Creating Brave Spaces through Spiritual Critical Friendship in and outside Classroom

Abstract

In this study, through interviewing four international and immigrant students of color, I try to learn their experience during their study at American religious or theological education programs around three areas: (1) white normativity, (2) becoming authentic humans, and (3) spiritual friendship. I then envision and analyze how to create brave spaces that encourage open and genuine conversations to foster maximum learning outcomes and meaningful connections among learners through an approach of spiritual critical friendship. I furthermore discuss the cultivation of learners to become more authentically human beings through such learning and connection experiences within and outside classrooms.

Prologue

It was at a class when the instructor told us about the Religious Education Association 2018 conference. An African American colleague responded to part of the conference theme, “Beyond white normativity.” “there’s this song called ‘Whiter than snow.’ “Yes, exactly,” the instructor affirmed. This was followed by excited talk about how such a song re-enforced racism.

However, I was a little upset. Because, this was one of my favorite praising songs at church back in China. I wondered silently: I think the name of song refers to “cleansing our sins.?” I mean, I especially liked the part of the lyrics of “whiter than snow,” as I desire so: because I wanted to be cleansed by Lord Jesus so thoroughly that I become clean as “whiter than snow.”

Such an occasion confuses me. While it’s hospitable and open to the African American colleagues, I’m not sure my view would be welcomed. I blame myself for lacking “guts” - not daring to utter my thoughts to my colleagues, and to my professor to find out how they would respond.

I found myself wrestling through my thinking: why can’t I? Isn’t this a learning space in which, each of us learners is not only entitled to share our opinions, but is obligated to exchange thoughts on a topic raised by the instructor and/or a colleague for the purpose of learning? But, can I? Would my (“dissident”) question hurt my colleague, or be deemed as disrespectful?

As I reflected on it, my daily prayer from an Orthodox prayer book came to mind: “Lord, give me the strength to be truthful, honest, kind and helpful to others.” I am thinking, what is the help that I need to be able to live out this prayer in this case? How will a genuine conversation take place in and outside classrooms?
Introduction

White normativity is an important research issue in American critical educational research and in various social science disciplines. Yet international students’ experience of this phenomenon remains largely unknown.

I understand from the experience of colleagues and myself, who are students from different parts of the world and with different colors of skin, we see white normativity experienced from different angles and levels different from Americans; we experience daily life in America from “outsider” positions. Therefore, I would like to inquire whether the experience of ‘white normativity’ has emerged, or not, in their experiences, or has been, avoided intentionally in their learning spaces.

I aim to draw on what is learned from these learners to consider what it means to co-create a brave space that fosters maximum learning outcomes and meaningful connections among learners. Ultimately, I hope to find ways to cultivate learners to become more authentically human beings through such learning and connection experiences within and outside classrooms.

Honest expression of opinions around sensitive topics often requires the participants to face challenge, difficulties and controversies. Consequently there is a possibility of feeling discomfort when engaging in the challenge of genuine dialogue around topics like diversity and other sensitive issues.

It calls forth a brave space for students from both abroad and domestically to engage in authentic discussions about such subject as ‘white normativity’ and other sensitive issues of race and ethnicity. One definition of a brave space is: “wherein students, teachers and citizens generally can come together to have hard conversations and hear each other out - even and especially when that is challenging. This includes the practice of Sitting with Discomfort.” (AllSides Dictionary)

Why is it so important for genuine conversations to take place in learning spaces, especially for religious leaders? It meets two urgent needs of this world: 1) meaningful connections, as each person, perhaps, seeks after/is in need of meaningful connections that build virtue, and help the person to connect to God more deeply, and 2) a need to nurture authentic dialogue between different groups in different settings: groups of different generations within one church; different church denominations; different faith traditions; religious communities and secular communities, and so on. To do so, it is fundamental to create a space for religious leaders to develop their capacities for such engagement themselves. From my experience, there remains much potential in the learning spaces in religious and theological education programs to intentionally work towards realizing such potential.

