

For more information on Fearless Dialogues—a grassroots organization committed to creating unique spaces for unlikely partners to engage in hard, heartfelt conversations on difficult subjects—please visit www.fearlessdialogues.com.

FEARLESS[™] DIALOGUES

A New Movement for Justice

GREGORY C. ELLISON II

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Contents

Foreword by Parker J. Palmer	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
1. Fear+Less Dialogues Introduced	1
2. Conversations with Country Dark: Beyond the Fear of the Unknown	15
3. The Welcome Table of Radical Hospitality: Beyond the Fear of Strangers	35
4. When Pupils See: Beyond the Fear of Plopping	65
5. Listening for the Love Below: Beyond the Fear of Appearing Ignorant	85
6. To Die a Good Death: Beyond the Fear of Oppressive Systems	119
Notes	153
Index	165

Fear+Less Dialogues Introduced

No dogs nip at my heels as I outstretch the three-foot measuring tape overhead, but I feel the ancestral presence of freedom fighters hoisting picket signs. With fists clenched on each side of the measuring tape, I sense a kinship with young activists who throw up their arms in protest and bow their knee to die-in. Unchoked by tear gas, my legs stand firm. But my unclouded eyes still water as I recall the faces of a hundred hues.

For a solitary moment, I gaze silently into the eyes of remembered faces standing before me. They too hold three-foot measuring tapes above their heads. Through my watery eyes, I see them clearly. There is the former gang leader in New Orleans with the garish knife wound chiseled around his neck from ear to ear. To his left, the Spanish-speaking New York pastor and the wheelchair activist from Georgia. My eyes continue to rove the room and I peep the quizzical grin of the aging white male business tycoon. Next to him, I behold the prophetic vision of the brown-faced girl from Ferguson, who saw a flash of heaven in her community where others saw only hell. I look around the room and recall the faces of thousands of unlikely partners drawn together by Fearless Dialogues for hard heartfelt conversations. . . . Then I see Monique Rivarde.

Twelve months before Fearless Dialogues entered public discourse, I met Monique in a crowded courtroom. A cloud cover of rage hovered over the sentencing, and teardrops showered down this mother's cheeks. Nevertheless, undeterred by fear, Monique looked squarely into

the eyes of the murderers of her eighteen-year-old son and challenged them to commit to become better men. Not once did Monique raise her voice, but when she spoke, people leaned in closer to hear. Months later in a Fearless Dialogues community conversation about police brutality, Monique sat amid a cloud of witnesses numbering nearly two hundred and offered another challenge: See and hear the pains of the unacknowledged all around us. Her words reverberated through every soul in the room. Again, she spoke barely above a thunderous whisper.

Rivarde represents a form of resistance that is quiet and forceful. According to Kevin Quashie, “resistance” that is solely described as a deafening outcry “is too clunky, vague and imprecise to be a catch-all for a whole range of human behaviors and ambitions.”¹ When quiet resistance is overlooked in history, it is possible to uplift the strides of televised protests and stamp out the acts of day-to-day resistance of the millions, like Monique, who will never make the headlines. Fearless Dialogues equips communities to see the invisible, to hear the muted, and to create change through quiet resistance and fearless speech.

THE BIRTH OF FEARLESS DIALOGUES

Seeking Truth through Troth

It was a sweltering afternoon in May 2013, yet colleague after colleague filed into the conference room. The summer seminar doubled as a think tank, and all in attendance were primed for conversation and eager to bring to life theories from my first book, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men*. Twelve in total, we encircled the conference table. Before speaking I scanned the room and took notice of these unlikely partners. Around the table were a power-plant engineer, a marketing executive, a graphic designer, a community organizer, a drug dealer turned artist, an IT specialist, a freelance journalist, a professional singer, a pastor, a fashion designer, and a corporate attorney. Once the room settled, I quietly searched the eyes of every individual in the circle. Behind every cornea, I saw a story. Beyond every iris, there lay a gift. In the silence that followed, I could sense the ancestors and archangels blessing the work before us and the unborn unbridling our tongues. Breaking through with quiet resistance, I uttered seven simple words of invocation, “It is good to finally see you.”

For the next hour, full-hearted introductions flowed freely in the space; it was evident that this gathering of gifted persons possessed great potential for catalyzing change. Yet between introductions, a discomforting silence lingered near. A closer look revealed that subtle smiles and uneasy laughter masked a nervous energy. Person after person recounted grim tales of similar gatherings of impassioned leaders. Each of these narratives echoed a tragic cycle:

- Impassioned leaders gather.
- The perils of paternalism, territorialism, and fear stifle conversation.
- With no framework for dialogue, the leaders retreat to familiar theories, practices, and dogmas.
- Creativity, collaboration, and change dissipate.
- Frustrated leaders depart.
- Seeking to chart a course that would avoid dialogical derailment, we declared a troth.

Centuries ago, individuals and communities inscribed sacred bonds with each other by declaring a troth. The Old English word “troth” is an ancient vow where persons or communities entered a covenant to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship. These solemn promises forged relationships of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks.² Our troth was simple. We covenanted to train our eyes to see individuals and communities hidden in plain view. We vowed to attune our ears to hear the muted who scream from the shadows. During our training and attunement, we pledged to remain in community and to address any rising discord in our group with courage and humility. This troth would illumine our way and guide our interactions.

For weeks we read, ate, and shared together. We were far from an ordinary class; the city was our laboratory. So together we walked urban streets, learning from community organizers and local pastors, swapping stories with griot-like grandmothers and down-to-earth drug dealers. In time, we recognized small yet noticeable shifts in the world around us. We were seeing differently. We were hearing differently. We were changing internally.

But just as our vision was clarifying, blind rage circulated on social media. Though we were hearing more deeply, we could not ignore the fever pitch of discord scouring national news:

George Zimmerman Found Not Guilty and Goes Free³

Twitter Erupts After Ex-Neighborhood Watchman Walks on . . .
Murder Charge⁴

Ivy League Professor Calls “God a Racist” after Zimmerman
Verdict

Verdict Doesn’t End Debate in Trayvon Martin Death

‘No Justice’: Thousands March for Trayvon Martin⁵

After Zimmerman Verdict, Trayvon Martin Isn’t Only Victim⁶

President Obama: Trayvon Martin Could Have Been Me⁷

White Churches Uncommonly Quiet after Zimmerman Verdict⁸

In the days following the July 13, 2013, verdict that found George Zimmerman not guilty for the murder of Trayvon Martin, constructive conversations seized. At dinner tables and lunch counters, dialogues were wedged between screams for justice and silent sorrow. Thousands jammed onto city streets and civic squares in protest, while even more sat at home in moral conflict, questioning their complicity or justifying their silence in fear of being labeled a bigot. A space was needed for hard heartfelt conversations that could transform a powder keg of emotion into a creative medium for change.

The time had come for Fearless Dialogues to move from theory to practice. So the twelve who gathered around that conference table in May sent out a call to action on social media, public radio, and print media: “We will have a community conversation about the Zimmerman verdict on July 20, 2013. All are welcome!”

Heaven on Earth: A Movement Unfolds

Rain pelted the summer-scorched concrete and steam rose like a numinous fog. Despite the traffic jams that gripped Atlanta, three hundred people bypassed bottlenecks and navigated side streets to find their way to Emory University. Each was unsatisfied with age-old options of writing their congressperson or toting placards on the capitol steps. Some needed a place to be seen and chose to no longer scream from the shadows. Others sought a space to hear the opinions of real people, not just thoughts of political pundits. Sifting through the fog, they searched for change . . . and we welcomed them with Radical Hospitality in the parking lot. Each person received the same introduction:

“It is good to finally see you. Welcome to Fearless Dialogues. Are you ready for change?”

As they entered the building, live music colored the air. Standing at a registration table adjacent to the door, a Fearless Dialogues team member greeted each person again with the same three prompts: “It is good to finally see you. Welcome to Fearless Dialogues. Are you ready for change?”

At this table, the dialogue continued as the community leaders gathering for conversation selected name tags that uniquely described the gifts of their soul. A judge chose a name tag that read “healer.” Emory’s assistant provost picked a name tag reading “artist.” A single mother placed an “educator” name tag on her dress, while a factory worker selected a name tag labeled “neighbor.” Once self-identified by their gifts, community leaders were invited upstairs by another Fearless Dialogues team member, who offered our signature salutation once more: “It is good to finally see you. Welcome to Fearless Dialogues. Are you ready for change?”

Overwrought by seven days of sensationalized media slander, schism, and debate over Zimmerman’s not-guilty verdict, these three hundred people proudly, even if tentatively, wore their soul-gifts on display. Many came seeking to understand and to be understood. Some sought a shoulder to cry on, while others yearned for a venue to vent. Jam-packed in the room, we anticipated hard conversation, but we could not pinpoint exactly what might happen that evening. After preliminary introductions and an explanation of the Fearless Dialogues philosophy, groups were divided based on the name tags chosen during registration. Not only did neighbors sit around tables with artists, healers, and educators. These groups also brought foundation executives, small-nonprofit leaders, factory workers, students, and drug dealers face-to-face.

Before the community conversation began, we introduced the Fearless Dialogues “animators” in the room. Unlike workshop facilitators, who call out participants raising their hands or waiting their turn to speak, Fearless Dialogues animators are uniquely trained to bring conversations to life. These animators give inspiration, encouragement, and renewed vigor to unlikely partners in dialogue.

After the animators laid out the ground rules for dialogue, they guided these small groups into conversation. On that first day, we had not yet developed our signature-theory based experiments, but the twelve of us who sat around that conference table and walked the city streets together noticed an uptick of hope as the exchanges between the three hundred deepened. Lifted by the energy of connecting with

unlikely partners in hard heartfelt conversation, the three hundred ended their time together by hoisting three-foot measuring tapes in the air and accepting a simple challenge.

Nearly an hour after taking the three-foot challenge, the band had played their last note, but the steady hum of conversation continued. Dozens of unlikely partners clung to the moment and remained deeply engaged in dialogue. We underestimated the impact of Radical Hospitality. We underappreciated the value of crafting space for unlikely partners to see the invisible and hear the muted. Then I had an unforgettable encounter as I exited the building.

Nearly out the door, one young man who sold drugs pulled me to the side and looked deeply into my eyes. Little did I know that his words would catalyze our movement. The words fell from his lips with a thick southern twang: "This felt like heaven. I haven't been in many places where I can share my story and how I feel without being judged."

Two days later, the twelve regathered around the conference table. Over a meal we recounted the moments on that Saturday afternoon when the dean saw the gifts in the drug dealer, the factory worker heard the vulnerabilities of the foundation executive, and the graduate student and the grieving mother envisioned communal change. On that rainy afternoon, we received a glimpse of heaven on earth. On July 20, 2013, human action collided with divine intervention, and Fearless Dialogues was born.

FEAR+LESS DIALOGUES

Fearless Dialogues is a grassroots nonprofit initiative committed to creating unique spaces for unlikely partners to engage in hard heartfelt conversations that see gifts in others, hear value in stories, and work for change and positive transformation in self and other. Thinking critically about the words "fear" and "less" individually, and then as a compound word, is central to the work of Fearless Dialogues. I invite you to consider these three words now.

Fear, noun \fi(ə)r\

an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat.

Like thin air leaking out of an airtight room, fear stifles, closes in, and isolates. Hounding us by day and harrowing by night, fear "lurks ready

to spring into action as soon as one is alone, or as soon as the lights go out, or as soon as one's social defenses are temporarily removed."¹⁰ This pervasive fear expects conflict and roots itself in the "heart of relationships between the weak and the strong, between the controllers of the environment and those who are controlled by it."¹¹ Often fear appears one-sided, as the weak are seemingly intimidated by the strong. However, an undiscussed and undisclosed fear also lingers in the hearts of many strong persons in power. They fear the possibility of being forcefully knocked from their pedestal. One debilitating result of fear is the inability to see beyond the facade of power or the visage of weakness and to glimpse the power that lies within. For meaningful connections to be forged, individuals and communities must face fear head on.

Less, det. & pronoun \les\

a smaller amount of, not as much

An antidote to fear, "lessness" is a posture of humility, perceptiveness, and intention not to lord power over others. This posture resists the temptations of possessing all the answers, and yields to the mysterious journey of raising questions. Lessness is not a diminishment of control. To the contrary, this posture requires attunement and discipline to listen first and not battle for the last word, to see a gift where others see only problems. In a dialogical landscape where news pundits shout down adversaries in their fear of losing ground or being wrong, Fearless Dialogues models another way to engage. Less is more.

Fear-less, adj \fi(ə)r\ + \les\
lacking fear

I have intentionally struck through the most common definition of "fearless" because this definition rings untrue for the work of Fearless Dialogues. In its most common usage, "fearless" is the composition of a root and a suffix ("fear" and "-less"). Here, the suffix "less" means "without." This construction connotes that hard heartfelt conversations can exist without the presence of fear. However, seldom is it the case that unlikely partners, whether self-identified by their soul-gifts or not, can engage in hard heartfelt conversation with absolutely no fear.

Fear + less, adj \fi(ə)r\ + \les\
compound word addressing the reality of fear and the possibility of

"less-ness" to free unlikely partners to have hard heartfelt conversations.

A preferred structure for the work of convening unlikely partners is to define the word “fearless” by viewing the term as a compound word (“fear” + “less”). With a compound structure in mind, “less” means “to a smaller extent,” suggesting that when fears are named, they have less of a stranglehold on hard conversations. Further, “less” evokes images of a disciplined posture of lessness between conversation partners. Thus, as a compound word, “fear+less” dialogues offers greater possibilities for unlikely partners to engage challenging subjects together.

UNLIKELY PARTNERS TOO NUMEROUS TO COUNT

Fearless Dialogues is unique in scope because of its value of bringing unlikely partners into common spaces for dialogue. In the first Fearless Dialogues community conversation, faculty, students, staff, and administrators from Emory University found common ground with judges, foundation executives, factory workers, elected officials, drug dealers, and physicians. Since that summer afternoon in 2013, Fearless Dialogues has gathered more than 15,000 unlikely partners for community conversations in college classrooms, corporate boardrooms, church sanctuaries, and community centers. Whether working with incarcerated youth, community organizers, education professionals, or trustee boards, Fearless Dialogues emphasizes that even those who share common space with us daily may still occupy the role of Familiar Strangers. Therefore, we create conditions for unlikely partners like the judge and the felon, the rich and the poor, the old and the young to see and hear each other in new and enriching ways.

This book outlines the methodology of Fearless Dialogues by simulating a community conversation between unlikely partners. Within these pages you will notice theoretical voices from pastoral theology, Quaker philosophy, African American history, and twentieth-century mysticism, alongside the ancestral wisdom from the Black literary tradition. You will overhear formative moments from my youth, behold the timeless wisdom of my grandparents, and listen to transformative encounters from Fearless Dialogues gatherings. Just as hard heartfelt conversations between corporate executives and artists or gang members and stay-at-home moms are critical for the “work” of Fearless Dialogues, so also is the cacophony of dialogue partners within these pages vital to our learning. For the Fearless Dialogues method to remain

authentic, its methodology must not justify the ends but rather practice them.

As author, I accept the honor of “animating” the dialogue in this book. During Fearless Dialogues conversations, animators utilize an unconventional combination of interactive exercises, small- and large-group reflection, and high-impact theory-based lectures, all wrapped in the posture of “lessness” and in the arms of Radical Hospitality. In this role, I am privileged to guide you through theory and practices that have made the work of Fearless Dialogues meaningful for countless unlikely partners.

