

Practice Spirit, Do Justice Opening Plenary

Sung Park, Rev. Rebecca Voelkel, Lisa Weiner-Mahfuz

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Rebecca: We mentioned at the beginning that today was about worldview. What is the vision of the world we want to share? Lisa and Sung and I are going to do a piece together that we would ask you to consider as we live and struggle as a pro-LGBT spiritual and religious movement.

Lisa: Here is how we begin: We are on Dakota land, the Hilton Hotel Minneapolis. All around us in the place we call Minnesota is Anishinabe and Lakota land.

Sung: Each of us, queer, LGBT, allied have come to this place and this moment out of a journey that is rooted in our spiritual, religious or faith traditions. We have been inspired and supported, challenged and guided by so many. Our ancestors, our grandmothers and grandfathers, those we love and those who loved us. So many who have gone before us. And we return thanks again and again for those whose lives have laid the journey down before us. Our first step is one of gratitude.

Rebecca: But we have also been handed down a legacy, the heirlooms from our families or traditions that are tarnished with oppression and stained with the blood of too many. The land on which we stand, Dakota land, surrounded by Anishinabe and Lakota land, also tells a story of the legacies that are ours.

In 1862, the US government perpetrated a mass execution of 38 Dakota, still the largest mass execution on US land. A moment of silence to remember them, their blood still soaking this land, reparations never made, Minnesota schoolchildren do not learn about them in their history books.

Sung: As we begin Practice Spirit, Do Justice we do so grounding ourselves in the complex legacy that is ours. Paths laid for us by those who loved us and who yearned for us to live in joy and justice. Heirlooms of creativity and inspiration passed down. And legacies of blood-soaked soil, histories that only tell part of the story so as to mask the oppression. This is where we stand. This is where we begin.

Lisa: We offer this grounding in the land and in the history of this place because we believe it's important to know our histories and truths. If we don't know these histories and truths we can't hold the complexity of the individual and collective bodies that makes our presence here possible. Without this knowledge we can't hold the contradictions around privilege and oppression that exist right here---right on the ground upon which we stand. Liberation is only possible when we are uncompromisingly honest about the conditions of genocide, occupation, colonialism and oppression that exist right where we live.

Rebecca: We also offer this in the tradition of our elders, our forebears, some of whom we call

saints, some of our best revolutionary thinkers. We want to hold and share with you the concept of a third space, coming from black revolutionary activists in the south. If the first space is the conditions, the oppression we see and name, the second space is our reactions, our survival skills at their best, then the third space is where we dream.

Sung: Practice Spirit, Do Justice, we hope, will be a third space. We want to offer a third space, where we step back from the oppression and the place where we allow ourselves to dream...we have come to dream our collective liberation with you.

We read this together: We come together holding both the conditions of oppression and the possibilities for liberation.

Sung: We come together because we believe that faith, spirit and building beloved community

Lisa: will help us forge the trust we need to build bridges of solidarity.

Rebecca: We come together because we dream of creating family and community rooted in individual and collective self determination.

Together: We come to this third space holding the hope that we can do this work together with all of you.

Rebecca: It was Christmas, 1987. I was eighteen years old, a white, Christian teenage daughter of two pastors from a mixed class background, not yet a woman, not quite able to use the word lesbian to describe myself.

That morning, we had awakened in our sleeping bags to the ground shaking. At first, I was disoriented and didn't know what was happening. But quickly, an older man, a leader in the community, came to the lean-to where we were staying to tell us that the US-backed military government of El Salvador was dropping bombs nearby to scare and intimidate the residents of Santa Marta.

We were there because we were part of a small delegation of North American Christians and Jews who were part of the Accompaniment Movement. The residents of Santa Marta had, five years earlier, experienced a massacre—3000 of the 4000 residents of the village had been killed by the Salvadoran National Guard. The remaining 1000 people had fled to Honduras. About six weeks earlier, these survivors had decided to walk home to where their village had been in El Salvador and North Americans had signed up to accompany them as a disincentive to the US-backed Salvadoran military to harm them. (You see, when the 4 US Churchwomen were killed in 1980, the US had cut off aid for several months and the Salvadoran government had learned that killing US citizens mattered more to the US government....)