In this research, first, I try to learn about the experience of students from outside America during their study at American religious or theological education programs around three areas: (1) white normativity; (2) becoming authentic humans; and (3) spiritual friendship. I have interviewed four international and immigrant students who are either currently studying at religious or theological education programs in an American institution or have recently finished their graduate study. I then introduce the concepts of critical friendship and spiritual friendship, and try to explore an
approach combining the two in an attempt to create brave spaces to fulfill two purposes. First, to have open, and authentic conversations for optimal learning to occur. Second, to foster greater meaningful connections among the learners.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology. I conducted in-depth interviews with each participant about their experiences. I recruited four international or immigrant students of color as research participants. They are either currently studying at an American religious or theological education program, or recently graduated from such a program. With one participant two interviews were conducted, three with another. The interview durations range from 60 minutes to 120 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded with the participant’s permission. The audio records of the interviews were transcribed by the researcher. While reading the transcripts, I highlighted key concepts and significant statements and wrote notes to record initial thoughts about ideas for analyzing the text.

Table 1 below that shows the demographic information of the participants (P):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>International or immigrant student</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Christian Tradition</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Year(s) of residence in the US</th>
<th>Current student &amp; year at the institution</th>
<th>Recent graduate/ year of graduation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1: Allen</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Episcopal</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Current student/2nd year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2: Ben</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Immigrant</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Current student/2nd year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3: Charlie</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>Vietnam and France</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Current student/3rd year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4: Donna</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Immigrant</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Catholic Orthodox</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Recent graduate/May 2018</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Participants of the study (Pseudonyms are used in all tables.)

This research intends to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the participants’ experience around white normativity in educational related activities in and outside classrooms?

2. What is the participants’ perceptions and experience of 1) becoming more authentic human, and 2) spiritual friendship?

3. How does one create brave space(s) that nurtures authentic encounters, through the lens and approach of spiritual critical friendship?
Findings

I will first report what I found about the experience of the participants of the study. My reported data will be clustered in three groups to demonstrate participants’ experience of white normativity, becoming more authentic human and spiritual friendship.

Experiences around white normativity

The definition of white normativity I used is listed below by Kathy Winings (2017):

White normativity is the defining of cultural practices, attitudes, assumptions, and ideologies in the wider society and culture using the white culture as the standard, the norm. A related term White privilege, is similar in that there are freedoms, advantages, benefits, access, and opportunities whites enjoy — consciously and unconsciously — that are not necessarily enjoyed to the same degree by other ethnicities. White supremacy refers to the system of structural or societal racism that privileges whites, whether or not there is racial hatred present. Regardless of the term used, this is a serious issue in creating a beloved community.

This problem has also continued to haunt our faith-based communities. We have been unable to adequately and fully address white normativity or, using a more common term, whiteness. Whiteness refers to all the ways in which the white culture maintains its privileged status and dominance over and above all other ethnicities and cultures.

The participants have a range of experiences around white normativity. Two out of four said they did not experience white normativity or racism either against them as international students or as immigrants of color, nor in their observation against their colleagues. One reported an incident that occurred to a friend. Another one expressed racism as common experience in American institutions and society. Their reported experience are represented by the interview quotes recorded below.

In response to my questions about whether the experience of ‘white normativity’ has emerged, or not, in their experiences, or has been, avoided intentionally in learning spaces to these “outsider students,” Allen shared:

That experience could be true. But I don’t see it at all. Not from my professors. Such as [the professor of] Sacred Theology invites us for dinner all the time, is open to all of us, you don’t see any discrimination. No. …When students talked about it, there are students who are silent, but they did not speak against it. They do not condemn it. They are just quiet.

Allen confirmed in his experience, people can talk about it freely in his learning environments, and such discussions are supported by his “white lecturers”:

There is plenty of space for us to discuss issues related to racism, feminism, etc. Professors invite us to speak, and colleagues also asked me to speak up in class. The class discussion is authentic, mutual, open. Lecturers also support it...like
‘that’s a problem we see, and we have to deal with it.’ Many of the complaints were about racism.

Different to Allen, Charlie shared an incident from his friend’s experience of racism manifested in Asian students’ campus lives. In the incident, the friend dropped several drops of fish sauce on the table, the dining area then is covered by the odor. Some students felt uncomfortable and started saying things like “O man, Asian crab again!” “That’s a small example, but it can hurt.” Said Charlie.