My freewheeling style of writing—from poetry and prose to cultural criticism and historical snapshots—mirrors my approach to teaching and counseling, which maintains that animators must capture the audience’s imagination in seconds, lest these animators find themselves tuned out and invisible. The poetry, prose, and creative writing are intended to stimulate the imagination of the artists. Attention to the mystical tradition and practices to foster individual and collective wholeness may resonate with the healers. The close examination of theoretical sources and attention to multisensory learning styles may refresh the minds and hearts of educators. The neighbors are invited to feel connection in the varied experiments formed in the laboratory of discovery. Activists might use this text as a barometer to measure their sensitivity to seeing, hearing, and standing alongside those who remain unacknowledged and marginalized. Finally, the connectors may engage in a meta-analysis of how Fearless Dialogues animators bring conversations to life while carefully balancing strong personalities and unstable power dynamics.

Finally, since this work is not a Fearless Monologue, you will be invited into the conversation as well. Throughout the book, as I move between theory, practice, and narrative, I pose italicized questions directly to you, Beloved Reader. As these questions bear deep philosophical and vocational weight, you may choose to respond with your voice by scribbling thoughts and feelings directly into the margin or in a nearby journal. While this is not a workbook, the pages following are written to evoke conversation with others and provoke a deep and interrogating conversation with self. Since some of the moments of this book are especially tense, be aware of times when I invite you to breathe, stretch, or observe silence. Please accept my invitation to you, Beloved Reader, to join Fearless Dialogues as our latest unlikely

partner. "It is good to finally see you. Welcome to Fearless Dialogues. Are you ready for change?"

THE JOURNEY AHEAD

In Fearless Dialogues' work with thousands of unlikely partners and dozens of communities around the globe, my colleagues and I have noticed five primary fears that stifle conversation: the fear of the unknown, the fear of strangers, the fear of plopping, the fear of appearing ignorant, and the fear of oppressive systems. Each of the five remaining chapters examines how Fearless Dialogues utilizes theories and practices to overcome these fears that impede meaningful exchange.

Creating unique spaces for hard heartfelt conversation is the niche of Fearless Dialogues and our response to the perilous fear of the unknown. In a conversation with country dark, chapter 2 moves us into the luminous darkness. Surrounded by the magic of country dark, I share with you how Fearless Dialogues creates spaces that embrace failure, stimulate the senses, and identify pockets of freedom. I am certain that my Grandma's wisdom and Barbara Brown Taylor's sacramental vision will make altars of the spaces in which you move.

At my maternal grandmother's welcome table, we learned to lessen our fears of strangers. Chapter 3 introduces Fearless Dialogues' unique approaches to Radical Hospitality. Guided by soul-stirring narratives and conversations with diverse theorists like mystic and educator Parker J. Palmer, pastoral theologian Robert C. Dykstra, social psychologist Stanley Milgram, and my gun-toting Granma, you will feast at the welcome table with Public Strangers, Familiar Strangers, Intimate Strangers, and the Stranger Within.

Have you ever shared your truth in a classroom, a boardroom, or your family dinner table, only to have your cherished words crash to the floor with no response? Master educator Jane Vella calls this painful experience of not being valued as a speaker "plopping." In chapter 4, to examine the fear of plopping, I recount my own educational journey from an inner-city high school in Atlanta to the hallowed halls of Princeton's Ivy Green. Lessons from these institutions of higher learning and theories from psychologist William James and social psychologist Kipling Williams inform how Fearless Dialogues helps unlikely partners to see the unacknowledged all around us.

"I am unfit. I feel unequipped. I feel unprepared." These three insecurities mask a fear of appearing ignorant. In chapter 5, I share Fearless Dialogues' threefold approach to peeling away these masking insecurities. As you learn to increase proximity, listen empathically, and inquire humbly, I introduce you to the works of sociologist James A. Vela-McConnell, pastoral theologian Karen Scheib, and the Carmelite monk William McNamara. Perhaps more compelling is my invitation for you to descend with me into the belly of the beast, where we will take A Long Loving Look at the Real and face life's Five Hardest Questions.

"I am not an activist because I don't . . ." Far too many change agents are immobilized by oppressive systems that predetermine the acceptable parameters of activism. To face the fear of oppressive systems and move beyond vocations of negation, chapter 6 asks the bone-chilling question "What must I do to die a good death?" Guided by the adolescent lives of Martin Luther, Howard Thurman, Jesus Christ, and my childhood hero, together we will be galvanized to change the three feet around us.

THREE FEET, THREE WORDS, THREE PILLARS

Whether standing in an auditorium in Nassau, a classroom in Sao Paulo, a concert hall in Atlanta, or a church in Memphis, I issue the same challenge to the remembered faces holding a three-foot measuring tape overhead. As we look eye to eye, I share the Fearless Dialogues rallying cry, a life-changing story from my childhood:

This may come as no surprise to you, but I was a strange child who asked big questions. After all, I was reared in the home of activists, and I walked the hills of Atlanta in the shadows of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center. In all her wisdom, my Aunt Dotty was unalarmed when I, at eight years old, asked how I could change the world. Honoring my boyish justice impulse, she responded, "Baby, I don't know how to change the world, but I can change the three feet around me."

Over three decades since that porcheside chat with Aunt Dotty, the Fearless Dialogues team has challenged more than 15,000 people worldwide to see the lives and hear the stories of three people who cross within their three feet. The three-foot challenge anchors this new movement for justice.

It may sound unconventional to hear that Fearless Dialogues measures both local and global change in thirty-six-inch increments. Built on the cornerstone of my personal mantra, “Once you see, you cannot not see,” at base level Fearless Dialogues encourages community leaders to become fully aware of the people and resources existent within their three-foot orbit. Equipped with heightened awareness of the potential gifts and valued assets within arm’s reach, community leaders come to experience an altered vision that changes how they move in the world. For instance, once you truly come to see a *maitre d’*, a drug dealer, a homeless person, or a traumatized teenager as someone made in the image of God, with a potential and perhaps undiscovered gift that can change the course of a community, you can no longer disregard that human being. You can no longer overlook them, bypass them, or step over them, because you have seen them cross within your three feet . . . and once you see, you cannot not see.

The Fearless Dialogues three-foot challenge stands firmly on three feet, or shall I say, three pillars: See. Hear. Change. In my years of research on marginalization, muteness, and invisibility, I have come to believe that purposeful engagement and sustainable change are not possible while community partners remain unseen and unheard.¹² For this reason, Fearless Dialogues places primacy on seeing and hearing as gateways to change. More specifically, we believe that when unlikely partners come to see individuals around them as innately gifted human beings, then they can hear the stories of people from seemingly different backgrounds as valuable. With the capacity to see gifts and hear wisdom within unfamiliar stories, the pump is primed for unlikely partners to pursue change. These three pillars—See, Hear, Change—are indelibly infused into the theory and practice of Fearless Dialogues.

As is illustrated throughout this book, to *see* is much more than to behold with the eye, because “vision is one of the laziest senses.”¹³ The full sensory nature of seeing became clear to me years ago when I had the pleasure of visiting the New York art studio of the internationally renowned Japanese American artist Makoto “Mako” Fujimura. Upon my entering the lofted space, an aromatic admixture of metal dust, saturated paper, and acrylic paints traveled through my nostrils and settled in my throat. The smell and taste of the space immediately transformed my preconceived notion of an art studio into an alchemist lab. As I touched the fine-ground gold dust that layers Mako’s paintings, I came to see his works with greater texture and meaning. Akin to Fujimura’s alchemist-like art studio, Fearless Dialogues creates unique spaces that

heighten sensory awareness. Utilizing visual art, music, and interactive exercises, this hypersensory environment, known as the Laboratory of Discovery, aids community partners in “seeing” the gifts in themselves and in those around them.

The art of *hearing* is also multitextured. One must train the ear, intensify the imagination, and expand levels of empathy to hear value in the stories of others who are seemingly different. Laden in the theory and practice of Fearless Dialogues one finds the benefits of carefully listening both to piercing rage and quiet courage. Consistent with the musical symbolism throughout this book, my piano teacher, Simon, once told me, “When life is hard, music makes it easier to breathe.” Likewise, in the heat of hard heartfelt conversations, an ear attuned to hope can provide a pocket of air for unlikely partners suffocated by problems that seem asphyxiating.

The great cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Embracing Mead’s aspiration, Fearless Dialogues maintains that global *change* embraces the paradoxical tensions of narrative, space, and time. As is reiterated throughout this book, small, seemingly insignificant practices can precipitate lasting change. When ordinary individuals fearlessly commit to changing the three feet around them, the tectonic plates of a community shift. Finally, Fearless Dialogues creates crucible moments for time-bending transformation that emerge when human interaction collides with divine intervention. In these rare moments, the past is reframed, future possibilities appear attainable, the present is energized with hope, and the kingdom of God descends to earth. For Fearless Dialogues, change is both local and global; it transforms individuals and multiple generations; it collapses time to clarify vision; and it energizes the heads and hearts of unlikely partners.

THE QUIET COURAGE TO SPEAK AND TO BE

In a national climate where political pundits spar on television, and social media debates end in stalemate, there are few models that demonstrate conversation across lines of difference. Yet families, churches, schools, and corporations desire pathways to engage in meaningful conversations and face difficult subjects. Perhaps this is why you have chosen this book. In the pages that follow, I will share with you how

Fearless Dialogues creates unique spaces for unlikely partners to overcome fears and engage in hard heartfelt conversation. Together, we will embark on a journey of self-examination and explore how social change is spurred by deep engagement with the variety of people who cross within our three feet. As you muster the quiet courage to speak and to be, I extend this invitation to you, Beloved Reader: Welcome to Fearless Dialogues! It is good to finally see you. Are you ready for change? Let's get to work!

The Welcome Table of Radical Hospitality

Beyond the Fear of Strangers

Them bright yella eggs in the cast-iron skillet always reminded me of the sun cuttin' through the midnight sky. But, it was mornin' in Granma's house, breakfast was cookin', and the usuals were startin' to gather. Some kinda meat simmered in a skillet next to the eggs. 'Possum? Rabbit? Squirrel? All tasted the same to me when they was fried and smothered in gravy. On the back burner, a golden river of butter ran through the bubblin' stone ground grits like the "ancient, dusky" Mississippi.¹

Under the eggs, mystery meat, and boiling grits, the heat from the oven pushed the air out the dough, and homemade biscuits the size of my eight-year-old hand was risin' like white clouds in the sky. Molasses sat on the table next to the canned pear preserves, and every thirty seconds the screen door was a-slammin' as folk kept filing in to 135 Webster.

Eatin' was sport for my family. And folk came from miles away, like countries gathering for the torch lighting of the Olympic Games, just to put they feet under Granma's table. Of course the usuals were there. Granpa and Uncle Jack in their uniformed denim coveralls took their seats at the big table. Not long after, Uncle Slim and Aunt LC moseyed in. The Saddlers thundered up the back steps, and like a songbird in springtime cousin Tweety came a-hummin' through the front door. In piccolo pitch, Aunt Lela sent her greetings to everybody, and kids upon kids upon kids scurried for an empty spot to

fill their mornin' bellies. After a customary prayer, we all grabbed our platter—'cause sport eaters don't use plates—and the games began.

It took years for me to appreciate the subtle lessons of warm reception that I learned at 135 Webster. On any given day, Granma could feed twenty to fifty people. My grandparents were far from wealthy, but as migrants from the Mississippi cotton fields they opened their table to all, and no one ever walked away hungry.

Granma was the oldest of eighteen children, and Granpa was number four of twelve. Because our clan was so large, and I didn't know half the folk milling around the tables, I figured they was all family. I have since learned that many of the diners weren't related, but my grandparents still treated them like kin. The sojourners from the block came in through the screen door, washed their hands, and ate off their platter with everybody else.

After the morning rush, Granma and Granpa sat on the front porch and "chewed the fat." Leftovers stayed on the stove until the next meal. If by chance they saw an empty-stomached sojourner walk by, the screen door would slam again, the hungry pedestrian would wash her hands, and sit at the welcome table.

As comforting as a mother's hug, the food prepared in Granma's kitchen put souls at ease. Around platters of piping hot grits, cathead biscuits, and all manner of mystery meats, family, friend, and foe let down their walls, removed their masks, and spoke their mind without inhibition. Around those tables food for thought was served buffet style, as heartfelt conversations on politics and parenting, faith and activism, history and current events unfolded effortlessly.

Not much on words, Granma Simpson was the quiet type. Interestingly, while others ate, she rarely took a bite. She retreated to her recliner in the corner to "rest." If ever questioned about her appetite, Granma responded, "Baby, I'm tired. I'll eat lil' later." But her lively eyes told a different story. Amid the chatter and the chew, she scanned the room, processing data. She looked and listened, learned and laughed. With her long loving looks, she took in the minute details that others overlooked. Quite often Granma's eyes would connect with a diner, and in minutes the full-bellied partaker would saunter to the corner and sit at her side. Barely above a whisper, diner after diner would disclose deep and intimate truths to Granma. With a few carefully chosen words, she would top off their meal with wise counsel.

On June 25, 2007, my Granma, Mary Jane Simpson, exhaled one last time in her eighty-second year. Prior to her death, she invited me to offer words of comfort and encouragement at her funeral. In preparation for Granma's eulogy, I polled family and friends, inquiring of her impact. She was most remembered for her down-home cooking, her wise counsel, and her capacity to hold a confidence with lock and key. On the day of her homegoing celebration, I stood before the hundreds gathered and emphasized five key words: "Granma never met a stranger."

In this chapter, I draw upon the sage-like wisdom of Granma Simpson, Henri Nouwen, Parker J. Palmer, and others, to share with you how Fearless Dialogues engages a fourfold method of Radical Hospitality to sidestep our perilous fear of strangers. To frame these spaces of Radical Hospitality, Fearless Dialogues:

1. Incorporates placeholders that evoke memories of communal solidarity;
2. Models the act of beholding to foster unspoken bonds of social responsibility;
3. Fashions a homelike holding environment for guests to feel secure; and
4. Ensures the host prepares to welcome others long before guests arrive.

With a commitment to intentionally facing fears and innovatively invoking the whole self, Fearless Dialogues transforms unlikely partners into strangers no more.

THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS: HOSPITALITY, HOSTILITY, AND THE FEARS OF LOVING THY NEIGHBOR

From childhood many of us are taught to fear strangers. We are schooled to believe that those unknown to parents and guardians should automatically be looked at askew and arouse skepticism. These socialized suspicions subliminally teach us that those in our inner circle, who look, talk, dress, and think like us, should be perceived as less of a threat. Youthful recollections of "stranger danger" fester for years and unconsciously seep into adulthood interactions, precluding hard heart-felt conversations and meaningful interactions. From these childhood

teachings, difference and otherness far too often evoke, and are equated with, fear.

Recognizing that fear of strangers can imperil dialogue and meaningful encounter with others, I invite you to consider four types of strangers that linger in our midst: Public Strangers, Familiar Strangers, Intimate Strangers, and the Stranger Within.² Each of these strangers bears gifts that can teach us much about ourselves and the world around us, if we can move from hostility to hospitality and muster the courage to face strangers fear+lessly. But, as I learned in my youth, hospitality is exhausting work.

