forms structuring identity are marked by relations of domination."¹¹ For Jones, when social and institutional forms structuring identity are marked by relations of domination, they have the effect of creating and undergirding "false identities" or "unfaithful identities." Moreover, the victims of sin in an unfaithful culture wear its effects on their bodies and in their psyches.¹²

Considered in light of Jones' understanding of sin, the widespread lack of confidence in academic abilities on the part of clearly intelligent and academically capable women suggests sinfulness on the part of our community. More specifically, it suggests that our community is marked by "relations of domination." In other words, this pattern reflects not only individual

¹⁰ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 113.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

struggles with identity, but also larger, systemic issues. Taking the last two patterns together, several questions arise that may shed light on systemic issues related to the “false identities” prevalent among many women at the Divinity School. First, it is worth considering the question- what counts as “smart” here? Second, how are practical ministry experiences related to the classroom? Is doctrine honored *over* practice? Third, are we fully honoring students’ various learning styles, or learning tools such as case-studies and immersion experiences the exception? It is worth noting that for many classes, the bulk of the student’s grade depends on their ability to write persuasive essays, often on abstract, theoretical topics. For some students, theory is difficult to grasp without a connection to the practical. For example, in response to the question, “Do you feel confident asking questions or making comments during lectures or class discussions?” one student stated that it depended on the professor and the size of the class. She continued by stating that when the conversation goes “cerebral” or “intellectual” she withdraws. I asked her if she withdrew out of disinterest or out of an inability to participate, and she said both. Sometimes she feels she can’t enter into the conversation because she can’t use the language (she said it “feels foreign”), and other times she removes herself out of disinterest.

By lifting up the previous example I do not wish to suggest that all women are disinterested in theory, or that all women learn better through more practical learning experiences such as “immersion experiences” or hypothetical case-studies. I do wish to acknowledge, however, that many women with whom I spoke seemed particularly interested in and affirmed by academic experiences directly related to hands-on ministry. Moreover, I wish to stress that no single method of teaching or learning works for everyone; therefore, the method of lecture-paper-lecture-paper so prevalent in the Divinity School experience may have the effect of stifling or hiding the creativity and giftedness of many students.

Based on limited research, it seems to me as though the Meadville Lombard Theological School may serve as an exemplary model of an education that takes seriously the need to connect practice and theory. One of the theological commitments, which undergirds the Meadville Lombard Educational Model (MLEM) is the “recovery of theology *as a way of life* from the longstanding treatment of theology *as a science*.”¹³ Consistent with their conviction that theology is a way of life, the MLEM infuses internship experiences *throughout* the student’s formation experience. The community partnership course for first-year students illustrates the way in which Meadville Lombard works to integrate theory and practice. The MLEM literature describes the course in this way:

“This course has several learning components to it: site work in a multi-cultural/multi-racial community setting; a two-hour seminar with various faculty members working with one another; a cohort group of students; and readings and a final project intended to demonstrate how the student has integrated their practical site experience with theories of ministry, theology, ethics, and religious education.”

The MLEM impresses me in the way that it takes seriously not only the different learning styles that exist among students, but also in the way that it breaks down the dichotomy between “academics” and field work. This model seems to suggest that engaging in ministry is academic work. Moreover, it suggests the importance of practical ministry experiences shaping the content and form of the academic curriculum.

Finally, in addition to considering how practice and theory are integrated at Duke Divinity School, I think an analysis of the power distribution among male and female faculty may also shed light on the struggles of many women at the Divinity School to claim their intelligence. I do not have the resources at my disposal to do any sort of comprehensive analysis; however, a few things are worth mentioning. First, to my knowledge, only one woman holds a chair at Duke

¹³ “Theological Reflections on the Meadville Lombard Educational Model,” by Dr. Michael Hogue, Assistant Professor of Theology, Meadville Lombard Theological School.

Divinity School, and that only happened within the last few weeks. Secondly, only four female professors have tenure. Third, more men than women teach core classes. The number of men versus women professors teaching core classes changes annually, but at least as long as the three years I've attended Duke Divinity School, the number of men has always exceeded the number of women. For those of us from my graduating class who stayed on paradigm, we had two female professors for introductory classes. The graduating class of 2010 did not have any female professors teach their core classes. However indirectly, these power dynamics may relate to the pattern of so many women students lacking confidence in their academic capabilities. The fact the professors with the most power and prestige are mostly male, may serve to foster the internalized belief among many female students that men are more gifted academically than women.

