IV. LEADERSHIP

REV. DR. ZANDRA JORDAN Interview

Interviewed by Ariana Lee

WELCOMED: The first question is: you move between multiple roles on campus, writing center director, teacher, preacher, and chaplain affiliate. What parts of your formation most shape how you understand your work at Stanford today?

Zandra Jordan: Well, I really think about all facets of my life as being integrated. I'm responding to the same call, although it may take a different shape, depending upon the occasion, the audience, and what we're working toward together. But I'm always hopeful that the work I do, whether in the classroom, in the church, or out in the world, is really helping to create a better world that ideally advances Kingdom values and purposes. In that sense, I really see myself as drawing upon all aspects of my formation. Certainly, my early faith formation is integral to me. I think it matters.

What we do, how we do it, how we show up in the world, how we interact with other people matters. And so I'm often mindful of that, that the life I live and what I model is a message to people about my faith, even if I'm not speaking about it directly, because I don't hide my faith. Folks typically know or soon find out, and so they will, whether I want them to or not, make some associations between what I believe, what I profess, and then how I teach, and how I direct and administer a writing and speaking center. So I do think all of that is very much integrated.

My formation as someone who studied English language and literature, rhetoric and composition, and then later in my journey, theology, all of that also has felt intertwined. There is a focus on text, on analyzing the written word and thinking about how it is composed and for whom, and with what intent and what impact, and the histories of understanding and interpretation surrounding those texts. So all of that has felt very much like what I've always studied and been interested in. So there's just correlation and connection in that way.

WELCOMED: How does your faith inform the way you think about teaching, writing, and speaking, especially in a setting that serves students across many disciplines, identities, and belief systems?

Zandra Jordan: Yeah, my faith, again, is at the forefront. It's core to who I am. And while my goal is not necessarily to proselytize or convert, I think that my life, my approach, my pedagogy, my values, they communicate. They tell a story. They have a message and a persuasive point about the impact of a life of faith on how one moves in the world. I am always amazed when I try to understand how it is that people can navigate difficult times without a faith perspective to

anchor them, and to help them have a hopeful way forward when things are difficult or look impossible.

So I think for me, my faith is telling me that I can show up as a certain kind of teacher, a certain kind of administrator, a certain kind of employee, mentor, colleague, friend, and preacher. And in that sense, that person has some things in common.

You know, there's a business to my professional work for which I am paid. There's also a business component of the church. People don't always think about it, but I mean, there is a structure there. There are bills to be paid in that setting as well. And you're constantly negotiating. People's personalities and agendas sometimes conflict. So, in that regard, I am trying to bring my faithful sensibilities to all of those interactions. I'm prayerful about all of it. I'm asking for divine guidance across those roles.

WELCOMED: Writing centers are often described as neutral or skill-based spaces. Do you see them instead as ethical or moral communities in any sense? And if so, how does that shape the way you lead the Hume Center?

Zandra Jordan: I do. I think this notion that writing and speaking centers are somehow neutral, and you know, it's just about skill, it's just about the writing or the speaking, is such a fallacy. Language is never neutral. It is never neutral. It's always already inflected with the politics around language, culture, and identity and what it means to do that work in academic spaces with histories of exclusion and inclusion. So we just can't divorce it from that. For me and my work, absolutely, I think about it as a moral and ethical enterprise. And I approach it as such in my selection and training of tutors. I'm not just looking for the most skilled writers. I need to know about your capacity to work with other writers, similar to and different from you. How do you understand that practice? How do you value it? And that has real implications for the work we do and the kind of center that we want to be. Absolutely, a part of that moral work to me is cultivating people, whether they are tutors, writers, or speakers. It's cultivating people, those who have a keen understanding of the impact of their words in the world. And that's how they choose to interact with someone else in their formation around language, through their courage and vulnerability in opening themselves to be seen, through their words, through their thinking process. It is vital to the kind of world that we can create. Language and rhetoric are constitutive. You know, we make worlds, we make relationships through our language, and so if someone doesn't have sensitivity to those dynamics, I don't think that they would make a great tutor in this center. Maybe someplace else, but not at the Hume Center.

WELCOMED: Exactly. Yeah. I appreciate that acknowledgment. I love that. So this issue of *Welcomed* is centered on love. How do love of God and love of community show up in your pedagogical practice, particularly in moments when students are struggling, uncertain, or trying to find their voice?

Zandra Jordan: Yeah, I think we are entrenched in such a moment now. There's so much uncertainty in our world, in the U.S. political climate and globally too, that is wreaking havoc. I have a great deal of compassion for those who are struggling and are trying to find their way and may be feeling hopeless and confused. There is a short path from feelings of confusion and chaos to hopelessness and desperation, and we live in a community that has an extremely high rate of suicide, you know, to be such a beautiful place in the Bay, such a well-resourced place. Of course, we know that's not true of everyone who lives in the Bay, but to have such significant rates of suicide, especially among young people, is devastating. And so I think it's important that we don't treat people as numbers, but that we do our best to see the whole person, and that shows up when I'm teaching, when I'm tutoring, when I'm administrating. My intent is to see the person before me, to try to understand who they are, what they are experiencing, and to show some recognition of their humanity, regardless of any differences between our positionalities. I think that's loving. That's what I understand Jesus to be doing. You know, he was very inclusive in how he reached out to those around him and whom he chose to serve, and provided healing indiscriminately, welcoming children, welcoming women, welcoming people from different classes and statuses of life. And so I think it's important for me in my work in and out of the church to be someone who can do that, who can embrace people across differences and really honor humanity and the divinity of God in each of us.

WELCOMED: Womanist theology, racial justice, and Black women's sermonic traditions. How do you balance care and rigor in writing instruction, especially when working with students from historically marginalized backgrounds?

Zandra Jordan: Yes, there is unfortunately quite a history of persons from marginalized backgrounds being made to feel like their language, their histories, their ways with words, their ways of writing and speaking are illegitimate or deficient, or are ill-equipped for the task of academic life and rigor. And that's just untrue. You know, it's incredibly unfair for the broader community to love our culture but hate us. And that's just what it comes down to, you know. They love our swag, they love what we do in a cultural sense, but can't stand us. I really deplore that.

In my approach to my own work, it is important for me as an administrator and a tutor, but also in my training of others, to help expose that. That's a kind of evil and it's a kind of trauma upon marginalized bodies, and I really work to expose that, to illuminate what is happening there when we insist upon some standard English when, you know, there really isn't such a thing.

And unfortunately for persons of color, that target, this imposition of some standard that isn't an actual thing, is always a moving target that we can never quite hit. It shifts whenever the person being evaluated comes from a marginalized community. And so it is my intention and effort to try to illuminate that reality and to shift perspectives. You know, there is linguistic knowledge, a lot of it, that debunks those attitudes and perceptions, whether or not people want to believe it.

And then, of course, we have the beautiful record of many writers and speakers of color and from other marginalized backgrounds who, through years of toil, dealing with various discriminations, have risen to national and international status. And we know that their voices, their uniqueness, their distinctiveness are to be revered and celebrated, and come because of those cultural distinctions of who they are. And so, if they were to try to whitewash themselves, we would lose the very essence and beauty of what we have in their literary and other greatness.

WELCOMED: Yeah, I love that. And this is kind of a side point, a question that I have for you personally. Have you worked to amplify dialect variation, whether that be AAVE or even Gullah, in scholarly work? Because, like you were saying before, I know at Stanford, it seems as though we have to work in standard English for all essays, all scholarly work. So I just want to know if you had any work or advice that challenges this Eurocentric linguistic focus.

Zandra Jordan: I've done some research in that area. Very early in my professional career, I studied attitudes toward AAVE in the historically Black college and university setting, just trying to understand how Black students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, because not everyone understands that there is diversity within Black communities, you know, and where I was conducting that research, that was the case there as well, had a range of attitudes, perceptions, and understandings of what African American Vernacular English (AAVE) might offer persons who phenotypically seem to come from that background. Part of my effort in doing that research was to help make the case that there is a diversity of opinion.

And we need to, in addition to coming to understand that diversity, have a broader appreciation for those who may be writing in a way that is more reflective of AAVE. There isn't necessarily a direct correlation between speaking AAVE and writing, so I don't want to conflate the two. But yes, there's some early research which I think helped to make the case that it is important to understand speakers of that dialect, and I would say a language, because it has its own rule-governed system. There can be multiple motivations and varying degrees of facility with moving between AAVE and other Englishes, and all of it can be beautiful and communicate clearly and effectively. And sometimes what we're seeing from people who are opposed to it is implicit bias or preference, which doesn't have anything to do with how clearly one is actually able to be understood. So I think it's important to distinguish the difference between what our own linguistic preferences may be and how someone else is communicating, whether or not that is coming across clearly, and often it is. If you understand what they're saying but you just have a preference for something else, be honest about that. It's incredibly unfair to downgrade students because of a preference. If it's really not communicating clearly, then there is something to be done there. But, you know, often that's not the case. I hope I answered your question.

WELCOMED: Universities often treat faith as a private matter. In your experience, is there room for faith-informed values to shape public academic work, even when faith itself is not explicitly named?

Zandra Jordan: Yes, I believe there is, and that's part of what I am working on in my research on Black women's sermonic traditions and podcasting. They demonstrate rhetorical strategies that are helpful for anybody who wants to learn more about how to deliver orations well and effectively. So you don't have to share the same religious perspectives to learn from those practices. Therefore, I'm basically saying: look at these bad women, they are something special in how they do what they do. These are excellent examples that every student of communication could learn from, regardless of their religious background. I absolutely believe that to be true.

WELCOMED: Many students arrive at college with questions about faith, belonging, and purpose, or realizing they are still searching. What would you say to students who are trying to find where they fit spiritually or morally on campus?

Zandra Jordan: I would say that intellectual or educational pursuits are not separate or divorced from the Spirit. The life of the mind is a spiritual matter. Our pursuit of educational excellence, to grow in a particular field, that's also a spiritual matter. We don't have to think about it as a separate thing. Here's my spiritual life over here, and here's my academic life. You're reminding me of a conversation that I had at Stanford with a student who was anxious about midterms coming up, about their academic work and success. I knew them to be a person of faith, so I asked, “Have you prayed about it?” and they said, “Well, no. God has more important things to do than invest time in my studies.” And I was like, “Well, God cared about all of my academic stuff. Every paper I wrote, every exam I had, every program. God cared about all of that because I prayed about it all and saw God working and answering those prayers.” And so I think that, if someone comes to the university and they feel like they have those questions about their spiritual life, commitments, and beliefs, it's something that they can explore at the same time that they are exploring a major. I would really encourage them to get connected to some communities on campus where they have support and can, alongside other individuals who are also exploring, really work that out. Take a class. Take a class in religion.

Go and check out what's going on in the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life. Connect to other communities on campus and to a local church. You know, you don't have to have it all figured out to go and listen and explore. I think it's important to ask questions and to get connected to some communities that can help you as you are sorting out your answers to those questions.