While Granma and Granpa's residence served as a family hub in the Midwest, my parents' home, affectionately known as the Do Drop Inn, was the southernmost family junction. For Grandma Franceina, the snowbird, our Atlanta home was an annual haven from the wintry mix of ice and snow in the Show-Me state. For cousin Damon, the pilot, our home was a layover pad to rest between flights. For cousins Tina, Audrey, Leslie, Aaron, Neil, and all of their collegiate friends, our home doubled as a free laundromat with the perks of comfortable sofas for napping and foil-wrapped care packages of fried chicken and peach cobbler. For more than one relative, our home served as a rent-free stopgap between jobs and relationships, all manner of personal crises. Throughout my childhood and teenage years, family members, friends, and even friends of friends moved in and out of our abode as if it had a revolving door. All the while, my mother, father, brother, and I learned to shift the equilibrium of our daily routine in order for strangers to feel welcomed in our home.

Such shifts in the interests of hospitality did not come without sacrifice and searing discontent. Mom bemoaned the fact that our house never stayed clean more than a couple of hours. Dad, an accountant and a good steward of our family funds, had no problem playing "bad cop" and setting arrival and departure dates for guests. My younger brother, DE, bellyached about visitors overstaying their welcome. I begrudgingly surrendered my bed to older relatives. In one such surrendering, I slept on a sofa most of my junior year in high school. As one of the innkeepers at the Do Drop Inn, I learned that, if left unchecked, constantly welcoming strangers could breed repulsion and hostility rather than Radical Hospitality.

In *Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, Henri Nouwen recognizes the hosts' ambivalence toward strangers and the dutiful

work required to create a hospitable environment for unfamiliar people to share freely of themselves. The potential for hostility never escapes the host. Nouwen, like my Granma and innkeeping parents, understood hospitality as a spiritual imperative for Christian living, with age-old roots in the Old and New Testaments.

Far from "the image of soft sweet kindness" or "a general atmosphere of coziness," countless biblical texts reference the sacrifice, risk, and reward of sheltering strangers.³ Abraham and Sarah offer water, shelter, and their finest meal to three sojourners trekking through Mamre in the heat of the day. A woman named Rahab, who is employed as a prostitute, accepts great risk to herself and her family by protecting Israelite spies from the soldiers sent by the king of Jericho. Two wayfarers encounter a stranger on the road to Emmaus and invite him to a shared meal and shelter, only to find that the stranger is Jesus! In each of these scriptural passages, the hosts welcome unfamiliar persons into the sacred spaces of their homes, unaware of the rewards and despite the risks. In these sacred texts, Abraham, Sarah, and the Emmaus wayfarers sacrifice time, energy, and hard-earned resources to offer a welcome table of food and drink to strangers on their journey. Others, like Rahab, risk their lives and livelihood to shelter the strangers whom others avoid.

From these biblical accounts Nouwen suggests that spaces of hospitality create unique moments where both "guest and host can reveal their most precious gifts and bring new life to each other."⁴ Perhaps Nouwen's mentee Parker Palmer is correct when he suggests that strangers bear a truth and vision that may not be revealed without the hospitality of an open-minded host.⁵ In a world desperately in need of neighborliness, welcome, and life-altering truths, reclaiming hospitality is necessary. However, reclaiming a form of hospitality that moves from mere kindness to sacrifice and risk requires deep investment and preparation of the host.

A host who seats guests solely to receive the gifts of new vision and the rewards of new truth is little more than a paternalistic maître d' feeding his or her ego. To the contrary, hosts must prepare their inner lives prior to the stranger's arrival, lest they greet the visitor with self-interest, paternalism, hostility, or angst. Upon reflecting on these scriptural passages, examining numerous theories, and observing the conditions necessary for host and stranger to share gifts in mutuality, I have devised an approach called Radical Hospitality to govern the practices of Fearless Dialogues.

To account for the variety of guests gathering for heartfelt conversation, Fearless Dialogues' Radical Hospitality ensures that:

1. Public Strangers are presented placeholders that transition their souls to a space of comfort where truths are revealed and gifts are shared.
2. Familiar Strangers are invited to behold self and others with contemplative eyes.
3. Intimate Strangers are welcomed into an environment that holds them in the crucible of crisis.
4. The host moves toward facing the Stranger Within.

Each of the radically hospitable acts—placeholdering, beholding, holding, and moving—sets the table for life-altering encounters and unforgettable moments of Fearless Dialogue. For starters, let me introduce you to the Public Strangers all around us.

PUBLIC STRANGERS: PRECIOUS MEMORIES AND PUBLIC WITNESS

Theirs is a story as American as Huckleberry Finn, as patriotic as Susan B. Anthony. Born in the second decade of the twentieth century, the broader public expected Mary Jane Young and Willie "Dub" Simpson to live the fullness of their lives tilling the blood-soaked soil of a land not their own. This was not a far-fetched prediction. Their mothers and their mothers' mothers, their fathers and their father's fathers, had all picked cotton in the sticky heat of the Mississippi sun. So too the pair were pupils of the Great Depression and schooled in the ways of the Jim Crow South. With Dub formally educated only through fourth grade, and Mary Jane making it only to grade eight, it would seem the generational trend of sharecropping white folks' land would continue for the childhood sweethearts. Days after their betrothal they vowed, "All our kids will go to college. None of them will pick a piece of cotton."

One day, after years of degradation, Dub struck the white landowner. With a bounty on his life, the couple sought "the warmth of other suns."⁶ Trudging clandestinely up the Delta, they found solace in a sleepy midwestern manufacturing town. In the company of strangers, they set up shop. They were faithful to their vow; years later, each of their eleven children went to college. Not a single one felt the thorny prick of a Mississippi cotton plant. This classic tale illustrates

the mastery of navigating multiple publics, circumventing danger, and finding solace in Public Strangers.

According to Parker J. Palmer, "at bottom, the word 'public' means all of the people in a society, without distinction or qualification."⁷ We encounter members of this broad populace on public streets and public transit, in city parks and at sidewalk cafes. In public life, strangers in pursuit of private interests meet each other and convey the subliminal messages that while we do not know each other, we occupy a common space.⁸

But public space and common ground are subjective realities. In the segregated South of my grandparents' childhood, certain public spaces were clearly demarcated "Whites Only." While the dividing lines of public terrain in the United States may not be as explicit as they once were, public demarcations to separate strangers still exist. The perceptive eye need not look hard to find public partitions in the form of redlining neighborhoods for tax purposes, community policing to target urban violence, and environmental hazards that toxify impoverished areas. Yet even with these dividing lines, in our daily round public worlds intersect, and strangers unexpectedly enter each other's lives.

Finding common ground in our private circles is often considered easier when we deal with those who are "like us." Individuals occupying our inner circle may share our race, sexual orientation, religious belief, or socioeconomic background. Yet the public is rife with difference that is capable of teaching us in wholly different ways than the comforts of our private spheres. In the company of Public Strangers, who exceed the bounds of our familiarity, we recognize both the potential for conflict and the power of human relatedness.

For Palmer, a healthy public life gives daily doses of potential conflict. When strangers meet and are forced to divvy up scarce resources, whether it be elbow room on a crowded subway or tax dollars for public schooling, conflict is inevitable. But public life teaches us that conflict is not always terminal. In both crowded spaces and difficult discourse we "learn to adjust, compromise, [and] correct our course so that conflict is minimized and the movement of the whole becomes possible."⁹ In Fearless Dialogues we seek to create unique spaces where unlikely partners are challenged to make conscious adjustments to accommodate strangers and maneuver around potential conflict.

For instance, upon entering a Fearless Dialogue, everyone chooses a name tag from one of six categories: artist, healer, educator, neighbor,

connector, or activist. Throughout our time together, persons in each category are strategically paired so that individuals who might not ordinarily speak to one another are placed on common ground. The felon and the judge, the millionaire and the unemployed, are challenged to draw upon their instinctive skills gained from public life to navigate conflict. In the best of circumstances, surprising connections between Public Strangers unfold. This truth strikes close to home for me.

My grandparents arrived as unemployed migrants in a midwestern factory town in the 1940s. They were strangers in a foreign land, with minimal education and a tenacious work ethic. Over time, Dub found work at a meatpacking plant, and he and Mary Jane scavenged scrap metal to make ends meet. A wizard with money, Granma learned how to make a dollar out of fifteen cents, and they built a five-bedroom home from the ground up for their growing family. This story sounds like the American folklore of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps. While intestinal fortitude and unswerving faith in God are central to my forebears' narrative, it is also a story of human relatedness with Public Strangers.

Family sources tell me that Dub met a "good white man" who taught him how to read specific charts and grids so he could be hired at the meatpacking factory. Given his traumatic flight from segregated Mississippi, trusting a stranger, particularly a white man, seemed a risky proposition. Like my grandparents, who welcomed famished strangers for home-cooked meals, I learned (years later) that this "good white man" was also known for taking risks in the spirit of mutual aid. When stretched beyond the comfort of our private realm, our vantage of self-interest is altered. Freed from the restrictiveness of our private lives, in public we are apt to glimpse unexpected goodwill from unknown people. Such was the case for my grandfather on his job search in the heartland.

In a serendipitous twist to this American tale of Public Strangers, in 2013 I sat on a back porch in the Upper Midwest. I was invited into this home as a friend of a friend; in all accounts, I was a Public Stranger welcomed into a private circle. With hot tea in hand, the host asked a perfunctory question about my family history. I told the story of my grandparents' traumatic Mississippi exodus and their settlement in the Midwestern manufacturing town. The host raised his eyebrows, for he knew well of this same town. My kinfolk called the "good white man" Ol' Man Palmer. My host, Parker J. Palmer, knew him as his grandfather. Sometimes Public Strangers are more familiar than we think.

Placeholders for Public Strangers: Transitional Objects for Transitional Spaces

"Greg, not so much salt. It'll give you high blood pressure. Not too much sugar, baby. You'll get diabetes. [Laugh.] If you drink too much water, you'll drown. Everything in moderation."

How I cherish the lessons learned at my grandmothers' welcome tables! Since their deaths, I better understand why many call southern cookin' "soul food." Long after the meals have digested, the food for thought still comforts the soul. On Saturdays, when I cook breakfast with my children and see the biscuits risin' in the oven, I hear Granma Simpson's voice. When I step outside and feel blanketed by the midnight pitch, I recall Grandma Ellison's lessons on country dark and taste homespun ice cream on the tip of my tongue. Oh, how I miss my grandmothers; but their soul food still nourishes me on my journey.

In addition to visiting me in my dreams, occasionally my grandmothers sit with me in public places. For example, some Sunday mornings, an old hymn will play in church. Before I catch myself, my eyes close and I'm rocking back and forth, taken by the tune. A tear falls and I recognize my grandmother "sitting with me." I wish I could open my eyes, and just one more time ask her for a peppermint tucked away in a ziploc bag at the bottom of her purse.

Not too long ago, one of my grandmothers sat with me in a meeting I had scheduled with a senior administrator at Emory. We had never spoken before, and because of the sensitive nature of our conversation, we met in her office. It was an unseasonably warm Atlanta day, but her workspace was frigid. When I entered the icebox, I noticed a basket of handmade quilts in the corner. To break the "proverbial ice" before our sensitive conversation, I inquired about the quilts. The administrator informed me that her retired grandmother, who lives in Mississippi, hand-stitched the quilts for her to give to office mates in their frozen tundra. "My Granma's from Mississippi, too. The quilts she made were so heavy, when you used them it felt like somebody was laying on you," I responded. Within seconds the tension around our forthcoming conversation dissipated, and this stranger and I became fast friends. Our grandmothers hovered above, but like magic carpets the quilts took us someplace else.

To explain the transcendent power of biscuit, blanket, and song, let us turn to the theories of D. W. Winnicott. Formally trained as a pediatrician before devoting his life to the study and practice of

psychoanalysis, Winnicott spent a great deal of time observing babies and their mothers. From these observations, he gathered that the development of an infant's self is largely predicated on the presence of a "good-enough mother" who creates a secure base or holding environment. For Winnicott, a good-enough mother need not be perfect, clever, intellectually enlightened, or even the infant's biological mother. However, this parental presence must withdraw from her (or his) own needs and assume an "easy and unresented preoccupation" with the infant's care.¹⁰ According to Winnicott, this unswerving devotion creates an illusion that the baby is the center of all things:

If [the baby] is hungry and desires the breast [or bottle], it appears; he makes it appear; he creates the breast [or bottle]. If he is cold and starting to feel uncomfortable, it becomes warmer. He controls the temperature of the world around him; he creates his surroundings. The [good-enough mother] "*brings the world*" to the infant without delay, without skipping a beat.¹¹

If the good-enough mother succeeds in responding to the infant's severe tests of hunger and trials of discomfort, these elements interact and produce an incubator for the child's self: a "holding environment." Winnicott's holding environment is "a physical and psychical space within which the infant is protected without knowing he is protected."¹² After this secure base is established and the good-enough mother gradually wanes in selfless preoccupation, the baby slowly recognizes his dependence. As a result of a safe and responsive holding environment, it dawns on the infant that she must now learn how to interact with the "not-me" world—the people and things in her surroundings—in order to survive and thrive.

Winnicott places primacy on the formative experiences in the infant-maternal relationship. In the earliest days of life, the good-enough mother selflessly devotes time and energy to creating a holding environment that responds to the infant's beck and call. When properly constituted, this holding environment creates the illusion that the child omnipotently controls the outside world and wields the power to demand food and dictate temperature change. However, as the good-enough mother's selfless devotion gradually wanes, the child slowly comes to realize that the "world does not revolve around me." This infantile epiphany is a developmental milestone for Winnicott, because the child is introduced to an objective reality that a world exists beyond oneself. While the subjective omnipotence created by the good-enough

mother's holding remains a precious legacy and resource, the child must learn to engage the "not-me" world for survival.¹³ Central to this phenomenon is the infant's adoption of a "not-me possession" that Winnicott calls a "transitional object."

Winnicott observes that days after birth, infants use fingers and thumbs to self-soothe. Months later, babies grow fond of stuffed animals, soft toys, and even blankets. For the pediatrician turned psychoanalyst, the child's attachment to these objects represents more than oral excitement and satisfaction. "Sooner or later in an infant's development there comes a tendency on the part of the infant to weave other-than-me objects into the personal pattern. To some extent these objects stand for the breast [or bottle]" and provide for the child a tangible sense of security and comfort reminiscent of the holding environment provided by the good-enough mother.¹⁴

As the child ages, the soft toy, corner of a blanket, word, mannerism, or tune becomes vitally important at the time of going to sleep, because it serves as a defense against anxiety and fear.¹⁵ Winnicott further says that in some instances, the good-enough mother allows this precious object to get smelly and dirty because washing "it may introduce a break in continuity in the infant's experience, a break that may destroy the meaning and value of the object to the infant."¹⁶ Furthermore, attachment to this transitional object that assuaged early feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and fear may persist well into childhood.

According to Winnicott, at some point in the child's development the physical object loses meaning but is not forgotten. Rather, it is internalized as a part of the child's inner reality. Once this transitional phenomenon is held within the growing child, memory of the once-cherished transitional object and the holding environment it symbolizes becomes a resource to fend off anxiety and fear.

Transitional phenomena internalized from our earliest holding environment can still secure us today. Rising biscuits on a Saturday can provide assurance that soul food will nourish generations to come. A Sunday hymn can summon the serenity of Granma's giving hands. Monday afternoon memories of grandmothers quilting can transform a tense conversation between strangers into fearless dialogue between fast friends. For these very reasons, *Fearless Dialogues* uses transitional objects as placeholders to extend Radical Hospitality to Public Strangers.