The third and final pattern that struck me was the widespread frustration among the students regarding classrooms dynamics and classroom conversation. Several responses illustrate this pattern, especially those in response to the question, "Do you feel confident asking questions or making comments during lectures or class discussions?" Some of the relevant responses include:

- Student 9- Usually, has to do with who's in the class-whether or not there are people with whom I'm familiar. More confident as a third year...I'm more intimidated around white males because of their arrogance and posturing- questions and comments to impress rather than for the good of the group."
- Student 1- I'm confident in pastoral situations...most insecure in class. Can't talk, even in classes where the professor is very validating... It's taken me three years to

- feel comfortable. (I asked, “Anything that would help?”) Student: Classmates not being out to prove something...wish uncertainty or not knowing would be expressed.
- Student 7- Depends on the class, overall I don’t feel comfortable. No. (I asked, “Is there a variable or variables that make you feel more or less comfortable?”) Student: Hmm...the only class I feel comfortable in right now is a class with all African-Americans, in the African-American studies department.
 - Student 4- “Questions? Absolutely! Comments took more time...normally my style was to make a comment through a question” ... Fear of not sounding intelligent...wanting to say the right thing. (Also, in response to last question of the interview when I asked if the student could think of anything that might help her feel more confident or competent, she replied, “Inclusion of more voices.” She said: the power dynamics are so vivid. Race, tradition, and gender- I want other people to be at the table to talk for themselves. There are people speaking up, but not being heard. There are some people who aren’t able to speak yet. In the meantime they’re being spoken for...sometimes confessions/disclaimers are excuses for insensitivity or exclusion.
 - Student 3- Yes. I have not always felt confident, but in fighting to be heard and taken seriously I’ve become confident and I’ve learned to affirm myself. (I asked, “Do you think there’s freedom here to voice your perspective?”) Student: No, I don’t think there’s freedom, but that gives me reason to keep asking. Note that earlier this student, in relation to the question, “Do you consider yourself confident?” said yes and proceeded to mention the way in which her family modeled that confidence for her, and also that she was a child of God, created in God’s image. She stated boldly,

“My God is no respecter of persons and neither am I.” She said that this didn’t mean she didn’t have respect for professors or preceptors, but that just because of their title she wasn’t afraid to speak up if she felt she had something to say. Interestingly, the use of theological language to articulate the reason for one’s confidence was prevalent among those who expressed a strong or growing sense of confidence.

- Student 5- “I do now...(I asked, “What made you feel uncomfortable before?) I just felt like fish out of water. I felt old...I don’t know, I just was very conscious of my ability to lactate ☺... I just didn’t feel comfortable. I would, sometimes I still do...If I have a bad day here, if I feel like I can’t speak up, I’ll go drive to...Panera and buy the kids’ cookies...because it’s a place where people are my age, and when they leave there, they’re heading to practice. (I asked, “What helped you feel more confident?”) The preceptor I told you about earlier¹⁴ ...Consistent feedback on papers by people who are superstars in their field. Hearing their comments and realizing *I thought something*, and they responded to it. The response to papers helped me feel confident speaking...But sometimes, even though I knew I had something to articulate, I was worried that people wouldn’t listen. Some students, especially younger students, talk about the “people in the church” so negatively. I had to say, *I am the people in the church*. I was reading Barth and Niebuhr *before* I got here. People need to know moms aren’t brain dead.

¹⁴ Earlier in the interview this student told a moving story about an experience with a preceptor that made a deep, positive impact on her. During her first semester at the divinity school, this student started to speak and an older, white classmate cut her off. The preceptor stopped the man and said that this student had something to contribute and he wanted to hear it. The preceptor stated that it was important to let each other speak. The student said it left such an impression on her because she was “so ready to be silenced” by her older, male classmate. She said this helped give her confidence and realize that she had something to say.

Another comment made by a student earlier in our conversation also relates. Student 2 stated, “During my first year in an OT precept when we were discussing feminist theologians and the naming of God...the preceptor...he just started out the whole discussion saying, if you believe in the Trinity, you’re going to have to call God Father. So, it was very much...not...it really was very insulting. I spoke up and said that I call God Mother, and then a classmate, he challenged me and said I just don’t see how you can be committed to Christianity and say that.” Another student, in response to the question asking for a few phrases to describe her experience at Duke Divinity stated that she felt Duke was too conservative. Then she said:

“I sort of feel like...because I professed being a feminist from day one I sort of feel like people think that I’m too radical. Or like, when I open my mouth, people are like, oh here comes the crazy feminist again. And I don’t know if that’s something that I’m anxious about so I think people are doing it to me..the first word that comes to mind is isolated in a way. I don’t know...maybe defensive; I’ve had to be defensive and kind of qualify my positions or my beliefs. That’s not even just been with my being a feminist, that’s been with like, especially in the beginning when I would tell people I didn’t belong to a denomination and I hadn’t been baptized...I didn’t have that problem so much among professors or administration, but I had that problem among the students. And the same thing with the feminism stuff. I think you probably remember that experience from OT when I came out crying because someone had laughed at me. I just really felt like I had to put my guard up.”