Among the participants, Ben expressed strongly racism is part of his experience in American institutions. For instance, he shared that in one of the institutions he studied at, a professor strongly suspected an international student from Africa plagiarized a paper, because the paper was in extraordinary quality. Even if the student showed his manuscript to prove the paper was written by himself, the professor still assigned a very low grade. Ben shared that many African students did not go to graduation ceremony even as their expression about the way they were treated.

**Perceptions and experiences around becoming more authentic human being.**

Regarding what authentic humans are, Ben said:

An authentic human is being comfortable in your skin, in your position. It’s not like you are bending over. You are who are you. It’s not like you change your skin color. If you are white, leave [it]. But in a way it lifts up the other…You also do not demean the other person. You also see the other as a good, unique person, and open to accept what the other brings.

To Ben, being authentic itself is empowering.

Allen reports: “An authentic human being is someone who lives by the principle of Christ. Someone who (22:20) restores the image of God, There is no life to me, without Jesus Christ, serving God, humanity, that kind of thing. More come to the image of God.”

In response to “Are there experiences of encounters with fellow learners of diverse color, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds that help them become more authentic humans? If so, what are those encounters like?” Ben recalled one incident:

Once I’m in an office. Many people in line, need to get paperwork signed. One big guy came. He’s my professor. He jumped the line. He wanted his paper to be signed [first]. He did it because he’s assuming first, he’s in an authority position; second, professor; third, he’s a big guy; fourth, his task is urgent. I said to him: there are many people staying in line, you either wait at the end of the line, or you speak with them to see whether they agree with your jumping. He went back to the end of the line.

Many years later, I never expected, he came to me to tell me he learned a lesson from my talking to him. It was good to him. He thanked me.
That was a humbling experience, a valuable experience for me. If you ask me where I got the moral courage to do it. I can’t explain it. What’s more fulfilling to me [is that] I didn’t remember, for him to remember to tell me.

Donna shared an experience related to the diversity of being a Sister, but not to do with skin color or the position of being an immigrant or racial outsider, as perceived by her, but more a divergence of different social values that proved challenging for her. This encounter challenged to figure out what her vocation was:

I remember one thing I face at one of my classes in my grad school. It’s not because I’m being somebody being an outsider. That’s more because I’m a Sister, I face new challenges at school. One of the professors would ask me like why do I want to do this program. For my counseling program, it seems like you have to choose to be a counselor. It’s not somebody telling you you need to be a counselor, then you go for school and become a counselor. This is what happened with me, the professor asked me why do you want to be a counselor. I told her, well, because the church told me that I need to have a counseling degree, and that’s why I’m doing this program. She said that doesn’t work with us, because you have to choose what you want to be, it’s that not somebody told you this is what you have to be, and you do it. I told her well…in being a Sister you have to obey, you have to listen, without argument, without like saying this is what I want, this is not what I want.

She felt this is not normal, she felt this is something weird. According to my culture, and my choice of becoming a Sister, this is something normal to me. However this is not for her. So I had a hard time during the 1st year of counseling, because I was trying to figure out if this is something I want to do, or this is something that I was told to do. Then I reached to a point that I figured out this is the right choice, this is something for me to do, this is going to be my life, …my service; so I have to love it; I have to accept it, and face more about it.

**Experience around spiritual friendship**

Table 2 below shows the participants’ reports on their spiritual friends.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Spiritual friends</th>
<th>Substitute of Spiritual friends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1: Allen</td>
<td></td>
<td>student adviser, lecturer, pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2: Ben</td>
<td>St. Teresa of Avila</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3: Charlie</td>
<td>the friend who witnessed Gospel to him</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4: Donna</td>
<td></td>
<td>spiritual father and spiritual guide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Participants reported spiritual friendship

As shown in Table 2, only one participant asserted he had a spiritual friend. Another participant reported that his spiritual friend is St. Teresa of Avila. The other two
participants have substitute spiritual friends as: spiritual father, spiritual guide, pastor, student adviser and lecturer. Two had a spiritual friend, Ben and Charlie.