A placeholder is a word, symbol, or concept that occupies a position on behalf of something else. Like Winnicott's transitional objects, these placeholders serve as bridges between an individual's subjective

experience and the objective reality of the outside world. Recognizing that anxieties and fears can run amok in the hearts and minds of Public Strangers, at Fearless Dialogues we utilize art, music, and food as placeholder transitional objects. While we cannot bring grandmothers and good-enough mothers into every room, we can utilize transitional objects that evoke memory and provide the feeling of a secure holding environment.

By design, when Fearless Dialogues hosts community conversations, we employ the services of local artisans. If food is to be served, a local cook or caterer is invited to prepare comfort foods for the gathering of unlikely partners. When the Public Strangers enter into the space, they hear all genres of music from hip-hop and jazz to classical and folk. These tunes are selected to tickle the ear and transition the anxious stranger to an environment that feels more homelike than novel. As the Public Strangers move toward their seats, artwork from around the world, picturing people of different ethnicities, genders, and backgrounds, lines the walls in an effort to send the subliminal message that all are welcome here. These intentionally set placeholders of food, music, and art serve as transitional objects capable of holding the environment for even Public Strangers to engage in dialogues fearlessly. These placeholders not only extend Radical Hospitality to Public Strangers; they also carve out space to behold the wisdom of Familiar Strangers.

FAMILIAR STRANGERS: MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Public Strangers need not be foreign. In fact, Familiar Strangers to whom we have never uttered a word oddly comfort us with their presence or alert us in their absence.

With some dread, I recall Emory's stadium-style lecture hall, which accommodated more than two hundred anxiety-ridden freshman chemistry students twice a week for a class designed to weed out freshmen who were less serious about the hard sciences. The college auditorium began to fill by 7:50 a.m. As on the New York City subway at rush hour, around five minutes to eight, throngs of students pressed through the double doors with unilateral focus: find a seat as fast as possible. Twice a week this was our daily commute.

My study partners and I sat on the third row from the front, always left of center. Even on the drowsiest of mornings, I took notice of the

redheaded fella two rows ahead of me. Never did I introduce myself or bother to ask his name, but he was as much of a fixture in the stadium hall as the chalkboard and the professor. On the rare day that my redheaded colleague failed to fill his seat, I noticed. He was a Familiar Stranger. As I was a mainstay on row three and one of the few African American freshmen sitting front and center, it is likely that my colleagues (and the professor) who did not know my name also noticed *my* absences. We shared common space, but for all intents and purposes we were Familiar Strangers.

Almost a hundred years ago, native New Yorker and internationally renowned social psychologist Stanley Milgram published a brief essay titled "The Familiar Stranger: An Aspect of Urban Anonymity." Milgram examined New York City bystanders who witness criminal activity, but fail to offer aid,¹⁷ intruders who upset the social system of waiting by cutting the line,¹⁸ and even Familiar Strangers who share common space on subway platforms. According to Milgram and his laboratory mates, the Familiar Stranger "gains extreme familiarity with the faces of a number of persons, yet never interacts with them."¹⁹ Like a developing friendship, the frozen relationship of Familiar Strangers is a process that takes time. To become a Familiar Stranger "a person (1) has to be observed, (2) repeatedly for a certain time period, and (3) without any interaction." As time elapses, barriers arise between Familiar Strangers, chances of salutatory pleasantries diminish, and recognizable faces blend into the environment as part of the urban scenery.²⁰

Milgram and his colleagues conducted a social experiment by photographing morning commuters on a New York City subway platform. The images pictured clusters of commuters standing back to back or facing straight ahead, all close in proximity, but emotionally distant and removed. The following week, the researchers distributed the photographs to the morning passengers with a cover letter about their study and a questionnaire about the phenomenon of Familiar Strangers. The findings were amazing! Nearly 90 percent of those questioned were familiar with at least one platform stranger. The average commuter recognized at least four persons with whom they had never shared a word.²¹

In addition to the study's statistics, the feedback uncovered that many passengers often think of their fellow commuters, imagining what kind of lives they lead and jobs they hold. Milgram surmised that Familiar Strangers shared an unspoken bond to mutually ignore each other without any implication of hostility. However, under critical

circumstances, Familiar Strangers would mobilize to speak to, stand alongside, and support each other, despite the prior pact of silence. These findings provide a key opening for Fearless Dialogues to create spaces for unlikely partners who rarely interact to have transformative encounters that alter the lives of self and other.²²

Beholding Familiar Strangers: Granmas, Greyhounds, and Guns

Funny story. Not long after we were married, Antoinette and I visited Granma Simpson one evening. Recently widowed and living in a large house, she slept with a loaded pistol. So when she invited us to sit with her in the bedroom, Granma moved her firearm to the nightstand before motioning for us to sit on the bed. Noticing that my wife was visibly alarmed, my pistol-packing Granma turned to Antoinette and said, "I protect my own." Then she shared this unforgettable story.

Granma hated airplanes. She only voyaged where her two feet could carry her or the spinning wheels of a car, bus, or train traveled. That evening she told us of one excursion to visit a family relative. On this particular bus trip, she journeyed alone, but her Greyhound²³ was delayed. For hours, she waited in a seedy bus station. To pass the time, she reverted to her custom of scanning the space, imagining the life stories of the people around her, and praying for the strangers on their journeys. After surveying the room, she locked eyes with an unnerved single mother traveling with her young children. As a mother of eleven, Granma knew all too well the struggles of antsy children on long trips. For her the story of this overwhelmed mother was more familiar than strange. While the overwrought mother sought to ease her anxious children, Granma noticed a suspicious man lurking and eyeing the distracted mother's handbag.

In a slow gaunt, Granma gathered her belongings and strolled over to the overstimulated mother. In minutes, they struck up a conversation about parenting and travels, yet Granma's eyes still scanned the room. Like a predator stalking his prey, a mysterious man lurching around moved in to strike on the overwrought mother and the sweet ol' woman. Growing up in Mississippi, Granma disliked huntin', but she knew her way around the wild. So she stuck a hand in her purse and looked the lurch in the eye. With her trigger finger on the concealed weapon, she said to the lurch, "If you know what's best, you should

walk away . . ." As the point of the story, Granma smiled at us, leaned over to Antoinette, and chuckled, "I protect my own."

In a seedy bus station full of strangers, Granma scanned the room and took particular notice of an overextended mother and her children. Granma knew the struggles of overextension all too well; this mother's story was a familiar one that hit close to home. In the process of connecting eyes and beholding each other, a silent and sacred bond was formed between two mothers. The strength of this bond quickened in crisis as Granma noticed the malevolent intentions of the lurch. Granma felt beholden to the mother and her children, even though minutes earlier they had yet to exchange a single word. For over a decade, I have been fascinated by Granma's quickened bond, social responsibility, and Radical Hospitality to this woman she had never met. To better understand this exchange, let us return to Stanley Milgram's work on how Familiar Strangers study each other closely and form unique and unspoken bonds of kinship.

Recall Milgram's findings revealed that while commuters had an unvoiced pact to silently interact on the subway platform, they took notice when a fellow passenger did not show up for their morning commute. Milgram's research-based insights add that Familiar Strangers also wondered about the jobs and lives of their platform peers and, in certain circumstances, were motivated to speak to, stand alongside, or support them. Consider this example that Milgram offers:

A woman collapsed on the streets of Brooklyn, not far from her apartment house. She had been a Familiar Stranger to another resident of the street for years. The resident immediately took responsibility for the unconscious woman, not only calling an ambulance, but riding with her to the hospital to make certain she was treated properly, and to assure that her possessions were not stolen by the ambulance attendants. She said later that she had felt a special responsibility for the woman, because they had seen each other for years, even if they had never spoken.²⁴

Milgram's studies suggest that Familiar Strangers possess the capacity to behold each other and, in rare circumstances, can become beholden to their neighbors. Word play is necessary for further explanation.

The earliest accounts of the word "behold" refer to "regarding or contemplating with the eye." Such seeing is not circumstantial, because beholding "requires an active voluntary exercise of the faculty of vision." Given this definition, Milgram's research implies Familiar Strangers do

not simply place their platform peers or nearby neighbors in their line of sight each day. Rather, the Familiar Strangers actually become visible to one another. As beholders, commuters not only see with their eyes; they also contemplate with them, creating story lines about jobs, schedules, and lives.

At Fearless Dialogues we take great effort to encourage unlikely partners to behold Familiar Strangers who gather for conversation. The process of beholding is first modeled by the host, with the animators' eye contact and initial greeting, "It's good to see you." To prepare unlikely partners for eye-to-eye conversations with other community thought leaders, the Familiar Strangers are welcomed into the Living Museum. There they find animators standing on chairs and holding provocative images at guests' eye level. Face to face with captivating photos and works of art, the Familiar Strangers are challenged to contemplate with their eyes: "When you look at this photo, who do you see? Who does this person symbolize in your life? Is it someone from your family, your job, your hometown?" Customarily, the contemplating eyes of Familiar Strangers drift upward as they search the annals of their mind for a familiar face, a familiar story. These modules prepare a beholder's contemplative eyes to see the gifts in the Familiar Strangers with whom they will soon be in conversation.

Milgram's research suggests that as time elapses, Familiar Strangers do more than behold with the eye; they silently become beholden to others. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "beholden" denotes an attachment or moral obligation to a person. Milgram's example of the Brooklyn neighbors attests to the unique shared bond of Familiar Strangers when it is fostered by prolonged observation.

At Fearless Dialogues conversations, we rarely have the opportunity to foster bonds between Familiar Strangers through prolonged observation. For this reason, in the Laboratory of Discovery we

1. practice Radical Hospitality to lessen anxiety and reduce power differences;
2. employ artistic mediums as transitional objects to reframe sterile and hostile environments into spaces for lively and engaging interaction; and
3. utilize research-based experiments to enhance vulnerable truth sharing and to foster connections.

While we have yet to learn of a Fearless Dialogues partner leaping into an ambulance to accompany a neighbor they know only in passing, we can attest to hugs shared between rival gang members, healing tears between estranged coworkers, and twisted smiles of awe and responsibility as neighbors stretch out their three-foot measuring tape and feel beholden to each other.

INTIMATE STRANGERS: FLATLINES, FAULTLINES, AND THE STRANGE FREEDOM OF CRISIS

Intimate Strangers share more than common space. With risk and gall, they extend themselves for the common good. Some, like the Good Samaritan of old, are lauded for their heroism. Others make a living by lifting the spirits of sojourners wandering in the strange lands of crisis. As my father and I learned on one particularly traumatic journey, a common bond with a complete stranger can buoy life even when we are surrounded by death.

Startled from my uneasy sleep, I heard a man moaning. "Code Blue" bawled from the loudspeaker, nurses and doctors started running, and the wheels of the inclined bed spun loudly as they rushed down the hospital's hallway. In seconds I returned to consciousness and glanced over my shoulder from my faux-leather recliner. The IV dripped, the machines beeped, and the tubing coiled in and out of my father's body. The antiseptic cleanliness of his hospital room tickled my nostrils, and I grappled with the strangeness of crisis, the anxiety of the space.

Amid the commotion beyond the door, Lakisha entered in her navy scrubs and brand new sneakers. "Mr. Ellison, I'm here to check your vitals." Her face was unfamiliar, yet her steadied voice invited calm. After scanning his barcoded wristband and inquiring about his name and date of birth, she spoke to Greg Sr. as more than a patient, to me as more than a concerned observer. While checking his temperature and tinkering with the beeping apparatus, she cracked tasteful jokes. In between laughs, Dad disclosed with uncustomary ease vulnerabilities about his current condition. With all that was happening in the wee hours across the hospital wing, we glimpsed home. Greeted by the strangeness of crisis, in a strange foreboding place, nurse Lakisha welcomed us as an Intimate Stranger.

Intimate Stranger. A paradoxical word pair, indeed. How might one be closely acquainted and wholly unfamiliar simultaneously? Years before assuming his professorship at Princeton Theological Seminary and advising my dissertation, Robert C. Dykstra was forced to reckon with this contradiction of terms. As an emergency room chaplain for the medical center in Princeton, young Dykstra found himself standing alongside families in strange and uncertain crises. Oftentimes, finitude and flatlines lingered in the conscious mind of visitors awaiting news of the condition of their loved ones. While favorable news garnered sighs of relief for some, others belched out guttural moans when the strangeness of death and loss entered their life.

Week after week Dykstra encountered death in the presence of teary-eyed patients and hospital visitors. There were tragic deaths by accidental hanging, car crashes, or stab wounds and more expected passings of the elderly by cardiac arrest or other traumas.²⁵ Regardless of the state of demise, loved ones felt the sting. Even in times when death does not have the final say, survival can bring loss in the form of life-altering infirmity. Yet even in the presence of loss and the company of tears, the flatline-lingering, life-altering waiting room doubled as a sanctuary for the young chaplain with eyes to see and ears to hear.

In the sanctuary of crisis and the company of strangers, a strange freedom abides.

Dykstra came to this revelation in a moment when caring with a woman whose twenty-six-year-old daughter had just died by suicide. While Dykstra was talking with the bereaved mother, she began shouting at him, "I hate God! I hate God! I hate him! I hate him!"²⁶ A few minutes later, her parish priest arrived in the waiting room. As she sat before the priest, the mother's demeanor shifted. She was not only cordial and composed; she also humbly expressed her gratitude for the priest's presence. Just as my father found uncustomary ease in full disclosure with nurse Lakisha, this mother stepped over the fault lines of decorum and unabashedly disclosed her repressed truth to a chaplain she had never met and might never see again. In both situations "the suffering person [felt the] freedom to say or do whatever he or she needed to, knowing that because the [caregiver was] a stranger, the victim need not be held accountable for it."²⁷ The intensity of crisis, coupled with the unfamiliarity of a benevolent other, creates ideal conditions for the strange freedom of truth telling.

Holding Intimate Strangers in the Crucible of Crisis: Bringing the World to the Parking Lot

I thought I knew my father well. After all, we had shared the same name for more than twenty-two years. He cooked me oatmeal and over-darkened toast to "coat my stomach" on wintry days in grade school. Through our teenage years, he toted my brother and me to our basketball games and gave us the evil eye when we jittered in Sunday morning worship. For many of my boyhood years, after church Greg Sr., the accountant, set up a card table in front of the television in the den. In this makeshift office, twenty pounds of tax documents and a plug-in calculator (the size of a small laptop, today) sat atop the card table with pencil-thin legs. With his left hand, Dad rifled through legal pads filled with numbers while the fingers on his right glided over numbered keys as if his calculator was a baby grand piano. As the sportscaster commented from the television, the pencil-thin table legs swayed side to side, and the calculator churned out its tune. The entire family knew not to disturb this weekly ritual. Back then, Dad wasn't much on words or public displays of affection. He worked hard, cared for his family, and went to church. In my mind, he was content with his Sunday solitude and the "big piece of chicken" at dinner.²⁸ But in March 1999, I learned that I barely knew the man whose name I inherited.

The call came around 10 a.m. As a senior in college, I was just knocking the crust from my eyes and preparing for an afternoon class. The voice on the other end of the phone unnerved me. I immediately dropped the phone and rushed to northwest Atlanta to pick up my younger brother from the high school I had graduated from just four years prior. So taken by the news I shared, the principal, who knew our family well, jumped in his car and trailed me and my brother to the meeting place.