The question directed to professors, which I mentioned earlier also yielded relevant comments. I asked professors whether or not they noticed patterns among male and female students related to confidence, particularly confidence speaking in class. Below are relevant responses:

- Professor 1-“Male students much more likely to have inflated sense of their abilities; I’ve seen it in women students, but not as much. I see many women drawing on their gifts and owning them, but women report having a much harder time finding their voice in the pulpit and claiming authority in ministerial settings. I don’t really hear that from my male students. And it’s more likely to be men who dominate inappropriately in conversation. I think the male students are trained to do that [speak up]. Women seem to be trained not to

...speak unless they know the answer, if no one's saying anything. It's not something I struggled with personally as a student, but I've witnessed it in the classroom."

- Professor 4- Only difference is more women who don't speak in class. This may be an issue of introverted vs. lack of confidence.

Finally, I want to lift up another comment made by a student in response to the question of whether or not they feel comfortable asking questions in class. Student 6 replied:

"Depends on the professor...in the big intro classes I was more careful, more because of people asking questions that are self-interested. If I asked questions it was more clarification than challenge. In some ways it's about propriety in a large space...When it comes to smaller classes, seminar classes, I was more comfortable...but when conversation goes cerebral/intellectual is when I'm disinterested..when it's abstract and there's not a connection to real life, then I'm not necessarily going to concern myself completely with it. (Me: so it's a matter of interest vs. an ability or inability to engage?) I feel I can't enter in b/c I can't use the language- feels foreign... removed... I am removed from it, but I also remove myself. It's not completely passive. I think, too, it assumes such a knowledge that even entering the conversation seems risky. Because if you're not well enough prepared, you're going to fail. Not fail, but if you're not well-prepared or you can't speak the language then participation won't be helpful or equal."

Like the other patterns observed, a complex set of factors likely contributes to this pattern. For the purposes of this project, I want to suggest two ways of reading the frustration exhibited toward classroom dynamics.

One way of reading the students' widespread frustration regarding classroom dynamics relates directly to the last student response mentioned above. I began this project with the view that female students' hesitancy toward speaking in class was due to lack of confidence; however, through research and reflection I now want to suggest that one way of understanding their silence may be as a form of resistance. This idea first came to me after reading an essay by Maureen Mahoney in the book, *Women on Power: Leadership Redefined*. Mahoney argues that silence can represent a subjective sense of power as resistance and an active choice to "not do." Moreover, Mahoney suggests that "rather than relegating a girl or a woman to a life of acquiescence and loss of power, then, such silences may help foster the capacity to speak out

with confidence and authority.”¹⁵ Mahoney’s work helped me to understand that some students’ silence, such as the last student referenced (student 6), may be an active choice to withdraw from the conversation out of resistance or protest.

Taking the example of the student 6, she mentions two different reasons for her silence, both of which reflect choice and agency, rather than lack of confidence. First, she states that in the large classes she often didn’t ask questions because she felt it inappropriate to ask self-interested questions when the class is so large, and time for questions is limited. By not asking questions, she was resisting the “posturing” and “self-interested questions” so many students mentioned in their interviews. Secondly, student 6 also stated that sometimes she retreats from the conversation because she does not feel it’s safe. She stated that the language sometimes feels foreign and “it assumes such a knowledge that even entering into the conversation seems risky.” Thanks to Mahoney’s work, I can see the way in which, rather than reflecting a lack of confidence, this choice to retreat reflects agency and resistance to conversations that exclude some persons based on the language that’s being used or the knowledge that’s expected. Student 6 did not describe the “language” or “knowledge” about which she was speaking in detail, except to state that she had these experiences when the conversation went “cerebral” and “intellectual.” I suspect the dynamics she describes may relate to two things: first, the comments made by many of the students I interviewed regarding their frustration when students make comments to “impress” rather than for the good of the group. Having had several similar experiences myself, I have noticed that often students that make such comments and who monopolize the conversation based on *their* interests/knowledge are students engaged in or working toward PhD work. I have

¹⁵ Sue. J. M. Freeman, Susan C. Bourque, and Christine M. Shelton, eds., *Women on Power: Leadership Redefined*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 78.

had two classes where PhD/ThD students consistently drop names of theologians or scholars the class was not assigned to read, and rather than put boundaries on the conversation based on assigned readings, the professor fosters conversation on the topic, or at least fails to discourage comments of that nature. Student 6's comments about the language feeling foreign may also related to the sense among some students that they were at a disadvantage for not studying religion or philosophy before entering Divinity School. Two of the nine students I interviewed explicitly mentioned feeling behind when they arrived because they had never taken religion or philosophy classes.