Charlie who reported he has a spiritual friend says that this was one of the friends who witnessed to him the Christian faith, and from then there was a special bond between them. His understanding of spiritual friend is “there is a special bond between the participants, namely Lord Jesus, and because of this bond, one needs to be responsible for what s/he shares about with the friend. It needs to be for the purpose of lifting up the partner.” He furthermore reported that he wouldn’t call his spiritual friend a best friend. A best friend is someone he “can talk with anytime, who would visit him at 4am, and who he knows that would drop everything to come to him if he asks.”

In summary, three out of four participants expressed they “know how to tackle spiritual issues” and “deal with life.” They do that largely by themselves. Two out of four participants expressed a barrier, or lack of opportunity to share personal struggles and weaknesses, or personal needs with fellow learners or people around, due to the leadership or role model position they have. In that role, people look up to them and get counsel from them. For instance, in response to my question: do you have the type of friends that you would share personal things? Donna gave the account below:

I have a spiritual guide and I speak with her. But I wouldn’t say I have a friend that I would share things with them. Spiritual guidance, yes. Because living a religious life it’s a bit difficult, it’s not like a regular person, where I can share whatever I want, with my friends, no I can’t. Because people would look at me as an ideal example for them… and I think to share my weakness or my struggles in life with them would cheat my image of a Sister to them. I talk to people about stuff, but I can’t share my personal experience with them, or I have to be wise enough because people would still look at me as like an idol…If I’m struggling with that… then I’ll change their beliefs. I have to be wise to not say such things, because I could lose them. They could lose their own faith. I don’t want to be that person that would drag them to that.

Allen, responded:

With colleagues, we talk about spiritual things. But it’s not about addressing [my] personal or spiritual needs. No. usually It’s often about their questions. They want to speak. They want to do something. They know I’m a pastor. They want my thoughts.

Ben shared “payer is friendship. I take it very seriously.” He prays all the time. He responded: “Yes, I do. [I have spiritual friend(s).] Spiritual friends include also the saints. For instance, I have St. Teresa of Avila as a spiritual friend.” He said at his “developmental level” he knew how to cope with the situations (as opposed when being a child he cried a lot.)

Analysis

I will focus on how learning and development occurs from participants’ experiences of becoming more authentic human beings and spiritual friendships, in order to analyze how an approach of spiritual critical friendship can achieve the purposes of
the study: build greater meaningful connections among learners, foster brave spaces for open and authentic conversations for maximum learning to occur, and ultimately, cultivate learners to become more authentically human beings through such learning and connection experiences within and outside classrooms.

Four noticeable elements about how participants learn and grow emerged from the participants’ reported experience. First, all four participants in facing critical incidents during their graduate study or life have gone to another being, someone other than themselves, for help, support and feedback. This critical part of the exploration led to these outcomes: solution, illumination that answers their quests, or a companion and support as both process and end.

Second, it appears that both triggers and outcomes of learning involve the critical thinking process. Participants’ assumptions were revealed, challenged, and illuminated by questions raised by their professor, friends or colleagues. The given feedback appeared to be honest expressions rooted in the value held by the persons whom the participants spoke with.

Third, the give-and-take feedback between the participants and the party they met with took place in personal interaction.

Fourth, regarding how spiritual friendships help cultivate the participants’ growth and development, the common features are: (1) from the content of the topic under discussion, (2) from the trust and the bond with the spiritual friendship, and (3) the type of questions their friends asked, and how the questions were asked. The concern, care and love bore in the questions and the way they are presented; how well the friends listened to them and gave feedback to encourage further thought.

Discussion

According to the themes emerged, I see a few opportunities to utilize learning to cultivate growth and help participants to become more authentic humans.

In the act of reaching out, common to all participants, they were triggered by a life event, driven by an innate human drive, then reached out to a trustful party for support and feedback. This effort of connecting and communicating with another being was clearly a critical step that lead to the learning outcomes. Therefore, the act of reaching out, and the communication process between the participants and those who they connected with proved to be a learning activity.

When subjects communicate with one another, the “between-human” (Buber 1962, p. 298) of the subjects becomes an co-created interpersonal space of connection and communication, that allows the life experience of the subjects to be shared, listened to, reflected upon and supportive and critical feedback to be provided by a fellow human. This relational space functions as a holding space characterized by balanced challenge and support. (as cited in Woo, 2012, p. 829)

This poses two opportunities to me: first, an approach that can replicate a similar environment to foster the learning processes during a time of disorientation. Second, it
is worth to intentionally creating this environment for the purpose of a “greater good” – cultivation of the authenticity in the learners, and foster learning and growth to the maximum inside and outside classrooms.