Around six thirty that morning, my father was kidnapped at gunpoint. Like every other day, with coffee in tow, he walked down the paved entryway to open the office. As he rifled for his keys, an armed assailant approached him and jabbed a pistol in his back. He took the keys, marched my father back to the car, forced him in the trunk, and drove off. In the darkness of that cramped space, my father talked to his abductor. From the trunk, he prayed for him aloud. Hours later, the car stopped and the blinding light of day startled my father as the trunk flung open. "Drive to the nearest bank." Careful not to turn to his right

and glimpse the abductor's face, my father drove to his local credit union. Fully reclined in the passenger's seat, the gunman pushed his weapon in my father's side. After withdrawing several hundred dollars, my father pulled away from the bank and the gunman leapt out of the moving car. At 10 a.m. I received the call from my father's secretary. "Your father was kidnapped this morning. . . . I need you to meet him at your church."

Shortly before 11:00 a.m., my brother, the principal, and I pulled into the church parking lot. My mother and pastor stood outside of the front door of the church anticipating our arrival. In the parking lot, open arms received our confounded minds and our troubled hearts. Tears replaced words. Then a prayer raised to the heavens. On the blacktop of the cathedral on Cascade, we held each other, recognizing that life as we knew it would forever change.

Minutes later, my father turned into the lot. Little did we know that moments earlier the same car he drove had doubled as a darkened cell. He stopped the vehicle well before the entrance of the church and shakily removed his 6-foot-3-inch frame from behind the wheel. With tears streaming down his face, he ran toward us. We sprinted to him. Steps away from the Lord's house, we held each other. In the company of the principal and the pastor, my father kissed my mother, my brother, and me. With a crucible of truth that only crisis can uncover, he fearlessly said, "I love you so much."

Could this be my father? His emotions and vulnerability made him unrecognizable. In a bold display of public affection, father, mother, and sons stood teary-eyed in the parking lot as Intimate Strangers. On the white-lined asphalt, a holding environment was created to contain the raw, unfiltered emotions of deep-seated pain and wordless joy.

For nearly twenty years, I have reflected on crucibles fashioned by nurses in hospital rooms, chaplains in ER waiting rooms, pastors and principals in parking lots, and others capable of holding the truth shared between Intimate Strangers. These ruminations have framed how Fearless Dialogues crafts a container to hold the untapped gifts and undiscovered stories of strangers encountering each other in the seat of crisis.

We now take a closer look at the evolution of the word "crucible" and how a crucible might serve as a unique "holding environment" for Intimate Strangers to unearth new understandings of self and other. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "crucible" was first used in 1475, in reference to "a vessel, usually of earthenware,

made to endure great heat, used for fusing metals." As time evolved, the definition of crucible as a literal melting pot took on figurative forms. Two such iterations of the word refer to "crucible" as "a place of severe test or trial" and "a situation in which different elements interact to produce something new." In order to welcome Intimate Strangers who approach hard conversations under the duress of severe trials and tests, Fearless Dialogues must create a vessel that can endure great stress and allow different personalities to interact to produce something new. This crucible for Intimate Strangers is called a "holding environment," Winnicott's psychoanalytic term introduced earlier.

Winnicott views the infant-maternal relationship as a metaphor to examine how individuals respond in care settings and interact with the world. In his work as a psychoanalyst, Winnicott sought to create a holding environment for his patients, much like the one created by the good-enough mother "who brings the world" to the infant to foster a physically and psychically secure base. In his essay titled "Cure," Winnicott aptly referred to a psychoanalyst as a "host" who is not concerned solely with "interpreting the repressed unconscious [but] . . . the provision of a professional setting for trust, in which such work may take place."²⁹ Two hosts, doubling as good-enough mothers, took the responsibility of holding my family in the crucible of crisis.

On that spring morning in 1999, my father's abduction shook our family at the core. We were strangers to crisis, and in our immense anxiety unrecognizable elements of our personalities emerged. Yes, we intimately knew each other as relatives. But prior to that morning only once had I seen my father cry. Public displays of affection escaped my memory. For the first time in my life, the man I perceived as superhuman and the pinnacle of strength appeared mortal and frail. Yet our family received the care of two good-enough mothers in the form of principal and pastor "fathers."

Far from a hospital chaplain and more like a stern disciplinarian, Dr. Samuel L. Hill, the principal at Frederick Douglass High School, gave my brother and me space to share our deepest fears and pains in his office. Even though it was during the school day, Dr. Hill preoccupied himself with our extraordinary predicament and followed us to the church. Once in the church parking lot, about twenty feet from the door, stood my mother and the Rev. Walter L. Kimbrough. Recognizing the magnitude of the trauma, Rev. Kimbrough did not require us to walk beyond our car door to receive a caring embrace. He "brought

the world” to us. Like the care we received in Principal Hill’s office, our pastor’s care forged another vessel to purge our pain, contain our fears.

Before my father’s car broke the horizon, we stood hand in hand on the white-lined black asphalt and prayed for his health and sanity, and for our strength and humility. By the time my father drove into the lot, a holding environment had already been created to contain his severe tests and our traumatic trial. That day the parking lot doubled as a crucible. In it, the undiscovered emotions of Intimate Strangers interacted and produced a new and deeper love for family members whom we thought we had known already.

At Fearless Dialogues, we seek to fashion a holding environment that can contain all manner of crises. Under Winnicott’s tutelage, we believe that as animators we bear the responsibility of withdrawing from our own needs and assuming an “easy and unresented preoccupation” with the unlikely partners soon to gather. Learning from good-enough “mothers” like Dr. Hill, we seek to create a physical and psychic space where unlikely partners feel protected enough to share their fears. Simultaneously, we fully understand that trust does not come with ease. For this reason, we internalize the wisdom of good-enough mother Kimbrough, and we pray for unlikely partners weeks, sometimes even months, before their feet begin moving toward conversation. Finally, on that prayerfully anticipated day, just as the Intimate Strangers “open their car doors,” we bring the world to them. Through Radical Hospitality, we assure them time and time again that we have been expecting their arrival and they are most welcome in the sacred space to share their gifts. These deliberate and prayerful actions create a crucible-like holding environment for Intimate Strangers to interact.

As a Fearless Dialogues animator, at times I play the role of Intimate Stranger. It is a blessing to create secure spaces for unlikely partners to engage deeply. However, as animator, I also bear the unique burden of shouldering unfiltered truths and seeing persons in trauma. Looking back on his role as a chaplain and Intimate Stranger, Dykstra articulates this burden by reflecting on the risk and the reward of being fully present with persons in some of the most critical moments of their lives.³⁰ Dykstra discloses that accompanying persons through the gauntlet of trauma created in him an “escalating sense of utter helplessness and inadequacy.”³¹ In providing space for suffering persons to bear their wounds, as a chaplain and caregiver he was bruised and scarred. In order not to become calloused to death and cold to loss, caregivers and hosts must contend with their own mortality, the frailty of heartache,

and the antinomy of why bad things happen to good people. “In coming as a stranger to strangers in a situation of strangeness,” even the good-hearted Samaritan must reckon with the strangers within.³²

THE STRANGER WITHIN: TOURISTS OF THE INNER LANDSCAPE

There are strangers among us. Sadly, too many lie within. The city streets of our hearts bustle with endless foot traffic. Like Times Square, Trafalgar Square, and Tiananmen Square layered one atop the other, the world of the heart attracts untold tourists. These curious out-of-towners explore our inner landscape, posing before the monumental moments we hold most dear. We overhear their unknown tongues rumbling up from the deep or perhaps even shift our gaze to the visitors’ direction. But as phantoms their faces remain shadow-cast; a closer look reveals a throng of strangers standing suspiciously in darkness. Huddled around the id, they inflict terror and instill fright. We know not whence they came. Yet we feel their shadowed presence when we take a new job, strike out to foreign lands, or enter a crowded room of unfamiliar faces. If these feelings are left unchecked, when we move into uncharted regions, we may project our fears of the shadowed tourists onto the living faces before us. Therefore, we must befriend the strangers within, lest the unexamined and unchecked traffic of the heart breed anxiety toward the stranger and bleed hostility toward our neighbor.

Not that long ago, a series of unforeseen events triggered a fit of rage in me that halted my ability to write. Having counseled young men exiting the prison system, I had seen rage on the visage of others many, many times. In their presence, I heard rage in trembled voices and felt it hovering like a toxic smog. But in my mind, I was different. Then Rage reared his head during a lunch meeting with a companion I had just met. To my knowledge, this companion intended me no harm; we had spoken for only a matter of moments. Yet an unfamiliar feeling boiled in me. A whisper rumbled from the depths: “Reach across the table and break his jaw!” Though I had not thrown a punch since fourth grade, it took every iota of energy in my thirty-four-year-old self not to clench my fist and swing. Never before had I recognized Rage’s habitation in my heart. But on that day I learned he was there to stay and had been awaiting my visit.

On a February morning in 2011, I stood before the mirror and met Rage. He looked me squarely in the eye. To the casual observer, we'd look like twins, but his likeness seemed misshapen—fractured, if you will. As I turned in disgust from the reflection before me, Rage whispered, "I'm leasing a flat down below. Come see me, won't you?"

For weeks, I tried to ignore his simmer, his sting. But in occasional conversations, sly and sarcastic comments surfaced from the deep and sauntered from my lips. Standing witness to the shock on my conversation partners' faces, I could feel Rage's chuckle. "Come see me . . .," he'd whisper. But I'd snuff out his voice. As weeks turned to months, at home I began to notice that my verbal utterances were several decibels above normal. In my high-volume rants, my loved ones looked on in disbelief. In the silent aftermath, with head bowed in shame I questioned, "Who am I? What have I become?" The stranger in me had become a foe, while I was an ally in his spoils.

On a November evening of that same year, I stood again transfixed before the mirror. Rage's face had become my own. In fright and disbelief, I mustered courage for the inward journey. I visited Rage in his flat below.

i know this hood
 so i checked it out
 i park my thoughts
 approach the house
 "greg, you've seen this guy before . . .
 own your shit knock on his door"
 see through the portal feel his soul
 he sees me too
 through the small peephole
 he knows my fossils and my name
 my goals, intentions
 this ain't a game

gateway open

i stare him down!

Rage slams the door
 i kick it in, but just before
 i step in and examine his house
 i calm my nerves
 internal flames to douse

on one hand i feel so far from home
 on the other i'm not alone
 the bolt turns
 that sucker locked me in
 now i'm imprisoned from within

on a centered table light radiates
 and now I feel so far from hate
 his home is my home
 purity, there
 rage untainted is full of care
 no varnish to cover blemished wood
 remind me life's cracks are fully good
 Rage no longer stranger, but friend
 His creative fire now burns within.

In the poem above, I personified the strange emotion, Rage. For months, he not only tormented my inner life; he also created friction in family settings and fissures in daily conversation. As these rifts became too much to bear, I reconciled that no longer would I live a divided life. The stranger *in* me is *of* me. To ignore and split apart this emotion that is woven into the fabric of my being is to be untrue to my self. Thus, in order to speak with full integrity, to write with bold authenticity, and to exist in the world undivided, I had to meet and make peace with my nemesis.

To face this stranger required me to acknowledge that little difference lay between me and the young men I counseled. Standing before the mirror, I recounted their confessions of rape, murder, and malignancy. How difficult it was to realize that even with my firmly rooted faith and measured moral compass, what lay in them was resident in me. Theory and practice taught me to introduce them to their rage, so that it would not rule them unawares. Even though I had glimpsed Rage's face in me, it took nine months to practice what I preached. On that November evening, I stood in the flat of my soul. In the home that Rage had built, I came to understand that this stranger in me was puppeting my interactions with the outside world. Locked in the empty box where Rage once lived, he and I became one. I found a space of welcome where the once-shadowed visitor became a friend in me and a friend to me.

In time, I noticed my disposition change. Probing conversations and hearty dialogue replaced the shortened comments and the curt

sarcasm that had rolled off my tongue so effortlessly months before. The volume knob on my voice box turned down, and sanctity returned to my home. Finally, the flood gates opened, and words upon words flowed freely from my soul down to my fingertips and onto the screen. Welcoming the Stranger Within actually welcomes our true self home.

Have you welcomed the Stranger Within into your home? If not, how is the lack of your relationship with the shadowed stranger impacting your interaction with the world? How difficult it is to greet fellow sojourners we have never seen, if we are fearful of the stranger we met in the mirror many, many years ago. In order to create a free and open space for the strangers among us, we must first be radically hospitable to the self.

Moving the Host to Welcome the Stranger Within

In order to receive a guest, the host must create a free and open space within. However, hospitably emptying one's self to welcome the fullness of another is much easier said than done. Our minds "seethe with endless traffic, with noisy rumblings."³³ Worries and concerns over unresolved questions and open-ended situations preoccupy our inner world. Fears of change pepper our inner landscape such that a bad certainty far outweighs a promising risk. Crucial deadlines, bill payments, and time-sensitive e-mails populate our inner life. Our inner terrain becomes so jam-packed with ideas, opinions, judgments, and fears that little acreage remains for self-reflection, discovery, or the warm welcome of others.³⁴

Even though the traffic of the daily round creates gridlock in our minds, there still exists unclaimed acreage in the soul. To greet the Stranger Within and be readied to welcome and accept others, we must *move away from* the internal congestion of the mind and *move toward* the open space of the soul. How is this done, you ask? Let's seek the wisdom of famed American psychologist Carl Rogers.

Lauded for ages because of his uncanny ability to create safe, warm, and empathetic therapeutic environments, Rogers proved skillful in aiding his clients to move toward the open space of the heart. In his essay "To Be That Self Which One Truly Is," Rogers plots the direction taken by some of his clients seeking to discern their aim in life.³⁵ While he does not reveal the length of time that he sojourns with these clients, he does accentuate the importance of their gradual movement

away from the traffic and *toward* the open space where the undiscovered self resides.

Moving Away From . . .

Some of us are caught in a facade. Rogers describes a teenage male expressing deep fear of being exposed by peers as something he is not. The young man equally resists disclosing to Rogers who he thinks he really is. Like Rogers's client, I hid behind a facade and denied the possibility that Rage could take root in me. I, too, sought to distance myself from this volatile emotion that I saw in the eyes of incarcerated young men. At times the facade faltered, and I feared exposure. Both the teenage client and I sought to move away fearfully from a self we were convinced that we were not. However, "in doing so we were beginning to define, albeit negatively, who we were."³⁶ For Rogers, recognizing and moving away from facades marks a milestone in becoming a person who welcomes the Stranger Within.

Rogers also deemed it necessary to move away from "oughts."³⁷ Like a legion of voices constantly whispering in our ears, imperatives of who we "ought to be" filter into our consciousness, occupy our mind, and pattern our thinking and daily practice. These internal voices originate from family, culture, faith commitments, and professional expectations; left unchecked, these influencers may distance us from the open space of the heart. In my situation, I could not grapple with the reality that though I was a pastor, counselor, and Ivy-League-trained professor, this Rage simmered in me. Given my upbringing and training, I thought that I "ought to be" able to snuff out such a temperamental emotion. Not the case. Like Rogers's clients, I had to move away from oughts and own the fact that "what is most repulsive in others mirrors some fragment in me."³⁸

Moving away from facades and oughts draws one nearer to the repressions in the self.³⁹ Off the beaten path of conscious thinking, repressed emotions, like strangers in the midst, await engagement. Once conscious of these inner strangers, in order "to be the self which one truly is," we must move toward them.

