Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey

Episode 14: Putting “belonging” at the heart of research and education

**Peter Salovey:** Hello, everyone. Welcome to Yale Talk. I’m Peter Salovey.

For over 300 years, Yale has prepared students for lives of leadership and service. The college’s original 1701 charter described its mission as educating young men “for Publick employment both in Church & Civil State.” Many of our early professors and graduates were Christian ministers. The university has grown and changed since its founding, but the Yale Divinity School remains an integral part of the university.

My guest today is Willie James Jennings, associate professor of systematic theology and Africana studies at the Yale Divinity School. Professor Jennings is a multiple prize-winning author, theologian, and ordained Baptist minister.

Professor Jennings—Willie—thank you so much for speaking with me today.

**Willie Jennings:** I am so glad to be here with you, Peter.

**PS:** Well, thank you, and I see that you have a new book out. It’s called *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. One reviewer called it “a lightning bolt that craters the faculty lounge and the administrative wing simultaneously, upending conversations as stale as the coffee and charging life into the corpse-like hulk of theological education.” That’s quite a quote, I have to say. Tell us a bit about the book.

**WJ:** Well, Peter, this book grows out of my many years in the academy as an academic dean, as faculty, graduate student, working in all kind of areas of the university and the theological academy. And for me, many years as a consultant with the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning and for the Association of Theological Schools, which is the governing body of theological education in the United States and Canada, and from being with faculties from East Coast to West Coast, both in the U.S. and Canada. And in all those settings, I learned that there is something that is in many ways haunting the work we do as educators. It's the overarching image of the educated state. And for so many people in so many contexts, that overarching image has done great damage in terms of the formation, in terms of what we’re aiming toward as we educate people. It is the image of a self-sufficient white man who embodies three, what I call, “demonic virtues”—possession, control, and mastery.

The difficulty is that this image torments so many people as they are moving through the educational process. And so what the book does—by short story, by vignette, by poetry, it's a bit of a memoir—is to try to bring people in through the back door, inside the part of the academy that normally is not seen by so many, as you and I know: the struggles and the challenges of students and faculty and administrators and staff, faculty beginning their careers, faculty in the middle of their careers, and faculty at the end of their career wondering, “What did I just do for the last 40 years of my life?” And so I spend this time in this book helping people see that we need an alternative image of the educated state that drives our formation work. And that alternative image is of Jesus and the crowd. And as I say, the alternative image isn't necessarily Christian. It is the basis upon which Christianity forms. And fundamentally what it is, is the ability in whatever you have been trained to do, the ability to gather people together, people who would normally not want to be together, but because of the way you do your work, you create community, you create communion, you draw people together.

Having that as the overarching formation image for our work is a far more healthy way to go about doing our work than having the image that now continues to dominate, the image of a self-sufficient, white, masculine intellectualist form. So the book is an attempt to go after this, go after this problem.

**PS:** It seems like you're confronting an ethic that privileges individualism. And in some ways is rooted in a Protestant idea of the work ethic. It seems like it's a theological confrontation. It's not a religious or spiritual view versus one that is not. It seems like it's more of a confrontation within the teachings of the Church.

**WJ:** Well, it’s more the implications of a desire to form children and grandchildren. It grows out of the colonial moment in the West when so many came into unprecedented power and wealth and holdings, land and peoples and natural resources. And so these masters, these folks who had all of this, looked out on their holdings and asked a simple question, “What will become of my—all that I have gotten? What will become of it after I am gone?” And then, Peter, they looked at their sons and they said, “Who must my sons become in order to carry forward my legacy, to expand what I have been given and to carry forward my hopes and dreams?” And so the reality of education that is born between the father's dreams and the son’s aspirations—that’s what we're talking about. Now, it began inside a kind of Christian womb that these masters imagined their future as being inside God's providential will, and so looking out at their sons, wanting them to be educated, wanting them to be trained, wanting them to be formed as men who can handle power, was crucial. Thus, the self-sufficiency, and self-sufficiency here is simply that it goes back to the old idea of Stoicism, that one has been trained not to give in to the extremes of anything. Not the extremes of lust, not the extremes of gluttony, not the extremes of anger. That one is able to maintain a level of self-control and one, therefore, is able to handle power. One can handle power without apologizing for having power or having pride over having that power. But one operates in it honestly, clearly. And so what we have to understand is that Western education as a whole, which in many ways, as you mentioned earlier, is so deeply tied to a theological education at Yale and many other places, Western education is built inside this desire. In fact, as we know, many institutions in the West were built up on plantations, and many institutions in the West were built by generous donations by plantation owners and others who benefited greatly from slavery. So this desire to train sons to handle power, that's what we're going after. And in that regard, yes, it is individualism, but it's a self-sufficiency that many believe is necessary to handle power

