

## Sacred Conversations

January 17, 2010  
Rev. Martha Niebanck  
First Parish in Brookline

**Opening Words:** “*Letter from the Birmingham Jail*” Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Jr.

I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

**Reading:** “*Skin Again*”

bell hooks

If you want to know who I am you have got to come inside.  
Be with me inside the me of me, all made up of stories present, past, future  
some true to life and others all fun and fantasy, all the way I imagine me.  
If you find all about me – coming close and letting go of who you might think I am  
before you come inside and let me be real and you become real to me.  
All real then.  
In that place where skin again is one small way to see me but not real enough to be all the  
me of me or the you of you.  
For we are all inside made up of real history, real dreams, and the stuff of all we hope for  
when we can be all real, together, on the inside.

**Reading:** “*Never Give Up*”

Barbara Ehrenreich

(T)his is a perfect time to be confronting the issues of race among those people who most need this confrontation -- meaning white people ...

It's a fine time to be confronting racism; it is also a hard time. Because you look around and there is no morally inclusive civil rights movement -- probably nothing that should be called a civil rights movement at all...

(The issue is) the loneliness of moral abandonment. The civil rights movement was once the moral code of all our movements, spawning feminism, spawning an anti-war and anti-militarism movement, reviving and challenging the trade union movement, gestating a movement of the poor of all colors. The civil rights movement was not our only hope, but it was perhaps our finest hope.

Sometimes we have to get used to a little loneliness, because sometimes the only moral center we will find is in ourselves.

Look, these are desperate and chaotic times. History has left us no operating manual, no step-by-step instructions. Nothing is promised, nothing is guaranteed, everything we have ever fought for is in danger or already in ruins. We have to find our own way -- maybe a new way. That can be scary; that can definitely be lonely.

But there is a way in which we are not alone. When we stand on principle -- no matter how unpopular that principle may be, no matter how much it separates us from the crowd -- and I mean principles like (economic), racial and gender justice -- we are

sending a message to people we do not know -- to people who are far away (as far as Chiapas or Nigeria perhaps) and to people who are not born yet.

And that message is: You are not alone. We too have worked and dreamed for something better. That message is: Never give up.

**A Prayer For The Children:**

Ina J. Hughes

We pray for the children who sneak Popsicle's before supper,  
who erase holes in math workbooks, who can never find their shoes.  
And we pray for those who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire,  
who can't bound down the street in a new pair of sneakers, who never "counted potatoes,"  
who are born in places where we wouldn't be caught dead,  
who never go to the circus, who live in an X-rated world.  
We pray for children  
who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions,  
who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money.  
And we pray for those who never get dessert,  
who have no safe blanket to drag behind them,  
who watch their parents watch them die,  
who can't find any bread to steal,  
who don't have any rooms to clean up,  
whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser,  
whose monsters are real.  
We pray for children  
who spend all their allowance before Tuesday,  
who throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food,  
who like ghost stories,  
who shove dirty clothes under the bed,  
who never rinse out the tub,  
who get visits from the tooth fairy,  
who don't like to be kissed in front of the carpool,  
who squirm in church and scream in the phone,  
whose tears we sometimes laugh at and whose smiles can make us cry.  
And we pray for those whose nightmares come in the daytime,  
who will eat anything,  
who have never seen a dentist,  
who aren't spoiled by anybody,  
who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep,  
who live and move, but have no being.  
We pray for children who want to be carried and for those who must,  
who we never give up on and for those who don't get a second chance.  
For those we smother and . . . for those  
who will grab the hand of anybody kind enough to offer it.

**Reading:** *"This I Believe"*

Chris from Seattle

I live in a world and I am part of a society that has the lowest expectations for me. Images on the 6 o'clock news serve as a daily reminder that black males are to be feared and would mostly likely do harm to someone. I read how I would be lucky to live to the ripe age of 30 and chances are I might have been in jail. I am the father of several children with little or no means or interest to care for them. I am a black man in America.

Nevertheless, here is the truth.

I am 39 years old, hold a masters and practice as a nurse practitioner. I have never been in jail and have no children. The truth is that each day I want to be an example of good humanity. Despite the images and assumptions about me, provided by the media, I have learned a great lesson that I carry with me each day I introduce myself with "Hello, my name is Chris and I am the nurse that will be taking care of you."

About 5 years ago, I was working in an ICU in Dallas, Texas. I was assigned to care for a 60-year-old Caucasian male who had suffered a heart attack. He was married and had children but seemed, at least to me, uncomfortable with me taking care of him.

His condition was very stable and he was due to be discharged from the ICU in a day or two. What became uncomfortable for me was that each time I entered his room to gather vital signs or administer medications; he kept staring at me in an odd yet familiar way.

When I moved to Texas and began working, often times I would have trouble convincing people that I was a Registered Nurse, or some would assume that I was a housekeeper or an orderly and assign me tasks common to those positions.

Often I would hear the "I have never been taken a care of by a black nurse before". Well I was sure that this scenario was more of the same.

When I entered his room again to administer medications and to ask if he was having any pain or discomfort, he continued with the familiar stare. I decided to remove the awkwardness of the situation by asking him if there was something he wanted to ask me or say to me and he said:

"I was just thinking that I have a son that died when he was 18 years old and his name was Christopher. Today, he would be about your age, he was tall, he was your height, and he wanted to be a nurse. I was wondering if he would have been the kind of nurse that you are and where he would be working and what he would be doing. I have not thought much about this until I met you this morning"

Not prepared for this I asked how he died and how many years has it been. I then excused myself to go to the bathroom to cry.