Moving Toward . . .

One of Rogers's adult male clients felt an unsettling disdain whenever he experienced childish feelings. In one session the small-boy aspect of

himself emerged, and with shock the client exclaimed, "That's an emotion I've never felt clearly—one that I've never been/seen."⁴⁰ Rogers explains that after this alarming encounter, over time this client began to accept and embrace his younger self as part of himself. With a growing sense of acceptance and embrace, the client learned to live closer to his feelings and welcome the small-boy aspect of himself. Rogers highlights that by moving toward and living into an open, friendly, close relationship to our own experience, we unleash the possibility of having community within.⁴¹

On that November evening years ago, I stood transfixed before the mirror, seeking the community and companionship of Rage. Having long perceived Rage as a frightening enemy, I faced myself and finally felt the emotion clearly. In Rage's presence, I felt the tensions of explosive flame and creative fire. That encounter with Rage was a new undertaking; prior to that moment, I would not permit myself to experience Rage, because of fear. To my surprise, what I found in me was far less terrible than imagined. Like Rogers's clients, when I moved toward living in an open, friendly, close relationship with my own experience, I gradually began to recognize Rage as a friendly resource and not as a foreboding stranger.⁴²

With the companionship of the Stranger Within turned friend, the once small, unclaimed acreage of my inner terrain widened. Less fearful of what I might uncover, I found that sources of information and relationships with others I had once closed off miraculously opened. This experience perfectly aligns with Rogers's theory. He explains that moving toward a greater openness within leads the undivided self toward greater acceptance of others and a heightened ability to value and appreciate both one's own experience and that of others.⁴³

The movement away from facades and oughts and toward openness of experience and acceptance of others is the consummate journey of the Fearless Dialogues animator. The host committed to the journey of moving away from oughts and moving toward self-acceptance comes to understand that Radical Hospitality is not about "changing other people by our convictions, stories, advice and proposals."⁴⁴ To the contrary, the host, who is on her own journey, knows the inherent power of laying aside one's preoccupations. In the free and open space of Radical Hospitality and Fearless Dialogue, both host and stranger are given license to simply "be that self which one truly is."

A FINAL WORD THE WELCOME TABLE: A RETROSPECTIVE

As a young boy with Simpson blood, I ate for sport in all locales. To my delight, our church family greeted the sacred meal of Holy Communion with the same reverence that Granma had when feeding throngs of kinfolk. Indeed, First Sundays were earmarked as ritualized services of remembrance, punctuated by celebrating the Eucharist. But that's not all. At the start of every month, this high holy day showcased the whole community, and Radical Hospitality shone through the sanctuary in both word and deed.

With our red-paged Methodist hymnal in hand, Pastor Lowery invited all those who were able to stand to follow the printed liturgy and to read the boldfaced words. Each spoken word bound the congregation together and drew us nearer to the blessed elements. Just before family after family would leave their burgundy-cushioned pews to partake of the holy elements, we read an age-old prayer in unison: "We do not presume to come to this thy *Table*, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy *Table*. But thou art the same Lord . . ."

Our table was an off-white altar rail at the front of the church. It stood in contrast to the maroon carpet like the sliver of cream-cheese frosting on a three-layered red velvet cake. Though thin in frame, this altar served the same purpose as the wide statuesque table at Granma's. This was an open table, and all were welcomed to partake of its goodness. And if Pastor Lowery's invitation did not underscore this salutation, our singing did. Without fail, on every First Sunday we sang the refrain of the most memorable church tune of my youth: "I'm gonna sit at the welcome table. I'm gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days, Hallelujah!"⁴⁵

As these rhythmic words of Radical Hospitality filled the sanctuary, all would make their way up to the sumptuous-looking altar. Swaying from side to side in flowing purple and white robes, Ms. Sally led the choir from the loft. Row after row they received the bread and drank the wine. Standing shoulder to shoulder with Rev. Lowery, the elder mothers, beaming in Clorox-white suits, ensured no empty cup remained on the table after the diners feasted; so too every basket of wafers remained full. Hallelujah! After the robed chorale, the male usher board in their

black ties methodically welcomed congregants in pew after pew—from the last row in the balcony to the first row in the church—to join our pastor and the elder mothers at the off-white altar in front. As we lined the outer walls of the sanctuary awaiting the symbolic feast, toddlers tugged on their fathers' trousers, teenagers stood close to Mom, old men shifted their weight on to wooden canes, and saints resembling Granma adjusted their big church hats. As our inner-city church was minutes away from four universities, it was no surprise to see collegians line the wall. Even more memorable were the times when members of Atlanta's homeless community stood patiently alongside the middle-class family clad in their Sunday best. After the walls were cleared, Rev. Lowery invited the ushers to the table. In gratitude for their service as hosts, he affectionately called them "doorkeepers in the house of the Lord." However, this high holy moment of hospitality did not close until the ministers had eaten and the elders and infirm who could not walk to the altar were served the elements in their seats.

Every First Sunday, I saw a welcome table. All were family. None were strangers. We were moved, held, beholden to each other, and transitioned to a place of serenity and love. We were earthly bound, but Radical Hospitality made the sanctuary heaven-like. While there is rarely a physical altar in Fearless Dialogues conversations, we seek to infuse spaces with a warm and inviting spirit where neighbors can feast on the wisdom of neighbors and broken communities can find kinship in the company of strangers.

To Die a Good Death

Beyond the Fear of Oppressive Systems

And there I stood. With my back against the wall and head on swivel, I scanned the lunchroom in search of the Big Three. Outsized and friendless, mere survival patterned the third day. Though my stomach grumbled, the fear in my heart prevented me from unlatching my lunch pail for the midday meal. Hunger was the least of my worries, for I spotted the Big Three towering over my classmates and knifing through the sea of newcomers; their eyes targeted me. This third day would be different. Determined not to give up my prized commodity, I clenched my fists and took a long deep breath . . .

At five, I carried no billfold or greenbacks. Nilla wafers were my kindergarten currency. These disc-shaped golden brown confections floated atop the cloud-like meringue of Momma's 'nana puddin'. Days after the 'nana puddin' vanished, Dad and I watched basketball on the wooden, floor-model tube and divvied up the reject wafers that were too broken to beautify Momma's meringue. Grandma loved Nilla wafers too. On hot summer days, we'd dip these sweet treats in tin cups of ice cold milk. After the plunge, the once-hardened milk-dipped exterior of the cookies dissolved in our mouths, creating a sugary sanctuary for our taste buds. Far more than cookies, Nilla wafers were priceless reminders of home. But on my first two days of kindergarten, three bullies stole my precious currency and my peace of mind.

So, as the Big Three approached on the third day, I sucked air into my lungs like woodwinds eyeing a conductor's baton and readied myself for confrontation. But, before the disharmonious conflict unfolded, a gentle giant placed his body between me and the Big Three. Interrupting the two-day ritual of bullying, the gentle giant asserted, "This is my cousin. You not gonna take his cookies anymore." The biggest behemoth eyed me once more, and without a single word he turned his back, and the other two mammoths followed him back into the sea.

With an outstretched hand, the gentle giant introduced himself, "I'm Brandon Williams." From that moment forward, Brandon became the watermark for which my life betides. He excelled in the classroom; I sought to follow his lead. Gregarious and fun loving, I patterned my friendships from his example. Come high school, we shared the blacktop, and my jump shot complemented his adept court vision. As teenagers, we stood shoulder to shoulder, but Brandon remained a giant in my eyes. And he taught me when giants fall, the ground quakes.

Some called it the game of the year. Nearly two thousand people squeezed onto Frederick Douglass High School's old wooden bleachers as we defended home court against our crosstown rival Benjamin E. Mays. In the jam-packed gymnasium, tensions were high and supportive fans erupted with cheers after every basket. Suddenly there was a scuffle in the bleachers, and the game briefly paused as police escorted a half-dozen students out of the gym. From a distance, one of the young men ushered out resembled Brandon. The game continued. I don't recall who won. But I will never forget the phone call late that evening.

It turns out Brandon was in the throng marshaled out of the gymnasium. The tussle that started at the ball game continued at the local hot-wing joint after the final buzzer sounded. As he had done for me a dozen years earlier, Brandon placed his body between the opposing factions. This time the mammoths did not turn away. Blindsided by an errant punch, Brandon hit the ground. Then bullets fatally pierced his flesh.

For months on end, my once-cherished Nilla wafers had an unsavory aftertaste of metal. Stomaching just one of the disc-shaped golden brown confections felt like swallowing a metric ton. Bound by the tragic demise of the gentle giant, life took on shades of flavorless grey, and no hopeful tunes filled my heart. Such was the lot of many of my friends. They too tasted metal and knew the sorrow songs.

Our chains are in the keep of the Keeper
in a labeled cabinet
on the second shelf by the cookies . . .
There's a rattle, sometimes.
You do not hear it who mind only
cookies and crunch them.
You do not hear the remarkable music— 'A
Death Song For You Before You Die.'
If you could hear it
you would make music too.¹

(... shhh ...)

For years, silence, not music, filled my heart. Over time, I gained the courage to penetrate the quietude and tell Brandon's story as an ode to a life well lived. With tear-filled eyes, I shared of our friendship in the company of Familiar Strangers, and I came to recognize his example as justice-bearing, sacrificial, and Christlike, in his advocacy for those with their head on swivel and backed against the wall. However, as many times as I have told of his boldness before students and unlikely partners around the world, I found myself ill-prepared to put his narrative to print.

I penned the first few pages of this chapter in mid-December. Every subsequent day in December, I returned to my desk to write, but no words would come. For more than three weeks, I found myself cemented in a writer's block and reliving the silent, music-less region of my heart.

In the sovereignty of those three weeks of quiet, I came to view Brandon and his interventionist strategies for peace metaphorically. Before the blank page, I reflected on behemoth-like oppressive systems that utilize institutional powers to shape language, inform actions, and create norms that signify who and what may be deemed desirable, acceptable, and normal. Then I turned my thoughts to the perception of larger-than-life systems that tower over the outsized and appear to function as impersonal dispassionate machines. Staring at the white space, I felt the rage and heard the silent tears of cornered individuals and communities who hunger for support and stand readied to fight for survival. In the eyes of the cornered, I recognized an existential weariness that I felt in my bones. In that achiness of spirit I realized that, regardless of the oppressive systems' shape, size, or form (e.g., political, educational, economic, family), systems that misappropriate

power can destabilize the cornered by imperiling hope. I came to see these mammoth-sized threats to hope as the Big Three: despair, apathy, and shame. Once any or all of these three perilous threats seep into the hearts of those with their backs against the wall, resisting the unjust system becomes a more daunting challenge.

By thinking metaphorically, I came to see Brandon's life anew. To interrupt the Big Three, he placed his body between the towers and the outsized. While his conciliation immediately infused my life with hope, it cannot be understated that such an intervention placed him squarely in harm's way.

During my twenty-plus days of quiet contemplation, my soul wrestled with this metaphor and how it continues to influence my vocation, my theory of hope, and my understanding of Fearless Dialogues' approach to social change. In the writer's lull, to deepen my discernment, I sought wisdom in Scripture and in the works of Howard Thurman, Martin Luther, Luther Smith, and Donald Capps. In the presence of these master teachers, and the accompaniment of quiet, I heard the rhythmic sound of my breath.

(. . . shhh . . . listen . . .)

I could hear a melody of respiration that satisfied a deep hunger no sugared treat could fill. The tune was simple: "The Kingdom of God is within."² In true verse I learned that no keeper, even the rattling chains of death, could mute the sound of hope resonating from the chambers of the heart.

As a living symbol of Christ, Brandon's animating spirit struck a chord deep in my soul. A perfect synthesis of vocation, hope, and social change, his life and death were of equal importance, for they were of "a single respiration."³ An inspiration to many, Brandon lived a courageous and full life. Likewise, his expiration, albeit tragic, was equally bold and impactful. A good life begat a good death. Since that fated evening in the winter of 1994, Brandon's single respiration of life and death has invigorated me to use my finitely numbered breaths to strategically interrupt oppressive systems through Fearless Dialogues.

History has shown that a good life and a good death can interrupt the stranglehold of malevolent individual and institutional goliaths. In this final chapter, we wrestle with the dominant metaphor of Brandon's life and death as a pathway to examine vocations of resistance, theories of hope, and the strategies utilized by Fearless Dialogues to resist oppressive systems. But first, a few words of direction for you, Beloved Reader.

In drafting this chapter, I faced long, sacred silences in the shadow regions of my heart. While traversing the luminous darkness, trusted companions raised probing questions about vision, faith, and mortality.⁴ Their queries were pillars of fire to guide me through the dark caverns of my soul. Recognizing how much I learned in the beautiful struggle of facing these ultimate realities, in this chapter I offer you a similar opportunity to have a fearless dialogue with yourself.

In the succeeding pages, it is my hope that the accounts revealed and theories examined serve as a mirror for you. As you recall your mammoths, face the Big Three, and reflect on the gentle giants who intervened on your behalf, I beckon you to welcome the sacred silence as a site for learning and gratitude. Likewise, these accounts may serve as triggers that catalyze a reassessment of call, a reclaiming of hope, and a renewed fervor to serve. For these reasons, I stand in the stead of my trusted companions and pose probing questions to stimulate your discovery. To alter the pace of your reading and offer pause for deeper deliberation, I italicize these questions. I pray that on this journey into the contemplative quiet, you hear the pitch-perfect sound of vocation, and the deeper notes of hope. It is this music from within that will stave off our justice fatigue and compel us to interrupt oppressive systems in this life, so that we too may die a good death.

THE PICTURE OF AN ACTIVIST?: QUESTIONING VOCATION, DISTORTING SELF

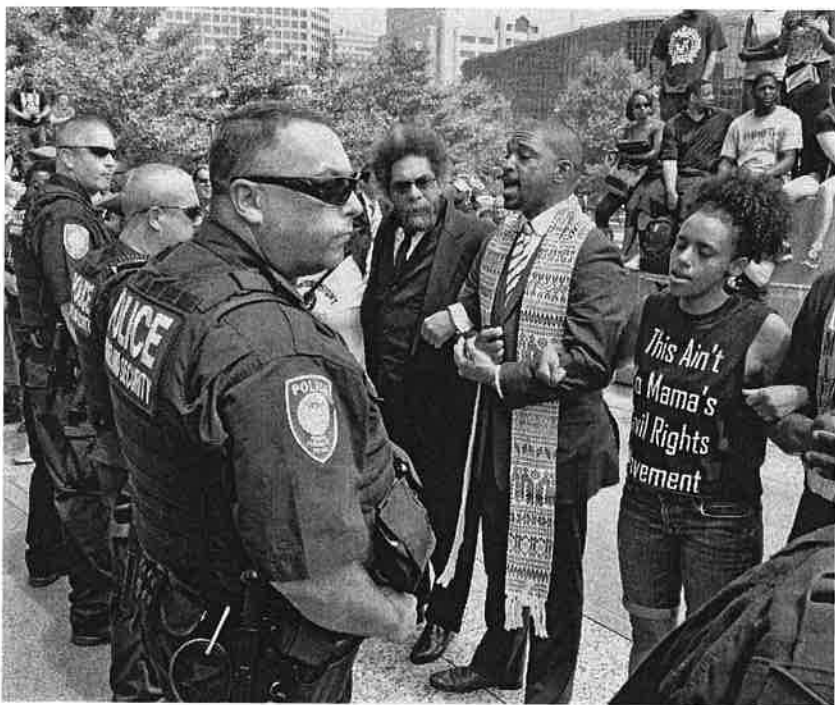
The volcano erupts when it wills. Its lava clears a path. In the wake of its destruction, new life must start afresh.