**PS:** And an exclusivity, right, it's focused on the son and probably the oldest son and no one else.

**WJ:** And so then what happens is that template, if you will, that we've just described, that template of someone who has been trained inside the dreams of the father and who now brings forth the aspirations of a son. So when you think about this, and you think about the charters for so many universities and so many divinity schools, so many theological schools, when you think about those original charters, those original missions, you can see those elements flowing through. We want to raise men who are able to do this, and then as things open up with all the rest of us who can show up, those who were not seen as white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, all the rest of us who show up, we step inside that very same template. Now where this becomes a problem is when you start to look at the profound psychic, the profound spiritual, if you will, the profound emotional damage this does for people being educated. And so what we wind up having are women and men who, not in public, but in the privacy of talking to their deans and their provosts and their faculty chairs and their colleagues—that’s where you see the tears, that’s where you see the frustration, that's what you see the anger, because we are all haunted by that desire, that need to show, if you will, the finished man, the one who—yes, I'm always in control, I have possession of knowledge, yes, and I do have mastery of my field.

**PS:** So we talk a lot these days about inclusion and belonging. And I don't see them—those ideas, those values—as necessarily in conflict with self-sufficiency, but it's kind of an acknowledgement that the self doesn't do it alone.

**WJ:** That's exactly right. And this is what I press in the book: Belonging has been banished from the academy as a crucial element of intellectual formation. So here's the question. What would it mean if we bring *belonging* back into the very heart of what we do in the university in terms of forming intellectuals, forming scientists, forming people who are going to go out and do good things in this world for the common good. To bring belonging back in, what it does is it takes self-sufficiency and it pulls it out and says, well, I don't really need self-sufficiency as an overarching image of what I'm going after. Belonging can do the work of self-sufficiency. Why? Because self-sufficiency becomes a really horrible taskmaster. It forces me back into individualism and a constant self-evaluation that can become and, in most cases, becomes incredibly damaging to those moving through the academy.

All you have to do is sit in the room with a group of doctoral students in seminar and you can see this working itself out in terrible ways, even a seminar that's going well, you have that shadow part of it present. Am I showing myself to be smart enough? Am I showing myself to be appropriate to the space? You know, what should I say? And what's going on inside often negates what's going on outside. That is to say, [Laughter] the conversation is only partly being heard because the other part that's going on and you know, when I go places and talk about this, I have not encountered any faculty anywhere that didn't understand what I'm talking about now. So that in that individualism, what I call that cancerous individualism, is the result of self-sufficiency placed at the center of a pedagogical goal, a pedagogical vision of what we're about.

If we bring belonging in, then we have a different way to start to imagine what we're doing in seminar, what we're doing in the classroom, what we're doing in our work.

**PS:** I know I have also taught seminars where it seemed that students were so focused, so self-absorbed in thinking about whether they were performing well that they weren't hearing their classmates. To get people out of their own heads and to recognize that they are part of something larger than themselves at all kinds of levels seems to make a difference.

**WJ:** Take what you just said, that a very important starting point. So imagine a faculty person: that was their experience in their doctoral program, but that experience doesn't go away. It continues to form them as they move through their dissertation, continues to shape them as they start their teaching career, as they move toward tenure, it's still there. Once they get tenure, it has increased. And it's, in a sense, it's solidified. It's metastasized in them. And so they become the kind of faculty person who's always haunted by this unrelenting self-evaluation that in many ways never allows them to enter into the full reality of a collaborative spirit that is at the heart of a university. So that they become those who, in their work, they don't know how to imagine belonging. Not belonging as an add-on, but a belonging that is central to their work because in a sense, they've been formed out of it.

**PS:** That's right. And that self-absorption, self-consciousness, self-criticism, that becomes a habit. And you take it home, and you’re with your kids or with your spouse or what have you and you never break out of it. I'm a psychologist. We worry about the same things.