Secondly, I want to suggest that another way of reading this frustration on the part of students is to see it in light of the first two patterns. Are certain students' contributions and critiques validated more than others? Without realizing it, are there ways we validate male students' comments and questions, more than female students' comments or questions? Do we validate or encourage comments related to theory more than we do comments related to practical ministry/contextual concerns? Also, I believe an examination of how professors and preceptors grade participation would be fruitful. Are students being graded simply for speaking, rather than showing consideration for others? Also, considering several students mentioned feeling silenced or shamed by preceptors, I think an equally important consideration is how preceptors get trained. Are preceptors being trained to be sensitive to a variety of theological perspectives? What models do they have for that? Does the Divinity School curriculum make space for a variety of theological perspectives and experiences? Finally, if many female students struggle to claim their intelligence and academic giftedness, how can we better facilitate classroom conversation so that the academic gifts of women are drawn out and nurtured?

I want to conclude my analysis of this last pattern by lifting up a vision of faithful conversation offered by homiletician Lucy Atkinson Rose. In her book, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, Rose contrasts her view of conversation with that of David Tracy. In Tracy's view, conversation is a "game" played by some "hard rules." "In this game, friendship yields, the subject matter takes over, and the participants lose themselves in the pursuit of truth. The final goal of the game, according to Tracy, is new consensus."¹⁶ In contrast, Rose offers a view of conversation that seeks community as its goal, and which strives to make room for more voices at the table. She writes, "My understanding of conversation is more *informal* and *personal* than Tracy's. Key characteristics for me include an atmosphere of *openness* and *mutual respect*, as well as a willingness of the participants to acknowledge the particularity of their experiences based on their historical and social locations."¹⁷ I find this vision of conversation inspiring and believe that it provides a positive model for Divinity School conversation. I believe that if more classroom conversations were specifically guided by convictions of "openness" and "mutual respect," the level of frustration and reserve on the part of many female students would significantly decrease. I suspect that the entire community would enjoy the conversation more and be more enriched by conversation if we patterned our classroom conversation after Rose's model.

In conclusion, I must state that this project has truly been a blessing to me. I am deeply grateful to the students and faculty members who allowed me to interview them. I am grateful for the time they gave me and the honesty with which they shared their stories, and I am also grateful for the way in which their strength, intelligence, wisdom, and faithfulness left me feeling

¹⁶ Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

inspired at the end of each interview. Overall, this project provided me with a unique opportunity to observe and identify positive, inspiring themes related to women's experiences at Duke Divinity School, as well as troubling themes and patterns. I feel very pleased in that the opportunity to present my project earlier this month helped me to achieve my primary goal for this project: fostering conversation about the experiences of women at Duke Divinity School. From what I've witnessed personally, as well as what others have shared with me, the presentation has sparked conversation among students and faculty alike. For this reason I conclude this project with a sense of hope, trusting that the positive aspects of women seminarians' experiences here at Duke Divinity School will continue, and the negative or concerning aspects of their experiences will receive further attention and consideration. To that end, I offer several more observations and patterns below that I could not address in the body of my paper, but which I believe merit further consideration by the Divinity School community.

Patterns and Observations for Further Consideration:

- 2 out of 4 students of color described the process of needing to adjust writing or speaking in order to fit in here. One student said the woman we see and know here is her professional persona, and another woman described the process of needing to adjust her writing to fit a white context, as opposed to the HBCU from which she came. Still another African-American student described in detail her sense that her capabilities and skills were often questioned; that as a black woman she was being scrutinized more closely- to the point that she brought a grade last semester to the administration and fought to have it raised because she knew she deserved a higher grade. She was granted the higher grade.

- One professor described the Divinity School as a “high-pressure place, but not cut throat,” another used the phrase “pressure cooker” at one point, another borrowed a student’s language and described it as being similar to driving on the “Indy 500...if you have to get off for some reason momentarily, it’s impossible to get back on.” The other professor who didn’t mention the pressure explicitly did mention noticing that there are many more women who’ve opted out or been forced out of the tenure track than men. This combined with two professors mentioning the loneliness of academia makes me wonder if our female professors are getting the support they need.
- Several students and a professor mentioned struggles with confidence in general. Many students related this to their family upbringing and/or their religious tradition. The professor’s comment was especially powerful and resonated with statements I’d heard by other students. In response to the question, “Would you describe yourself as confident?” She replied instantly, “My husband says I used to be more confident when I first got here.” Perhaps it’s natural that an academic institution would lessen someone’s confidence, but seeing as though I’ve heard several stories like this I think it’s worth further consideration.
- Several students suggested that extra-curricular activities and getting to know the community helped them feel more confident overall, and especially speaking in class. Student Services seems to try hard to encourage students to engage in extra-curricular activities, often to no avail. What is preventing students from engaging more in community activities? Are there new or different ways we can encourage or foster community that might serve specifically to boost students’ confidence?