So there we were, awakened in our sleeping bags early on Christmas morning. When the Salvadoran elder came to tell us what was happening, he sat down and started talking to us

about what exactly had happened in his village. He shared with us the killing of his daughter who was pregnant with her first child... the death of his friend from childhood who had attempted to defend his family.... And many, many more particular, real stories of the cost of war, of oppression, of colonization.

As we talked and sat in silence and prayed, he finally said, “do you know how I can tell the North Americans who are going to last here with us?” I leaned forward because I was expecting to hear a story of the importance of good political analysis, of fearlessly leaning into the face of oppression and violence. And, of course, we had already talked about both of these. Instead, he said, “the way I know that anyone is going to last here is that they know how to laugh, to sing, to dance, to experience joy... Because the work we are doing is so difficult, we have to claim the promise of how the world is going to be, NOW. We have to live the promise. That’s what our faith teaches us....”

My friends, as we begin this time together as queer, allied, radical, moderate, confused, passionate, despairing, angry, hope-filled people, I am deeply mindful of what that Salvadoran elder taught us. Doing justice is an utterly critical task for those of us who purport to be spiritual, faith-filled or religious folks. Doing critical analysis that is fearless in its willingness to name and see and engage systems of violence and oppression is essential so that we might help bring about genuine transformation in our world.

But in order to do that, we are invited, over and over again, to ground ourselves in our spiritual and faith practices. Part of those practices are the disciplines of laughter, joy, quiet, singing and silence.

I have to tell you, one of the most important pieces of working with Sung is the ways in which our meetings seem to intertwine an earnest (in the best sense of that word) faith with a ridiculous sense of humor. It is not uncommon for me to burst out laughing in the office after having read one of his emails. My friend, Sung, is one of those whose model of practicing spirit and doing justice inspires me.

My friend, Lisa, is a femme who knows the power of beauty. Whenever I am in her home or with her at a gathering, I always have to pause to see a beautiful weaving or piece of art or admire her hair or lipstick. This pausing, this noticing the beauty in the here and the now, my friend Lisa teaches me about the disciplines of spirit in the midst of doing justice.

Together: Practicing Spirit, Doing Justice.

Rebecca: Living amidst complex histories:

Sung: heirlooms of love, legacies of oppression and violence.

Lisa: Fearless in the face of death, disciplined in our dancing, our singing, our joy.

Sung: This is a unique story; it is also a common story among many of us in this room.

I was standing in JFK airport, my family and I had just touched down in New York City from Seoul, South Korea. At 9 years of age, what I saw in that airport 25 years ago was a sight that scared me almost half to death, a woman with long yellow hair and skin lighter than mine. I thought we came to a different universe altogether, and everyone seemed alien to me – little did I know that I would be pegged the alien in this foreign land.

And on this foreign land I stand, fully knowing it is not where I come from, fully knowing it is the land of people who have suffered travesties beyond my comprehension, and fully knowing it is my duty to honor and uphold those on whose shoulders I stand.

And in this foreign land, my family and I had to start from scratch. I learned a language not native to my tongue, now more familiar than my native tongue. I watched helplessly as my parents endured countless demoralizing experiences, as they could not shake off their mother tongue quite so well. But we persevered, because that is what my people do – my people survived colonization by China, Japan, and the US. We survived through war, carnage, assassinations of our kings and queens, historical archives being burned to ash, our own language being outlawed, and having our kin shipped to another land across the ocean. And in this foreign land, my parents made sure we knew our history, the injustices, the wounds, and most importantly, the survival stories. And in this foreign land, my parents made sure to teach us whose land we stand on, not the white man's land but the First Nations' land.