**WJ:** Yes, this is an incredible part of the legacy of so many people of color and so many women and so many folks who were at the margins in terms of what was imagined by the educational space, for the educational space. When they come in, how to challenge that overarching image in which they are invited, in the sense, compelled to move their lives, their bodies, their minds toward. How to struggle, how to fight against that, has been a crucial part of our life in the academy. And for so many institutions that are really concerned about matters of diversity, concerned about expanding the intellectual range of the work of the school, needing to think through this matter is absolutely crucial, because for so many people, this is where the real struggle, this is where the pain, the real anguish is for so many students coming, trying to feel as though they belong. And for faculty trying to feel as though they belong, in many cases are haunted by this overarching pedagogical obsession.

**PS:** Haunted is the right word. I was in my head thinking of the word *obsessed*. This obsession about performance and the self. I'm interested in how your teaching and discussions of these issues is inflected by what we're going through this year. COVID-19 pandemic, protests against racial injustice and police brutality, political violence. How do you help students make sense of all of this? And how do you integrate it into these issues of belonging and of education?

**WJ:** This has been this has been an incredibly challenging year to teach and an incredibly challenging year to try to do research, primarily because so many things, so many things have been laid bare this year. So many things that have been there have been magnified. And what things am I referring to? The difficulty of isolation. So if you're someone who, as we've been talking about, someone who's already struggling with this relentless self-evaluation that constantly points to you, these intellectual inadequacies. To be isolated, to be left alone, heightens that. If you are someone who in your teaching, you realize that you have always been someone who needs those around you. You need to be in the room. You need to sense, even at some level, the reality of a shared space. It's been incredibly difficult to teach.

And for so many students and faculty of color, this has been an incredibly difficult time. Obviously, because we're affected so, so deeply. I don't know anyone who isn't affected by COVID, by the deaths. I don't know anyone who doesn't feel deeply the Black Lives Matter movement. And all of that presses in on your teaching, presses in on the kind of work you do. The challenge—and I do think that this is a crucial challenge for us here at Yale—is how do we help students on these screens see that they are yet a part of a shared intellectual project? And that the reality of the work that they're doing is not a singular endeavor to show themselves appropriate to the space, but that is a shared endeavor of learning.

And that is so difficult, not only because of the reality of Zoom, but it's also what we've been talking about, the reality of an intellectual performance that has turned the beauty of solitude into the loneliness of a deeply self-critical, evaluative logic. And so how to reverse that I think is really important. My book tries to aim right at the inner workings and the realities of what it means to be alone with your thoughts and what it means to try to share in thinking, together, in the context of a class.

**PS:** Let's stay with the context of a class. You've taught students for over three decades. There's obviously the formal curriculum that you teach them, but you clearly want to inspire students in ways that are beyond that formal curriculum. You're not filling buckets, you're lighting fires. What do you actually want your students to take away from you—from you as an educator, from you as their teacher—when they take your courses?

**WJ:** I always want students to leave my courses with two things beautifully active. First, a much deeper appreciation of their voices. And all those who have helped to impact their voices that they can hear the generations of people who have been a part, either directly or indirectly, into the forming of their voices. Especially those who are inside their faith, that they understand that they are inside a long legacy of the voices of others in that faith. And those voices are active in their voice, that many speak through the one.

So the first thing I want them to be able to see is that they haven't been lost—their lives, their voices, their thinking—hasn't been lost in the educational process. And thus they simply repeat someone else's thinking, but that they come to see their voices as, in a sense, shaped by a “cloud of witnesses” that went before them, that they are people who speak their voice, having heard the voice of many others. Much like a jazz musician; when that jazz musician is mature, you hear her voice, but you hear all those influences in her. But those influences don’t overwhelm, but you can see all the flavors in this one voice, but you hear this one voice. And so for my students, I want them to be able to hear the flavors of faith of those who went before them, and hear the thinking that went before them.

The other thing I want students to gain when they come out of my class is a deeper ability to sense that their five senses have been sharpened. The work I do, I'm deeply interested in ecological matters. And so I want my students to have a profound sense of a communicative, active world that they must learn how to listen to, but not only in a communicative and animate world, but also their classmates to heighten their desire to hear, to sense.