After graduate school, I pitched my vocational tent on a volatile hotspot. Above the surface, I presented as a young, confident, and finely dressed tenure-track professor with an ability to care through teaching, preaching, and advocacy. Beneath the surface, the ground tremored and small explosions of self-doubt created fissures in my vocational outlook: *What good is a behind-the-scenes public intellectual? How can I be a prophetic preacher without a pulpit to proclaim? Can I call myself an activist, if I rarely find a picket line?* The spouting steam, the smell of ash, the thundering rumbles from within should have been ample warning.

Yet I was ill-prepared for the vocational eruption one year and one day after the tragic death of Michael Brown. From my home in

Atlanta, I kept a close eye on the social unrest still simmering in Ferguson, Missouri. On the first week of August 2015, scores of old friends, colleagues, and mentors flocked to the Show-Me state. From afar, I read about the panels, think tanks, and rallies, all organized to memorialize Michael Brown, protest police brutality, and call America to reckon with its history of systemic racism. Through social media and national news outlets, I tracked close friends protesting and standing alongside the fearless young adults spearheading the Black Lives Matter movement.

On that Monday afternoon, I felt a deep burning on the inside as I digitally followed the footsteps of the three hundred protestors marching from Christ Church Cathedral to Missouri's Thomas Eagleton federal courthouse. Around 1:30 p.m. my magma boiled as nearly a quarter of those chanting protestors crossed the barricade surrounding the courthouse. Face to face with giants in police gear and bulletproof vests, the unarmed protestors interlocked their arms and as a human chain readied themselves for conflict. Detainment was expected.



However, I did not anticipate the hot molten lava that scorched my spirit and leveled my sense of vocation when I saw "the picture" scroll across my Facebook wall.

In "the picture," my teacher, my old friend, and my little sister stood arm in arm before vested officers. As Facebook commentators "liked" "the picture" and pronounced their opinions, my eyes watered and steaming lava spouted from the screen. Inflamed by feelings of guilt, hypocrisy, and vocational unrest, I closed my laptop. Storming questions cleared a path that leveled my self-understanding as a scholar, minister, and activist: *Where am I? Why am I here? Why am I not there? Who am I?* Hours upon hours, day after day, I gazed at "the picture," and in the wake of the destruction one question remained: *Who am I not?*

From one angle, "the picture" spoke a thousand words about my educational formation, my ministerial calling, and my identity as an activist. Yet from another angle, it debunked my self-understanding as a public intellectual, a prophetic minister, and an activist on the front lines. Squarely at the intersection between "Who am I?" and "Who am I not?" this vocational crisis forced me into months of critical introspection and therapeutic intervention. Sifting through the devastation of my incinerated vocation, I searched for signs of hope, lessons for life.

Have you been there? What decisions have you made, or better yet, what decisions have been made for you that leveled your sense of purpose, your understanding of vocation? When all that you have worked for and all that you have built lies in ruin, how do you search for meaning? So . . . now what?

A fearless dialogue with my self proved mandatory. So I entered into a place of contemplative quiet, and I undertook the process of deconstructing "the picture" metaphorically. The pixelated image became a roadmap for my return to self and a compass to reclaim my calling. First, I examined the three whom I deemed the protagonists in "the picture": my teacher, my old friend, and my little sister. Then came an epiphany about the mammoths.

The Teacher

In the center of the image, donning his uniformed black suit and tie, stood my teacher, Cornel West, nationally recognized for his

philosophical depth as a social critic, his quick wit before the media, and his love ethic that placed him on the side of the oppressed. I first met Dr. West in 2004 as a student in a doctoral seminar he cotaught at Princeton University titled, "An Introduction to African-American Intellectual Thought." During the course we discussed all manner of public intellectuals who spoke out against lynching, economic disparity, educational inequities, and white supremacy. In "the picture," West looks out beyond the photographer, and I imagined him questioning me: "Where do you fit in the lineage of African American intellectuals?" As I pondered who I was as a public intellectual, answers flowed: I am not Cornel West. I am not W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Anna Julia Cooper, Toni Morrison, or James Baldwin. I am not, I am not, I am not.

The Clergy Friend

Standing by my teacher, like a tree planted by the water, was my sure-footed clergy friend, the Rev. Starsky Wilson. Rev. Starsky and I met in a sleepy suburb of St. Louis during his final year of seminary. Even then, he articulated a prophetic vision for a community undivided by race, educational disparities, and class. I was privy to his dreams long before he was named CEO of the Deaconess Foundation, appointed by the Missouri governor as cochair of the Ferguson Commission, or chosen to serve as senior pastor of St. John's United Church of Christ. Then, on August 9, 2014, Michael Brown was shot, eleven miles from his office at the Deaconess Foundation and fourteen miles from the church he pastored. As the foment of Ferguson's discontent began to mirror the Montgomery and Selma of old, a small cadre of prophetic leaders like Rev. Starsky began to emerge. By day, he leveraged his resources as a philanthropist and worked with select members of the faith community to offer sanctuary for persons seeking refuge. By night, he weathered intemperate climates and literally stood behind dozens of young activists and prayed as they chanted, "Why are you in riot gear? We don't see no riot here!" Day after day I stared at "the picture," and in the eyes of my beloved friend I saw the best of the prophetic preaching tradition. Still, I could not help but ask, "Who am I?" I am not Starsky Wilson. I am not Martin Luther King, Adam Clayton Powell, Traci Blackmon, Teresa Fry Brown, or Gardner C. Taylor. I am not, I am not, I am not.

The Activist Sister

I'm still unsure which was more shocking, seeing my little sister standing before armed police or digesting the declarative statement on her sleeveless shirt, "This Ain't Yo Mama's Civil Rights Movement." While Rahiel Tesfamariam is not my biological sibling, within hours of meeting we knew we were kin. As I trekked through my doctoral program at Princeton Theological Seminary, Rahiel found her wings as a graduate student and international ambassador for justice at Yale Divinity School. Always a crystal-clear writer, with the ability to pull on the heartstrings and convict the spirit of her readership, it was no surprise that after graduation Rahiel started an online magazine on faith and culture, and eventually became a columnist for the *Washington Post*. Because of her history as an organizer in California and Washington, DC, she emerged as a central figure in articulating the positions of a new millennium of activists unbound by the respectability politics of old. Like Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, Stokely Carmichael, Darnell Moore, and countless members of the Black Lives Matter movement, there stood my sister steadfast and unswayed. Yet I am neither Rahiel Tesfamariam nor the previously named political activists. These I am not.

The Mammoths

"The picture" tormented me because I did not fit within my idealized vision of scholar, minister, or activist. One day I noticed the mammoths, and the metaphor deepened. Each of the vested officers standing before my teacher, friend, and sister donned black sunglasses. Two ideas percolated.

1. Shielded eyes inhibit access to the soul. Coupled with a state-issued uniform, heavy artillery, and a dispassionate scowl, this thin opaque glass barrier walled off human connection with the officers. It further made the individuals who took oaths to protect and serve appear more like giant militaristic machines. *How does one resist the hope-impairing tendency to depersonalize systems and dehumanize people as part of a larger machine? What might we gain by seeing the particular individual who is associated with a larger system?*

2. Sunglasses also cast reflections like distorting mirrors. While face-to-face with the officers, a glance into the opaque shades would reveal

a smaller version of the self. When we stand before our giants, the reflection of ourselves appears diminished, our ability to create change may seem infinitesimal, and we may unconsciously cling to a vocation of negation, that we are not enough. *While not diminishing the impact of die-ins, sit-ins, and marches, might we conceive of activism more expansively? How do we thwart distortions of smallness by living into vocations of resistance that do not fit neatly within the parameters of pictured activism?*

The symbolism of “the picture” served as an inner labyrinth for me to spiral to the center of my vocational core. Inside of me, the teacher, the minister, the activist stood side by side, but few opportunities existed to fuse the gifts of these roles. At times, my lectures felt a bit preachy, my sermons sounded professorial, and my advocacy emanated from my faith; but rare was the space to integrate the three. In the chance opportunities when the three vocational identities took on a singular voice, on one hand, I felt the wholesome peace of an internal resolve. On the other hand, I felt the external discomfort of a punitive gaze from other teachers, ministers, and activists, because my hybrid approach to service was far too different from the norm. *If social change is the ultimate aim, and vocational wholeness is the goal, why should I care if I am looked at askance?*

Perhaps you have felt this inner division and outer tumult in seeking to integrate your passions and your work. Yet I wonder, how can we stand before mammoths like race, class, and homophobia and effectuate change if we are divided from within and castigated for serving differently? For answers, I suggest we look into the shaded eyes of our mammoths. In the dark reflecting glass, we can see our insecurities around vocational fit, and examine how a litany of *I am not*s flattens our ability to create change.

THE PROBLEMS OF FIT, THE PERILS OF FLAT: BEYOND A VOCATION OF NEGATION

For months on end, I scrutinized “the picture” and defined my vocation through a process of negation. *I am not* a public intellectual in the form of Cornel West. *I am not* functioning in the prophetic preaching tradition in the same fashion as the Rev. Starsky Wilson. *I am not* standing on the frontlines or crafting overtly politicized publications like my activist-oriented sister Rahiel Tesfamariam. Haunted by *I am not*s, I lost any semblance of certainty around my call, and the questions

returned: *If I'm clear on who I am not, then who am I? Are there ways to live out my calling that don't amplify my difference? Why do I care so much about how others perceive my service?* Bedeviled by my vocation of negation, more than ever I wrestled with the problem of “fit.”

Discerning vocational fit may sometimes come with intense struggle. Such can be said of the Protestant reformer Martin Luther. In the psychobiography *Young Man Luther*, Erik Erikson examines a period of identity crisis in Martin Luther's life that has been contested by generations of scholars. Erikson chronicles that at the age of twenty-three and in the throes of vocational discernment, Martin Luther experienced an epileptic fit while singing in the monastery choir where he trained for the priesthood. As Martin Luther fell to the floor, he cried out, “I am not! I am not!” Erikson argues that this declaration of negation has at least two interpretations. During the Middle Ages such a psychosomatic eruption may have been interpreted as demonic. Therefore, in his fall to the ground, young man Luther may have been decrying “I am not . . . possessed.”⁵ Another interpretation is more vocational in nature and aligns with the metaphor of seeing the reflection of oneself in the face of a giant.

Before Luther entered the monastery, his father subjected him to years of strict schooling, with hopes that his son would enter politics or administration. However, at the age of twenty-one, without his father's permission, Martin Luther abruptly left the University of Erfurt, where he was slated to study law, and decided to enter the monastery. Therefore, his fit in the choir may have been a protest against his lack of vocational “fit” in the legal community. Perhaps, in his epileptic fall, prior to blacking out, young man Luther saw himself in the face of the giant patriarch and cried out, “I am not . . . what my father said I was.”⁶

Through Martin Luther's lens, “I am not” is not a diminishment of commitment, but a differentiation of call. By declaring that he was not the sum total of his father's hopes and dreams, Martin Luther demarcated himself from the expectations of how he should bring about change in the world. In a recent conversation with my dear friend and teacher Luther Smith, he echoed similar sentiments and advocated for an expansion of how we see vocations of activism and callings for social change:

For some people, there is only a certain kind of activism that counts, and I think this is a sad thing. This type of thinking resides within many in the black community, but [this thinking also] gets imposed

on the black community such that the only folks worth really writing about in our history books are people like Martin Luther King or Thurgood Marshall. [If you look at only these] public figures, you lose so many black intellectuals that feed what it means to be a people and you lose the artists that shape awareness. [You also] lose the contributions of the folks that are really inspiring awareness and engagement in communities that will never have their name in the paper. It just *flattens* what it means to be an activist.⁷

A flattened view of activism not only neglects the efforts for communal change enacted by those who fall out of the spotlight. It also casts a shadow on alternative approaches to social change that do not fit within the expected parameters of front-line protests. Through media coverage, historical interpretations, and legal determinants, oppressive systems further flatten activism by normalizing some forms of protest as desirable and stigmatizing other forms of resistance as insurgent. For instance, a silent protest on the state capitol steps would likely be cast in a more favorable light than a die-in that obstructs the traffic of a state highway. To this end, the distorting mirrors of oppressive systems make the criterion for activism and social change too small to contain other vocational identities aligned with social action. Regretfully, far too many change agents succumb to these pressures by cramming themselves into the confines of desirable protest or insurgent resistance, in order to make their work recognizable.

For me, the matters of fitting and flatness extend beyond individual vocational identity. These concerns have organizational implications for how Fearless Dialogues is classified and does its work. By adopting the dominant approaches of neither the NAACP nor Black Lives Matter, does the work of Fearless Dialogues qualify as desirable protest or resistant insurgency? While not being aligned with an academic institute, does the work of Fearless Dialogues register as possessing the appropriate intellectual depth? Given its lack of denominational backing and its unwillingness to proselytize, does the faith-induced work of Fearless Dialogues fall short of God-centeredness? The confining limits of acceptable means to serve are tools of oppressive systems to asphyxiate vocational identity and strangle organizational creativity.

... so, breathe ...

The Good News is that the creative force of change can never be bound by flattening norms and stifling stigmas. For just a moment, let us consider embracing forms of social action that exist beyond the picket lines. *How does your work in the hospital, the church, the large*

corporation, the fast-food chain, or within your family afford you opportunities to share knowledge, engage spirit, and advocate for others? How might we recast our perspectives of activist-oriented service and our vocational outlooks on social change?

The more I reflected on "the picture," Martin Luther's seizure, and Luther Smith's sage words on flatness, the more I recognized how desperately I sought to retrofit my square vocational peg into a circular hole that would validate my call. Even with worldly validations like promotion and tenure, peer-reviewed publications, preaching opportunities, and partnerships with communities, my vocational peg still felt unshapely. Moving beyond a vocation of negation requires seeking not to fit or flatten one's life work into a truncated label or neat category like scholar, minister, or activist. To the contrary, a more artistic approach to vocation proves necessary. Seeking inspiration from artistry, I sought the guidance of a master artisan to help me carve my unshapely vocational peg into a sculpture that seamlessly integrated the creative mind, the mystical spirit, and the heart to care *with* the unacknowledged.

Like a wide-eyed apprentice, I watched this master navigate nimbly around reductionist categories of how he should serve. I took notice of his inventive intellect, boundless depth of spirit, and unencumbered sense of advocacy. The more I turned to this craftsman, the more I recognized a way forward for advocates like me who do not fit flat descriptions of activism. So too did I observe his organizational craftiness in carving out spaces for unlikely partners to engage in heartfelt conversation with self, other, and the surrounding world. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I examined how this master artisan utilized an interrupting hope to place himself between the Big Three and the outsized who found their backs against the wall. Let us learn from the wisdom of yet another gentle giant who forged his own vocational path, carried hope for the disinherited, and, ultimately, died a good death: the Rev. Howard Washington Thurman.