This story serves to remind me that the world is not always cold and mean; that many things are not always as they seem. I believe that there are people who can see beyond color and stereotype to see the person. It serves as a reminder to me to enter each situation as a unique experience and to examine my own stereotypes and assumptions. This experience allowed to me act as a surrogate to allow a father to see a future, not meant to be for his son, through me. ...

That experience instilled in me that if I take the time to listen, people would lower that shield that often times takes days, weeks and, for some, years to lower and share in a way that changes the listener. I believe that each person that I take care of has a unique story to tell and if I am focused and ready to listen without assumption and stereotype, they just might share that story.

## Sermon

Last Fall, when I imagined this sermon for our Martin Luther King celebration, my hope was to introduce the idea of a Diversity Ministry Team here at First Parish. I wanted us to experience the gentle and developmental sequence of doing the work of becoming a community of practice for dismantling privilege.

I wanted us to begin with the first steps -- creating safe space for facing our history and ourselves. I wanted us to see the shape of sacred conversations. And I wanted to build the willingness to trust a process that is not about fixing or blaming, but about dwelling and abiding in the gap between what is and what might be.

Our culture is in an active conversation about race, class, and the economy. Whether you've gone to see "Avatar" or just read the reviews; are glued to the images of the humanitarian disaster in the media; are volunteering in the Haitian community; are reading the opinions of pundits; or are raging at the words Rush Limbaugh and Pat Robertson -- we are involved in a conversation about race, reality, and religion. Our culture is involved in a conversation about the nature of self in community, the sources of sin and suffering, and the presence of God in history.

Listening to the voices in the public square, we can hear the language of the technical fix, the knee jerk theology and habit of blame—the talk about systems, systems of oppression, systems of neglect, systems of care-every argument spoken from a disembodied balcony made of privilege.

And so today I begin with a different sort of voice -- one of connection, one that resonates with King's words from the Birmingham jail: *We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*

Hear the words of feminist theologian Rita Nakashima Brock, as she counsels going toward compassion and away from fix-it blame:

“This coming weekend, a lot of clergy will face having to say something about what happened in Haiti. I hope they talk about love and about how we weep and worry and hope and (that) somewhere, deep inside us lives this thing, this ability to see another person in anguish and not turn away. In the dusty, bloody, weeping, anguished black faces of this continent's poorest people, we see something of ourselves and want to help. ... We feel deep in us a welling up and spilling over of compassion, making us want to do something, anything to hold on to that deep humanity that binds us to each other and to something sacred we sense in ourselves and others.

“That is all of God I need, that moment when so many of us feel tears leap to our eyes beyond our control and help because we cannot stand to do nothing. Love and its vulnerabilities and joys have always had the quality of something sacred ... a gift (we) have not earned, a grace that comes with being human. (Today it is) enough to love beauty, to seek justice and compassion, and to be among those I love.”

(<http://www.dogcanyon.org/2010/01/14/god-is-french/>)

Would you be willing to slow down and become aware and curious about your personal, affective, engaged response to the tragedy unfolding as we speak? If so, I invite you to remember, in a sense, the story that broke your heart as the news was spreading. Notice in detail what in particular caught your heart's attention.

How does it feel to be in your body as you remember the particulars of the story you are carrying?

If you are willing to share, find a partner to share that experience of compassion --tell the story, share the image, feel the feelings with one other person. Listen deeply with loving presence without interruption. Listen with resilience, noticing your own reaction to hearing the other. Notice the differences and similarities between each of your experiences.

Tomorrow and the next day and the next into years, we will need to deepen the sacred conversation to include race and the effects of colonialism on the systems of privilege in which we live -- the invisible construct of whiteness -- the water in which we swim in unconsciousness.

Our congregation will begin by teaching each other how to include conversations on race and unearned privilege in our book group, in Adult Religious Exploration, in Good Times, on Film Nights, in musical evenings, watching theater, dance, making poetry, and reaching beyond these walls as we learn how to be accountable to communities of color. We will build the human connections of compassion, joy, and conscious disciplines of community that will make transformation possible. We have all the time there is to do this work.

Tomorrow, we celebrate the life and work of the prophet, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., whose last days were spent challenging the sources of poverty in unfair labor practices that kill our human souls.

We can remember the true history of this celebration's beginnings -- organized labor. For 14 years, labor unions brought corporate pressure to bear on the government. Year after year, working class people of all colors risked their livelihood by staying home on January 15.

We remember the early labor organizers who inspired Martin King and Rosa Parks with the sharing of songs, stories, poetry, and dance. They found the common ground of humanity in art and celebration. The work does not require hair shirts or flogging, just the willingness to sing. May it be so.

**Closing Words:** *"I Dream a World"*

Langston Hughes

I dream a world where man  
No other man will scorn,  
Where love will bless the earth  
And peace its paths adorn  
I dream a world where all  
Will know sweet freedom's way,  
Where greed no longer saps the soul

Nor avarice blights our day.  
A world I dream where black or white,  
Whatever race you be,  
Will share the bounties of the earth  
And every man is free,  
Where wretchedness will hang its head  
And joy, like a pearl,  
Attends the needs of all mankind-  
Of such I dream, my world!