Based on practice and experience, I envision a framework combining critical friendship and spiritual friendship to be applied in learning and in life to cultivate the learning outcomes. In next section I will discuss this approach.

**What spiritual critical friendship looks like**

As the starting point of an approach to spiritual critical friendship is “friendship,” I’ll start from the concept of friends. According to Handal (1999),

Friends are people who are close to us, who support us, and who provide confirmation. They often disregard our weak points or excuse them rather than confront us with them. Criticism is generally conveyed by others who are not as close to us, perhaps our supervisors or representatives of viewpoints different from our own. But in fact a real friend is someone to rely on, someone who will hold a critical mirror before us if necessary. (p. 63)

The statement above discusses the “sweetness” of friends that supports us without being critical towards us. Meanwhile it points out opportunities contained in being a “real friend” to help a friend to grow by “holding a critical mirror.” I suppose such opportunities are most available to those who are at the position of friends to one. Ones who are close enough to see, and hold the mirror for us.

This points to a fundamental reason for the need of “real friend.” A simple yet basic human reality is we are limited in our perspectives, knowledge, ways of thinking; we are imperfect in our ways of being. Please imagine, if our limits, weaknesses and mistakes that we are blind about are to be revealed, how would you like it to happen? Wouldn’t it be better if we are told such reality about our limitations by a real friend, who loves and cares for us and advocates for our successes.

**Critical friendship theory**

According to Costa and Kallick (1993), a critical friend is:

A trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work. (as cited in Storey & Richard, 2013, p. 17)

The critical friendship approach holds a tension: “high degree of unconditional positive regard” and “critics that can be conditional, negative and intolerant of failure” for the good of, success of the work of the friend. It provides a structure for a pair, a few or a group of learners to engage in interactive reflection to review a situation or an experience, to solicit feedback in an intentionally built relational space. Each activity in the Critical Friends group (CFG) model “contains elements of careful
description, enforced thoughtful listening, and then questioning feedback.” These are the basic elements of reflection. A CFG protocol entails five steps (Storey and Richard, 2013):

1) Presentation of the dilemma/issue;
2) Probing session: for the critical friends to ask questions to fully understand the context of the situation, the task at hand and the outcomes that the learner is working toward;
3) Warm, positive feedback: supportive, appreciative statements about the work presented;
4) Cool or more distanced feedback: offers different ways to think about the work presented and/or raises questions;
5) Challenge/hard feedback: challenges and extends the presenter's thinking and/or raises concerns.”

In general, this process uses time limits and agreed-upon purpose and norms as a structure to help learners to focus on their interactive reflection process, and prevents “the rush-to-comment approach that our busy lives seem to promote.” (Storey and Richard, 2013)

What’s particular about the critical friendship approach is that its process focuses on “developing collegial relationships, encouraging reflective practice, and rethinking leadership.” This process is carried out through cooperative adult learning, interactive reflective practices and critical feedback providing.

While the CFG approach is widely used in the educational world for teacher training, and students learning enhancement, I argue and advocate that it can be taken a step further in a religious education contexts – towards practice and deepening spiritual friendship.

**Spiritual friendship**

Spiritual friendship involves a transcendental being in the midst of the participants in addition to the other elements of friendship. The essence of Christian spiritual friendship is: “Here we are, you and I, and... a third, Christ, is in our midst.” as claimed by Aelred (p. 51) Spiritual friendship functions to cultivate the participants towards deeper connections with the transcendental being. The maturity of the participants develops in proportion to their connection to the transcendental being.

I envision that the application of the CFG approach deepens spiritual friendship among learners, to enhance the learning efficacy in religious and theological educational scenarios. Based on the participants’ reports, and literature, what forms and sustains spiritual friendship includes the topic under discussion, the consciousness and the function of the spiritual bond created by the transcendental being in partnership with the participants in the midst of the friendship. Consequently, a dynamic among learners with spiritual friendships consists of two active relationships: one, an intentional, interpersonal partnership between the participating subjects with the transcendental being for building up the friend(s); two, a relationship between the friend(s) that lifts both up towards greater awareness, tapping into and ascension towards the transcendental being.
Spiritual and critical friendship and adult learning

It must be made clear that CFG consists of basic elements of reflection: careful description, thoughtful listening and then questioning feedback. It is critical to first of all conduct attentive and thoughtful listening. But the discussion in this article will focus on questioning feedback.

