Greetings, friend.

It feels so good to say those simple words. I’ve been waiting a long time to do that. I am glad to be back. I’m Mark Hicks, and I’m the McLean professor of Religious Education and the Director of the Fahs Collaborative here at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago. I’ve been away from you for the last 13 months on a medical hiatus, and I want to begin by sharing my gratitude with those of you who supported me with texts, notes, cards, and other statements of encouragement. It really helped my healing process and I’m thankful.

So, it is on this day in the spring of 2023 that I come to you with an opportunity to share a bit of my journey and invite you to join me in the act of faith formation. Since joining the faculty and coordinating the efforts of the Collaborative, I’ve been doing a lot of research in the interest of teaching and learning. I’d like to share some of it with you.

It was over 100 years ago when the elegant mind of W.E.B. Du Bois introduced the notion of Warring Selves. He spoke of two thoughts, two un-reconciled ideals in one body. In his conception, there is a sense of two-ness, of multiple competing identities, if you will, stuck in tension, unable to break free. This struggle speaks to me. Most of you know that I’m a native of Oklahoma, “where the wind comes sweeping down the plains,” right? It’s a story of two-ness, of multiple selves. I find that, in fact, it is both nurturing and nauseating. Nurturing in the sense that better relationships come wrapped in nature and community and with respectability politics playing out and also in the manner of mattering: here I know I am loved. At the same time, I was likewise nauseated because the major messages of hate come to mind: the colonization of the 39 tribes who call Oklahoma home; the Tulsa Race Massacre—the messages they would convey to me were that I don’t have value, I’m not seen, nor heard. Now I would imagine that if Du Bois were here with us today, he’d expand his notion to include the multiple selves of identity that are part of a struggle. There’s a gender sense of the male, second child, trying to become a man in the shadow of an older brother; a physical body so wrapped in a taller frame, now moving in the world in stilted ways; the sexual body yearning for expression but the wider culture says “don’t say gay”; the fluid, multiplicitic religious body trying to reconcile the self in a climate of hard truths; and then there’s this middle-class body that was proud of my parents’ work ethic but embarrassed by the trappings of the middle-class world. All of these things and more arrive with me today. I suspect the same is true for you. This is my multicultural self where identities bump up against each other in a search for freedom.

I share the story because they offer an important seminal understanding of ourselves. I recall a graduate school lecture where bell hooks stated, “I came to theory because my life hurts so much.” As a professor of faith formation, these stories matter from the standpoint of identity development. Making sense of them marks the moment we realize the frame which we use to make sense of our world has become too small, too narrow, it feels incomplete. A Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor said it this way: “When you get it right, it feels as if you found the point of your life.” I’d like to get it right. The last 13 months have been a trying time. I’ve been trying on ideas, letting the arts stretch my boundaries. It was a pilgrimage of identity and of anthropology. I’m inviting you to join me in the work.

On June 1st, I will present a six-hour workshop designed to think with your hands, to talk yourself into knowing your heart, to bear witness to the representation that is uniquely you. I invite you to come to the workshop in the spirit of discovery. I welcome your good company. I look forward to seeing you then. Bye-bye.

Learn more and register at the Spiritual Flourishing in Turbulent Waters of Identity workshop web page.