



# GTU

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*Distinguished Faculty Lecture 2020*

**Response to the Distinguished Faculty Lecture**

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# Lecture

## ***Response to the 45<sup>th</sup> Distinguished Faculty Lecture***

**Judith Berling**

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Judith Berling is Professor Emerita of Chinese and Comparative Religions at the Graduate Theological Union. In her 28 years of service as faculty and administrator within the consortium, she has been instrumental in fostering GTU's culture of inclusiveness and appreciation for diversity.

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I am honored and delighted to be the respondent for Professor Fernández' Distinguished Faculty Lecture, in particular since he chose to focus on "Doing Memory" about the GTU. It is a truism of our times that theological education and religious institutions in general are under enormous strain in this rapidly changing world; it is all too easy to fall into gloom about our futures. But Professor Fernández has reminded us this evening that "doing memory" is an important practice in renewing our commitment to values that define our very reason for being. I am deeply grateful to him for doing so.

"Doing Memory," as Professor Fernández reminded us, is about honoring our ancestors/our forebears and honoring the "traditions" out of which we do our contextual theologies and set our mission and goals as a community. The GTU certainly had vision and inspired forebears: one of the many memorable quotes about it in its early days was: "It is based on mutual commitments to a vision and held together by faith: it should not work, but it does." But while tonight's lecture took us down "memory lane" it also recognized that the original vision and tradition has evolved as the

world and our community have evolved. Originally about “ecumenism,” particularly between Catholics and Protestants, over the years it has become increasingly interreligious, concerned about sustaining our planet, focused on contextual theologies, both global and domestic, committed to preparing students for new, alternative forms of ministry and justice work, and engaged with complex, hybrid intersectional identities across cultures, religions, nations, and genders. As scholars of religion and theology we know very well that traditions hold foundational truths or principles, but they also evolve among living communities of adherents in many environments and situations.

The lecture lifted up three core values of the GTU that we need to carry into our future.

Diversity: Over the decades the diversity of the GTU has continued to grow, from a relatively “tame” difference of Christian denominations to become ever more diverse religiously, ethnically, culturally—as he said, “beyond the range of our wildest imaginations.” Allow me to share a memory of Eddy and I engaging with cultural diversity that we never would have imagined. We served together on the dissertation committee of a gifted indigenous theologian from the Andean Highlands (a quechua speaker). He invited the two of us to a post-defense party in a crowd of his relatives and Peruvian indigenous friends. At one point, he asked us to perform a culturally appropriate ceremony to mark the occasion. Suddenly Eddy and I found ourselves pouring an entire bottle of red wine slowly onto an open dissertation, and then dancing together to lead off the group’s celebratory dance. Sometimes celebration of diversity is not just an abstract principle, but an embodied practice that pulls us out of our limited cultural norms.

Professor Fernández is correct to challenge us to reflect in faculty and student body the full diversities of the communities we serve. But I want to add that this commitment to diversity challenges and commits all of us—most especially faculty, but also students who study here—to continually learn from and with each other. I recall a moment in my class when a very conservative Muslim legal scholar was stunned when a Black progressive Baptist feminist made a comment that perfectly captured, illumined, and affirmed the core of his work. She had listened to him very

carefully to cut through to the very heart of his work as he himself saw it; and he, who was steeped in the traditional training in Islamic sciences, learned that a non-Muslim and a woman from a very different cultural setting could nonetheless give him an insight about his own work. They taught one another in and through their very real differences, and each came to understand more profoundly their place in a diverse human community. The entire class, including me, were enriched by their model of learning across difference.

Unity: In our highly polarized world we have begun to doubt the possibility of unity, and we suspect that it erases important differences and realities. And so it can. As in all institutions, we at GTU continually struggle to rid ourselves of racist, patriarchal, exclusivist, and Christian triumphalist biases. But the ideal of “Unity” of the GTU has never been about sameness. As I used to say, “Our schools and centers don’t agree on anything except that we are in Berkeley, and don’t agree whether that is a strength or a liability.”

Our unity comes not from erasing difference but from undertaking an act of faith that genuinely engaging with others across lines of difference can yield insights, wisdom, friendship, alliances, and new possibilities. And we have discovered that it is often most promising to do this through the Arts, which open our hearts and imaginations to new ways of seeing and to new stories. A world rent by division can learn much from our practices of unity in difference.

Service: I am particularly grateful that this lecture lifted the value of service as core to the GTU. As one who came to the GTU and theological education from the world of religious studies in an era when religious studies was bending itself into knots to be “objective” about religion, I have been deeply inspired by the fact that the scholarship we foster in this community is about issues that can make a difference in and to the world. We marry academic rigor with a commitment to issues that matter, ideas that matter, and the inspiring work of our graduates testifies to that tradition. Some of you may know that the late great Robert Bellah, with a heavy load of advisees at Cal, happily joined many GTU doctoral committees precisely because our students were working on issues that matter.

The values we represent and strive for are needed more than ever in today's world. May we listen to Professor Fernández, remembering to “do memory” in order to maintain our aspirations and commitment to those ideals.