The essential way for adults to continue to learn is through incidental learning from experience. Learning occurs when one links one’s experience to one’s belief system in reflective practices. Further, having access to feedback that is “constructive, descriptive, and useful is crucial in supporting greater learning and deeper understanding,” as reported in National School Reform Faculty (2012). (Storey and Richard, 2013, p. 18)

Comprehensive, truthful and constructive critical feedback is essential to facilitate different dimensions of learning and development: knowing, doing and being. For example, to a finished task, the feedback that facilitates learning and development effectively includes: descriptions about what is done well so the learner should continue doing, and what are the improvement opportunities along with helpful resources.

Learning how to provide descriptive and constructive critical feedback is crucial to foster learning and growth. It is not easy job to either provide or receive feedback. One necessary feedback to enhance learning is critical feedback. McGuire and Inlow contend, “Participants are often unwilling or uneasy about participating in two essential pieces of the interactive reflection process: giving and receiving critical feedback.” Page and Hulse-Killacky (1999) report that even in situations designed for group and individual learning, people are quite fearful and hesitant about giving critical feedback…When critical feedback is presented, participants often become quite defensive and angry.” (P. 372)

It is understandable the closer it gets to the core of the person – the being, the more challenging it is to receive and give critical feedback. Fear of critical feedback can stop learners from opening up, having authentic conversations with fellow learners and thus are diminished in their learning potentials. However, practice giving and receiving “corrective feedback” in a group learning environment will help leaners “overcoming the common fear of giving negative feedback, confronting beliefs about oneself, learning to give feedback in ways that help people learn, and seeing the impact one’s own behavior has on others,” claimed by Page and Hulse-Killacky (1999) (as cited by McGuire and Inlow, 2005.)

To become more authentic human being entails constant integration of one’s way of being with knowing and doing. A critical learning task is self-awareness. Knowing the self is unseparable from learning from a mirror - the eyes of others as we are limited in our own view. Graph 1 below, a version of the Johari Window illustrates the dynamic of “knowing (learning) and feedback” about the “self.”
Graph 1 reveals these truths: First, there are things about ourselves that we do not know, but are known by others. Second, such hidden truths about ourselves can be learned from feedback from those who know them (remember the “real friend” as one who holds a “critical mirror” before us, see page 9.) People who we interact with more and at greater depth likely know more about some hidden truths about us. I suggest that this learning most optimally takes place in the realm of spiritual friendship, given the space is guarded and guided by the Spirit.

I see two potentials to cultivate spiritual critical friendship in a religious education environment. First, spiritual friendship features the participants relating to the transcendent being while they relate to one another. This living Being works as a “catalyst” in the relational space of the learners. So from the outset the learners have an enabler helping them to solicit and provide feedback. Second, it is a golden opportunity for the learners to develop their leadership potential by engaging in such learning activities: to attain greater self-knowledge and to practice humbleness and courage - being intentionally open to being more vulnerable to disclose more of the self, and so to be able to better connect with fellow learners at a deeper level. I see such leadership qualities and experiences essential for religious leaders to grow. Engaging in the learning environment this way is one way to grow such qualities intentionally.

Last, I’d like to share some of my experience of exploring spiritual critical friendship, how I found that it enhances learning, and cultivates growth and development.
An excerpt from a reflective journal that records one most profound learning experience I have during my graduate study:

...In tears, I talked with one peer learner, Ann, my confusions, asking for her feedback. It turned out that this conversation was a hugely helpful peer coaching to me. She shared with me her similar experience at work, and how she dealt with it.... It was especially helpful to rehearse a prospect way to respond to the situation with Ann. It further produced a more meaningful connection that likely leads to future mutual support and development between Ann and I. Through this peer coaching, I was supported and helped emotionally, enhanced knowledge and skill, and it produced a deeper relationship. I can’t be more thankful for this encounter. Ann was an angel-like colleague God sent me in an oppressive incident. The peer coaching turned this “dark experience” into a profound learning experience to me. Based on the reflection Ann and I did together, I then sent to the instructor of the class a record and reflection of this incident in class, with the thought this might be useful for her future reference in supporting leaners.