So I want to ask, how many of us know this history of my people and the history of the land we are all standing on? For me, community means knowing our histories, our own individual histories and our collective histories – learning and embodying each other's past and present. It is about knowing where each of us come from, what we have endured, and how we can move forward together. Because we have not only survived but thrived against all odds, doesn't that mean something? Doesn't that tell us that we have an incredible reservoir to draw from? I know I learned this first hand, not just surviving but thriving as an immigrant, as a 1.5 generation Korean-American, as a trans person, as a Christian who found a way back to God despite several falls.

And I am able to stand here today because I had a community who carried me and taught me community is about knowing one another's wounds, and knowing how to help mend them. And it is about sharing the strengths and growing together. It is about having each other's backs. It is about taking care of each other. It is about bridging the most unlikely pairings; and embracing all the ugly, hot and messiness, the good, the joys and power we each hold and lifting that up.

When I first went to college, my mom started writing me letters with hints of lessons in them. Perhaps she felt I was adult enough to hear them, or perhaps she felt I needed the lessons to help me through in a strange place without her guidance. In one such letter, she wrote about how birds fly in formation – that the triangle they form has great logic and most of

all, maximizing the strength of each bird in the group. The bird in the front serves to divide the air current for the rest of the group so the whole group can fly more easily and efficiently. Then when the bird in the front gets tired, it flies back to the back of the formation and the bird that was right behind the leading bird takes that role until it gets tired, and this rotation continues through the length of the flight. Many of you may already know this fact, but at 17 it was a new lesson for me. And for another 17 years since, I have held that story close to my heart and continue to be my guide – that community means taking turns to lead, following when necessary, making sure each of us are contributing to the whole and each of us have the chance to recharge. Friends, I would like to invite all of us to hold this philosophy as we move into and through Practice Spirit Do Justice.

I have had the privilege of witnessing the model of community, in all that I have previously stated, while working with Rebecca and Lisa for Practice Spirit Do Justice. I have learned the incredible powers of healing in my interactions with Rebecca – learning to let go of my anger, learning the art of grace, and learning that not all white people are so bad J! So I thank you Rebecca for my journey with you in practicing spirit.

Lisa, where do I begin? I have known Lisa for only a few months, yet in that time I feel a kinship of years past. She is truly a power femme who in all sense models doing justice in all fronts. I used to be told to pick my battles, and I never believed it. And in Lisa, I see someone who lives every day forging paths to do justice by precisely NOT picking battles yet taking it all on with a quiet confidence and integrity.

Together: Practicing Spirit, Doing Justice.

Sung: Living amidst complex histories:

Rebecca: heirlooms of love, legacies of oppression and violence.

Lisa: Fearless in the face of death, disciplined in our dancing, our singing, our joy.

Rebecca: Tireless in our daring to build communities of resistance and love.

Lisa: I grew up in a family where I received two conflicting messages. On the one hand, my Jewish father and Muslim Arab mother had a very volatile relationship fueled by their differences based on faith, culture, race, gender, class and the politics of Israel/Palestine. On the other, my Jewish and Arab grandfathers, both of whom died far too young, were the best of friends. They were able to find common ground and nurture a friendship based on the complexity of their shared cultural and Semitic experiences.

As a light skinned Jewish/Arab-American disabled, lesbian, feminist I came to understand early in life that I had one of two paths I could take: the volatile path taken by my parents or the bridge building path forged by my grandfathers. I chose the path of justice because I do believe that those of us who hold multiple identities have gifts to bring to the world and, particularly, to

social justice work. Simply put, our bodies EMBODY what it means to truly organize across issues, identities, movements and communities.

One of the things that brings us to Practice Spirit, Do Justice is the question of what is a complex body? Each of us carries different intersections or complexities within our bodies. Yet, what binds us is a commitment to our mutual liberation in a society full of conditions-like racism, sexism, colonialism, transphobia, classism, ableism---that prevent us from BEING in our complex bodies in liberated ways.

Self determination over one's body and land are core to my personal and political principles. I'm going to go even further and say that I think that self determination over one's *body and land* should be a central tenant of the queer movement. Let me explain: The queer movement has a long history of understanding that the attacks on our communities are grounded in our struggle for sexual liberation and free expression of our bodies, love, genders and desires. Yet, what the queer movement has failed to do is to further this understanding by connecting our struggle to the struggles some communities face around the *colonizing of both their bodies and land*. Yeah, I said it.. COLONIZING!

Without question a clear example of this is the struggle for self determination by First Nations and Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas. For 500 years the United States government has occupied land that BELONGS (not belonged) to Indigenous communities and tribes. Long before the arrival of Europeans, First Nations peoples had their own ways of self governance, sharing of resources, resolving conflicts, engaging in spiritual practice and forging relationships to land. European settlers, bolstered by the formation of the United States government, colonized this land by imposing our own laws, religious doctrines and capitalist plans for regulating every aspect land across the Americas. All the while the plan was to actively destroy and disrespect what was here FIRST so that profits could be made through trade, the buying and selling of land, slavery and agricultural production.

I couldn't agree more with the First Nations/Two Spirit Collective when they state that "when you divorce yourself from the land and the Earth you can divorce yourself from each other." Divorcing ourselves from one another and from our collective responsibility to community is what leads to the building of walls, the policing of borders, the waging of war, the justification of occupation and the violence that fuels cycles of hate, ignorance and misunderstanding across communities.

Yes, my friends we divorce ourselves from one another bad things happen like Arizona passing a racist immigration law and then banning ethnic studies, the state of Israel erecting a wall between Israel and Palestine and restricting the ability of Palestinian people to freely move for decades and the implementation of social, legal and cultural Apartheid in South Africa from 1948-1994. Nothing good comes from colonizing bodies and land—NOTHING!

So how do we grapple with the truths of our lives and our histories in authentic ways? The answer to this question, for me, comes from a quote from Dr. Cornel West who prophetically

and passionately describes the legacy and perspective of Dr. Martin Luther King in this way:

“King had a spill-over love that went to poor and working people across the board of all colors. And then he had a critique of American imperial foreign policy, of invasion and occupation of Vietnam in his day, Iraq in our day, Afghanistan in our day, drones in Pakistan in our day.”

As we move into Practice Spirit, Do Justice I urge all of us to maintain a commitment to a spill-over love. I urge all of us to hold the truths and complexities of our histories. Together we must maintain a radical commitment to self determination and dismantling the colonial forces that prevent individual and collective bodies from being liberated. Our mutual survival depends upon it. *This is our work together in this space and beyond.*

Over the past four years I have had the privilege of working with Rebecca as a colleague and friend. Together we have labored over and found joy in forging a complex partnership along the lines of race, faith and the secular political world. She's a committed community builder that consistently works to open up spaces wherever and whenever she can for all of us to build beloved community.

I'm grateful for her friendship, our collaborative relationship and the joy of bringing together something for which we share mutual passion.

As Sung indicated, we have not known one another very long. Yet, his friendship is one of the gifts that has come out of organizing Practice Spirit, Do Justice.

There is an ease to our work together and for this I am deeply grateful. I have a feeling that Sung and I have traveled together before and I'm confident that we have quite a bit more traveling and perhaps some trouble making to do.

Together: Practicing Spirit, Doing Justice.

Lisa: Living amidst complex histories:

Sung: heirlooms of love, legacies of oppression and violence.

Rebecca: Fearless in the face of death, disciplined in our dancing, our singing, our joy.

Sung: Tireless in our daring to build communities of resistance and love.

Lisa: Reveling in our created bodies, complex and liberated.

[Sung and Rebecca off the stage and Lisa remains]

Lisa: In this spirit, we are deeply blessed to have Sharon Day with us. She's a First Nations elder who lives here in Minneapolis. We believe that there is no better way to begin our work

together than to start this conversation with the history of sovereignty and First Nations peoples. We will now turn this plenary over to Sharon so that she can move us through a deeper understanding of these issues as well the importance of investing more deeply in one another's liberation across issues, communities and identities.