And with both those things in place, Peter, my hope is that my students, when they've taken courses with me, they've already sensed the drive toward belonging, the drive toward gathering. I want students who, when they graduate, no matter what they want to do, I want them to be people who gather people together. You know, one of the greatest things to say about someone is that this person creates friends among people who would never be friends. Now that's what I want, and what I want for an intellectual is for that to become a fundamental characteristic of the educated state of an intellectual, that this person, whatever they do, they bring people together. Yes, they do their work well. Yes, they know what they need to know. But what they perform is not, you know, “look at me. Look at my self-sufficiency.” What they perform is a gatherer. So that's what I want students to come out of my class able to do.

**PS:** I love that—a gatherer, a connector. You know, I'm also thinking, we don't sing, “lift *your* voice and sing.” We say, “lift *every* voice and sing.”

**WJ:** “Til all Earth and heaven ring.”

**PS:** Exactly. And this reminds me of the fact that not only are you a provocative scholar and clearly an inspiring teacher, educator, but you're also a pastor. How does that role play into this? Are these separate identities, or is it all who you are and it's integrated and it comes through in everything you do?

**WJ:** It's all of a cloth. And no pun intended. [Laughter] It's all of the same cloth. But, you know, the reality of it is that from the very beginning of my life in the academy, I have always sought to see the whole person. And loving the whole person in the process of education, it's probably one of the blessings and one of the challenges for me is that I've always been the faculty person that students would turn to, which, as you know, that often means that you can't get as much work done [laughter] as you want to get done because they're knocking on your door. But there is a pastoral element at the very heart of what I do. But I think there's a pastoral element at the heart of what all of us, all of us in the academy, do. Some of us receive it more, glory in it more. And I certainly do. I care about the students I teach. And I teach them to care about one another. But I understand that not to be an add-on to the intellectual activity, but to actually be crucial to serious, rigorous, careful intellectual work. To care for one another in the process of thinking deeply is what deepens thinking. And so I go after that.

Now, of course, you know, being in the divinity school, one of the things you realize is that being a minister will oftentimes have profound effects on the way you carry out your work. So what does that mean? It means that I worry about—here at Yale, thankfully, this is not so much a reality—but certainly wanting to not only get along with my colleagues, but to in every way possible, to show them love, to operate in patience and kindness and caring. All of this is crucial to my life in the academy, and all of that that goes together. It's always fun to be in a room with people who are incredible minds, deep thinkers, but who also have a deep spiritual life at the same time. To me, that's the best of both worlds because you're with a kind of seriousness that matters and not one that is simply serious for serious sake.

**PS:** And what people may not realize is at the Yale Divinity School, that spiritual life, that spiritual calling, that may not be the same for everyone. Very different faith traditions characterize the school.

**WJ:** And it's wonderful. It's wonderful to have a space where Buddhists and Muslims and folks of all the Protestant denominations, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox as well, and folks of no faith but who are interested in religious and theological thought—it’s great to have all of them together in the classroom. It's great to have artists. It's great to have people who are headed toward the life of clergy. People are headed toward the academy, people who are headed toward law. You know, Yale Divinity School has a long tradition of people coming, as you know, Peter, who are not interested in being clergy, but they're going to go be businesspeople, they’re going to go be managers, they're going to go be lawyers, engineers.

**PS:**  Senators in the U.S. Senate from Delaware, for example. [Senator Chris Coons, ’92 J.D., ’92 M.A.]

[LAUGHTER]

**WJ:** They're going to do all manner of things. And the reality of it is, and I hope that this will become a fresh revelation for so many young people, that some of the best training that you can have for whatever you want to do in life is theological training. And so two years or three years at Yale Divinity School is a wonderful investment, even if you're clear that you don't want to be clergy, but you do want to think deeply about, as I say, the weighty matters of life.

**PS:** I would love to be in a classroom with you discussing the issue of self-sufficiency with a student who has a commitment to Buddhism. Self-sufficiency has got to have a different meaning, but my guess is there's some consensual view that emerges from just that kind of a dialogue.

So let's stay with the Yale Divinity School for just a moment. I know that this summer at the school you established an anti-racism task force and that you're the co-chair of it. And I'd just be interested in, how is that work going? What are you actually focusing on in that task force?

**WJ:** You know, it's been wonderful work, challenging work. And I am so thankful for my co-chair, Dr. Laura Nasrallah, a brilliant New Testament scholar, who is doing this work with us. And what's been great that this committee has been charged by our wonderful dean, Greg Sterling, with thinking through all matters of life at the divinity school, top to bottom, and asking ourselves, how might we deepen the anti-racist commitments that we as a community have? How might that commitment work itself deep into the curriculum, work itself into the ecology of the school and into the interaction among students and staff? And so we have been doing that work.