This encounter worked as a starting point towards critical friendship. After this, I’m open to Ann to receive and give her critical feedback.

A most profound transformational growth experience I have was from communicating with Vivian was from communicating with Vivian, a friend-like mentor who I met in a study program at church. A particular way she serves is through building spiritual friendships with fellow female believers. She related to me as an authentic person. She shared her weakness with me. Meanwhile, clearly she executed ability and maturity to build me up, especially spiritually. During a sorrowful occasion in my life, my attention was largely around rejection. Vivien, said to me during a long conversation, in her typical gentle yet firm voice: “Lord Jesus was alone, as he was abandoned by the whole world, when he was on the cross.” – It was such a gentle brook that flowed into me, a meek light that enlightened my whole being. For the first time, I experienced at the bottom of a valley, I was lifted up to a deeper awareness, and connection with God, through a new perspective that points to a critical reality. From then on, a new door has opened to me: to taste and share the experience of Lord through personal experience of sufferance.

These friendships give me a taste and hope for spiritual critical friendship. I was supported by the friendship. The friends accepted me with hospitality, meanwhile “held the critical mirror for me,” and shared a perspective where God was reflected. Through interactive reflection, I received constructive and critical feedback that helps me to experience the following learning outcomes:

 Greater self-understanding
 Increased knowledge of situations
 Skills of communication and interaction with fellow humans
 Greater understanding of God, and ways to relate to and interact with God
 Greater trust in God
 Critical thinking skills enhancement
 Becoming more true to oneself
Creating brave spaces through spiritual critical friendship

I will try to lay out the basic elements in creating brave space(s) that nurture authentic encounters, through the lens and approach of spiritual critical friendship in this section.

The relational space created by spiritual friendship is characterized by: (1) the transcendental being permeates in the midst the relationship as a replied-upon, enabling force, thus “a special connection at play between the participants,” such as the “special bond” between Charlie and his spiritual friend; (2) a like spirit and like mindedness in the participants paves the way for receiving and giving the needed feedback. These together invite and encourage the “hidden self” to walk into a gentle light, for joy and growing into a more integrated, authentic person.

This space created by spiritual critical friendship, is a brave space, that invites and enables the participants to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) – to provide the needed feedback to facilitate and help fellow learners to learn and grow. This is a process of learning. It invites the participants to strive for such practice: the thinking and feeling person be present to the fellow learners first and foremost, conduct attentive and thoughtful listening, asking caring questions and have interactive reflection, and then give feedback. (Jung, 2018) All these are to be practiced in love.

For me, this is (more) possible in spiritual friendship, each participant, enabled by the transcendental being, effectively partners with the transcendental being to take the responsibility for a spiritual friend: to diligently grow to become a spiritual friend. For me, this entails:

- First and foremost trying one’s best to seek after presence of God, to union with God. Rooted in, guarded and guided by the Spirit, then:
  - Learn, and practice being gentle to the friend(s) all the time
  - Caring for the friend (by prayer and/or showing the care to the friend)
  - Learn about the friends’ concerns (his/her tasks at hand, etc.)
  - Keeping the friend accountable in love, including “care enough to confront.”
  - If possible, try to become “best friend” of the spiritual friend as well, according to what that means to the friend.

Specific in communication between spiritual friends, such contents are to be communicated intentionally:

To draw on the power of attention:

- meaning making of daily experience in light of God
- make “spiritual bouquet” from the experience (St. Francis De. Sales)
- how it connects to one’s vocation
- make resolution
- each participant shares about same time length (e.g. each one spends 30 ms.)

I believe one way to address the societal structural phenomenon of white normativity is to work with individual persons and our classes through “one being influences
another being in interactions.” Such influences take place in the intersubjective space in daily interactions. Perhaps we could try to grasp such deeply meaningful opportunities by developing spiritual critical friendship. I would like to invite readers of this article to consider: how would you grasp such deeply meaningful opportunities? What will your version of spiritual critical friendship look like?
Reference:


