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Hope is Not Confidence. Hope is Commitment

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Emily Dickinson said,
"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all-
Yet hope is not confidence

This bird--frozen in flight and in death--evokes for me both the hope Dickinson speaks of and the precarity that so many feel in these uncertain times. Many theological school deans lead in contexts where success and failure, gain and loss lie close together. The landscapes of education, church, and society have shifted radically under our feet. The future of many institutions cannot be discerned. There are greater forces at work--some benign, some destructive, all-powerful, few predictable. Attempts to fly might fail and no one, in particular, will be at fault. Paradoxically, theological educators are daily in the business of nourishing hope, of remembering, deepening, and empowering the vision of God's radical love for humanity and creation ever-unfolding in the world. There is no shortage of need or demand for this work. And yet deans are doing a disservice to that work if an institution and its people are blind to the realities and risks before us.

Cultivating collective hope means facing together the risks with creativity, candor, and courage. As Ernst Bloch has said, "hope is the opposite of naive optimism . . . It is critical and can be disappointed." This bleak and beautiful image captures for me the work and commitment of theological education in these times--so precarious and yet soaring with possibility.

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