What's been great is that, as you know, there have been, you know, at Yale and at many other institutions, there have been other efforts to get at this. And so, in many ways, we're building on the fine work of other committees that have gone before us. What we have been charged with, given this crucial moment, is how might this moment open us and our thinking and then our work to actually capturing what has been so elusive in the ecology of the school. That is how we might do two things: care for our students in an even more significant way. It’s not that we haven't cared for our students, but how do we deepen that care, given what they're facing, especially our African-American students and our students of color? How do we help prepare them to enter into this really fraught time? So we're thinking about that.

But we're also thinking now, I think, more strategically about the intellectual ecology of the school and its relationship to the intellectual ecology of Yale. How do we embed anti-racism thinking and work in the intellectual project of the school? As I like to say, every educational institution is built on two energies: the formation, needs, and desires of students and the research, teaching, and writing energy of a faculty. And we have to align those two energies and draw them to really aiming precisely at the common good. And so how do we align those two energies with the importance of this anti-racism work is what we're going after.

So we've been doing really good work. We've been data-gathering, not only in the divinity school, but also the university in terms of what's been going on. And we are in the process of thinking through proposals. But what we want to assure our colleagues and as we were doing our work, to try to build it into the conversations, is that we don't want you to think about anti-racism work as an add-on. We want you to think about this at the very heart of what you do, at the heart of your research, at the heart of your writing, at the heart of your interaction with students, and to align that, as I said, with what students need when they leave us. What are the capabilities? What are the capacities that we want to cultivate in our students so that they can become leaders in this important anti-racism, anti-white supremacy work that we all want to be about. And so in that regard, I'm happy to report that we've been having wonderful conversations throughout the community, especially among faculty.

It is a shared project. It works best when a reality of belonging moves through it as a logic within the pedagogy, in a sense, driving the pedagogy.

**Peter S:** I love your ideas about how all of this—what we call belonging—doesn't have to be in opposition to the life of the mind, to the pursuit of excellence, to the kind of hard work that universities stand for. It's just that we can do that together. We can do that together.

**WJ:** And it's done better when it's done together. One of the things that I've had the privilege of doing in my life is to sit with a faculty person at the end of their career. And I'm sure you've had this opportunity too. To sit with someone, they've taught in their field for 40 years, 45 years, and sometimes, not every time, but sometimes I would sit with someone and they would give me that look and they would speak. And what they would be saying to me is this: “Was this worth it?” They're looking for a larger affirmation of a life dedicated to a subject, to a field, to a discipline. And if they haven't been able to take hold of a reality of belonging, that's been there guiding them through, then for some at the end, it's a challenge. It's a challenge to help them see that career in ways that doesn't leave them bitter. I think one of the challenges for us in the academy is to see the longitudinal effect, the long-term effects of an individualism that turned the beauty of solitude—and there's a beauty to solitude—the beauty of solitude into the pain of siloed existence. And that's a different matter. I've sat with faculty who at the end, they did not remember the beauty of the solitude. They remembered the pain of the silent existence. Now they accomplished a lot, but that's really not what we want for them. I mean, and I sat there saddened, because, to try to say, you know, this is not what we wanted for you here at the end. We really wanted a career in which the depth of belonging, not just belonging to your guild, but the depth belonging to a larger intellectual project, actually came through. But again, Peter, this is part of the problem of white, self-sufficient, masculine intellectual form. I mean, this is part of the problem of it. So anti-racism work comes right to the heart of what it means to cultivate a healthy faculty life.

**PS:** I love this. We're going to have to draw our conversation to a conclusion, but I love that you've ended on a note of essentially being an educator's educator. You're helping faculty reflect on the way that they have conducted themselves, you help them understand the brilliance of the life of the mind, the beauty of discovery, but also the dangers of isolation, the oppression that is a part of doing it only for the self and not understanding the connection it needs to make with others and with the larger world.

Willie, I have to thank you for speaking with me today. I can't tell you how much I've learned from our conversation. And I know you've given our listeners a lot to chew on. Thank you for spending time, and with all that's going on, you've been very, very generous.

**WJ:** You’re more than welcome. Thank you very much.

**PS:** To all our friends and members of the Yale community: thank you for joining us for Yale Talk. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.