THE GENTLE GIANT AND THE BIG THREE: AN INTERRUPTING HOPE IN THE FACE OF SYSTEMIC THREATS

Born forty-four days before the turn of the twentieth century, Howard Washington Thurman was raised in the segregated town of Daytona,

Florida. Reared by a widowed mother with few financial means, from an outsider's view, upward mobility for young man Howard seemed bleak. But his grandmother Nancy Ambrose, who was born a slave, "did not allow him to accept the educational limitations placed on black youth in their community."⁸ Spurred by a need to assist his family, a hope from ages past, and a commitment to personal growth, young Thurman became the first African American youth in Daytona to receive an eighth-grade certificate from the public schools.⁹ Need I mention that while completing this feat, he also worked full-time at a fish market? Though he completed eighth grade with a 99 percent grade point average, his thirst for knowledge remained unquenched.¹⁰

In the early 1900s, only three public high schools existed for African American youth in the state of Florida, but there were several private, church-supported high schools in the region that accepted African American students. Mother Thurman offered her son a goodwill blessing to pursue his education, but with only a meager income to support the rearing of his sisters, she could provide no monetary assistance in support of his dreams. With the little money he had saved, Thurman applied and was accepted at the Florida Baptist Academy of Jacksonville.

When the time came to leave Daytona and continue his education in Jacksonville, young man Howard left for the railway and purchased a train ticket. But he could not afford to ship his few belongings, packed away in an old ramshackle trunk. Overtaken by despair, Thurman sat down on the steps of the railway station, dropped his head, and cried his young heart out. Moments later, he opened his tear-filled eyes; standing before him was a large black man in overalls donning a denim cap. "Boy, what in the hell are you crying about?" the gentle giant questioned. The adolescent Thurman explained his predicament. After hearing the young lad's quandary, the man in overalls replied, "If you're trying to get out of this damn town to get an education, the least I can do is to help you." Moments later, the gentle giant pulled out his rawhide money bag, and paid for the delivery of young Howard's baggage. "Then, without a word, he turned and disappeared down the railroad track." The two would never meet again.¹¹ *Who are the people, whose names we'll never know, who sacrificed for our hopes and found value in our vocation?*

In Howard Thurman's earliest surviving correspondence to Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, he described in a letter of introduction to his soon-to-be mentor the hardships faced during his days of high school and

his vocational quest to serve the needs of his people. After perfunctory words of salutation, the eighteen-year-old Thurman opened the mischievous with these words, "Listen while I tell to you my soul." He revealed that in his first year of high school, he had no money, had insufficient winter clothing, and ate an average of one square meal a day. To make ends meet, he pressed clothes in the community and worked a thirteen-hour shift on Saturdays. In spite of his dire straits, he finished his first year with a 96 percent grade point average, the highest in the school. In his second and third year at the school, he earned a 98 percent and a 94 percent respectively. From his written testimony, the reader clearly grasps young man Howard's insatiable quest to learn.¹²

In the oldest surviving letter of Thurman's voluminous papers, he expresses a weariness around vocational fit and a discontent with a flat view of service. This problem of fit and peril of flatness would echo throughout his writings, lectures, and sermons for the remaining sixty-four years of his life. Hear these words of hopeful duress in the adolescent voice of young man Howard's letter to Johnson:

I want to be a minister of the Gospel. I feel the needs of my people. I see their distressing conditions, and have offered myself upon the altar as a living sacrifice, in order that I may help the "skinned and flung down." . . . I am scheduled to finish here next year. As you know the war is on and young men are being snatched daily. I am patriotic, I am willing to fight for democracy, but my friend Rev. Johnson, my people need me.¹³

Like young man Luther, who was struck by a fit in a monastery choir nearly four centuries earlier, the adolescent Thurman was crying out before a different altar. He saw and felt the plight of his people and was willing to lay down his life on their behalf, but can't you hear young Thurman crying out, "I am not . . . a soldier"? He desired a life of service, but the parameters of contributing with mind, spirit, and action were confining and small.

Seeking guidance on how to integrate his love of learning, his spiritual longing, and his commitment to liberation, this vocationally disoriented adolescent concluded his letter with a prayer request: "Please pray for me because (almost) on every hand, I am discouraged in my choice of the Ministry. Sometimes I think nobody cares but thank God, Jesus does, mother does, and I believe you do."¹⁴

Hope was not lost in this young man, who at an early age was backed against the wall by poverty, educational disparities, and widespread

racial discrimination. While the Big Three threats to hope—despair, apathy, and shame—lingered near, he continued to push forward in the classroom and on the job. Yet, as his first letter concludes, we hear the eighteen-year-old crying out desperately and searching with head on swivel for a community of reliable others to sustain his hope, support his educational aspirations, and affirm his call. Given the odds stacked against him, questions abounded regarding his next steps.

Faced with daily deprivation, where did young man Thurman find hope to complete high school as the valedictorian of his class? How did he overcome *despair* during his student years at Morehouse College, where he read every book in the library and graduated as valedictorian? Where did he gain the fortitude to contest *apathy* in the Ku Klux Klan-ridden towns of western New York where he finished seminary and preached sermons before open-minded liberals and hard-hearted racists?¹⁵ What disrupted *shame* from settling in Thurman's soul, when he worked in the impoverished communities surrounding the resource-rich institutions that paid his salary (Morehouse College, Spelman College, Howard University, Boston College, and the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples) as professor, dean, and pastor?

I am certain he found a fundament of hope in an eclectic community of reliable others. Maybe in the thoughtful words and prodigious example of teachers and mentors like Mary McLeod Bethune, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, and Benjamin Mays, he tapped into a wisdom to confront despair. Quite possibly, his otherworldly conversations with Gandhi, Rufus Jones, foreign travelers, little children, the Atlantic Ocean, and an old oak tree placed him in a spiritual realm to contest the whims of apathy. Certainly reading the Bible to his illiterate grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, welcomed the presence of God and boundary-breaking teachings of Jesus in his life to stymie shame, ground his ego, and safeguard him from a superiority complex.

The timing must have been providential. Back in 2014, Westminster John Knox Press endowed me with the task of writing this book. Under tenure review that same year, I accepted the unenviable task of compiling a 600-page dossier for others to assess my publications, my teaching, and my service to the church and the world. Far heavier than the twenty-pound document was the burdensome yoke of not fitting into the prototypical mold of professor, pastor, and activist. Feeling that I was under constant review by colleagues with access to 600 pages of my life, I walked the corridors of Emory University with head on swivel.

Questioning self, scholarship, and service, and with my back against the wall, I felt a towering presence drawing near. It was intent on taking my most precious commodity, hope. Wearing from the mounting pressures, I still readied myself for the fight. But before the internal conflict imploded, Thurman's body of work stood between me and the Big Three (despair, apathy, and shame).

For the past three years, especially during my travails in facing "the picture," Howard Thurman has journeyed with me as a reliable other. In this time, not only have his life and work shifted my understanding of vocations of resistance; his canon has also helped to refine my theory of hope, which is central to the work of Fearless Dialogues. Hereafter, I share with you how the impress of Thurman's corpus has contributed to this evolution of thought and action.

JESUS, THE DISINHERITED, AND A WILDERNESS CONFRONTATION WITH THE BIG THREE: CHARTING PATHS OF RESISTANCE AND NONRESISTANCE

What do the life and teachings of Jesus say to those who stand with their backs against the wall? This question was never impersonal for Thurman, as one raised in a Christian nation with a sordid history of slavery, lynching, and segregation. In 1935, during a pilgrimage of friendship to India, Thurman was forced to articulate how he could justify vocationally positioning himself as an agent of hope in a Christian tradition that exploited persons of color.

One day, following a lecture at the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka,¹⁶ Thurman received a soul-shifting challenge by a Hindu administrator. Though the administrator knew the stated purpose of Thurman's visit was a pilgrimage of friendship, he could not fathom how an intelligent African American man could speak so affirmatively of a Christianity that inflicts harm on people of color. With no reservation, the administrator tendered a tremulous question, "What are *you* doing here?" To contextualize his question, he reminded Thurman of how his African forebears were forced into bondage by Christian slaveholders. He then cited accounts of Christian ministers who used religion and scriptural passages from the apostle Paul to sanction the system of slavery. The host even mentioned a newspaper article reporting an all-white Christian church interrupting Sunday worship to join a lynch mob. The Hindu host wondered aloud how Thurman could

claim the same Christian tradition utilized to impose political segregation, social isolation, and economic inequality on his own people. After listing this diatribe of ills, the administrator crudely invited Thurman to conversation by calling him "a traitor to all the darker peoples of the earth."¹⁷ That afternoon, Thurman and the Hindu administrator engaged in five hours of fearless dialogues about Thurman's commitment to the religion of Jesus.

More than a decade after the five-hour conversation, Thurman published a small but important book titled *Jesus and the Disinherited*. A bold social application of Thurman's biblical interpretation, the book undermines religious justification for segregation, asserts the worth of the underprivileged, and confronts structures complicit with injustice.¹⁸ In order to make the case that the underprivileged have direct access to God, Thurman locates Jesus as one of the disinherited in his age. This interpretative lens provides the reader with a unique angle to examine Jesus' unconventional approach to contesting oppressive systems. However, if we take one step backward, the book also offers a glimpse of how Thurman vocationally positioned himself to engage in a life of activism beyond snug categorization. So let us look closer at how young man Jesus, and Thurman, uncovered a path of resistance beyond the conventional bounds of activism and social change.

Thurman makes three incisive conclusions that situated young man Jesus as one among many disinherited of his age.¹⁹ Each of the following conditions in Jesus' life placed him in an unavoidable position of discerning how he would face a system that abused him and those he loved:

1. Jesus was a Jew. According to Thurman, "it is impossible for Jesus to be understood outside of the sense of community which Israel held with God."²⁰ Jesus of Nazareth's Judaic origin is not coincidental but central and cannot be severed from the Christian tradition. Jesus went about his Father's business as a Jew of Palestine.²¹
2. Jesus was poor. His family was so strapped that at birth his parents could afford only a dove, not the traditional lamb, as a sacrificial offering on his behalf. This suggests that, from birth, Jesus was linked with "the great mass of poor people on earth."²²
3. Jesus was a member of a minority group in the midst of a larger, more dominant group. Prior to Jesus' birth, Palestine fell under Roman occupation. Taxes were increased. Temples honoring

the occupying state were raised on Israel's holy soil. Any element of insurgency was snuffed out with force. Therefore, as a poor Jew, Jesus was a minority raised in a climate where he was not afforded the protections and guarantees of Roman citizenship. "If a Roman soldier pushed Jesus into a ditch, he could not appeal to Caesar; he would be just another Jew in the ditch."²³

Given these assertions about Jesus' origins, economic condition, and social status, Thurman posits that as a Jewish youth in Palestine, young man Jesus had to discern, "How will I reckon with Rome?" "This question was not academic. It was the most crucial of questions. In essence, Rome was the enemy; Rome symbolized total frustration; Rome was the great barrier to peace of mind. And Rome was everywhere. No Jewish person of the period could deal with the question of his practical life, his vocation, his place in society until he had settled deep within himself this critical issue."²⁴

Not unlike young man Howard, who fell under the heavy yoke of segregation and white supremacy, young man Jesus was forced to question, "*What must be the attitude toward the rulers, the controllers of political, social, and economic life?*"²⁵ Thurman outlines that Jesus and other Jews in Palestine were faced with narrowly defined options of how they might respond to Rome's oppressive system: resist or not resist.

Nonresistance

In Thurman's purview, the path of nonresistance takes one of two forms. The first path leads to assimilation. Through patterns of imitation, the disinherited bow a knee to the powerful and yield qualities once held as germane to self as unworthy. Such submission diminishes self-respect and often requires shunning one's heritage, customs, and faith. Thurman argues that the Sadducees, who were high priests and the most economically stable of the Palestinian Jews, made public peace with Rome by becoming like them. While they loved Israel, this assimilation ensured their security and maintained their status.²⁶ *Like the Sadducees, have you given up or given in to oppressive systems for security and self-interests? If so, what have been the benefits? What have been the costs?*

The other path of nonresistance is cultural isolation. Recognizing that actively contesting a behemoth system is a daunting task for an

outsized group, these nonresistant persons reduce contact with the oppressor to a minimum. While not actively resistant, these disinherited persons steeped in a rejected culture may very well harbor resentment, bitterness, hatred, and fear. Thurman connotes the Pharisees of Jesus' day, who did not actively resist Rome, but held a terrible contempt for them, might be classified as cultural isolationists.²⁷ *Like the Pharisees, have you sequestered yourself from oppressive systems and tempered your tongue to stave off further rejection and harm? If so, what have been the benefits? What have been the costs?*

Resistance

"Why can't something be done? We must do something!" cry the disinherited wearied by prolonged bully tactics. "By 'something' is meant action, direct action, as over against words, subtleties, threats, and innuendos."²⁸ Yet these calls for forceful action emerge as a last resort for the disinherited, because of an awareness that such resistance may lead to a tragic end. Once this mood is established, the overtly resistant determine it is better to die fighting for change than to live as quietly compliant. In its most radicalized form, overt resistance adopts a tragically flat view of activism, that those who choose not to take arms and fight display conformity, complicity, or cowardice. The Zealots of Jesus' day carried such beliefs. Undeterred by the consequence of death, they mobilized a small organized movement of forceful action to place pressure on the persecutory system. Recognizing this insatiable fervor for change, Jesus welcomed a Zealot into his band of twelve disciples. But he chose a different path. *Like the Zealots, have you chosen a path of overt resistance and in spite of your good intentions ostracized potential allies who choose to fight differently? If so, what have been the benefits? What have been the costs?*

We know little of Jesus' youth, but we know that he must have wrestled with these three self-limiting parameters of how to contest the Roman state. I surmise that at some point between his three-day lesson with the teachers in the temple courts at age twelve and his heaven-opening baptism years later, young man Jesus had a crisis of fit. Can you hear him calling out to the heavens, "I am not the Sadducees. I am not the Pharisees. I am not the Zealots. I am not, I am not, I am not"?

Young man Jesus must have recognized that a tool of oppressive systems is to pit the outsized against each other. He must have understood the perilous effects when disinherited persons direct their energy into fitting within narrowly framed categories of nonresistant or resistant. On his way to the temple at twelve, had he met the daughter of a Sadducee, who had neither succumbed to apathy nor accepted the assimilationist tendencies of her parents? Walking to meet John the Baptist at the lake, could he have swapped words with the son of a Pharisee, who staved off shame and did not yet harbor isolationist discontent? With fresh eyes after seeing the heavens opened, did he meet a teen from a Zealot household, with fire in his belly, who sought to fight the Roman state a different way?

With questions of how to live out a vocation of resistance vying for Jesus' attention, Thurman suggests that, shortly after his baptism, a more pressing question settled on Jesus' heart: "*What shall I do with my life if I am going to be true to the tremendous experience of God which I have had?*"²⁹ To carve out a more fulsome form of activism, the young carpenter found a place of complete and utter isolation where he could engage in a fearless dialogue with self . . . the desert.

A Wilderness Confrontation with the Big Three

Scripture tells us that in the wilderness Jesus faced three temptations. Upon closer examination, these temptations parallel the Big Three threats to hope (despair, apathy, and shame) and are representative of the models of nonresistance and resistance that Jesus saw in his youth.

Only days into the wilderness, as Jesus yearns for a meal, a malevolent voice beckons to an empty-stomached Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." This parasitic thought of apathy³⁰ challenges Jesus to stop resisting hunger and to eat now, because a future meal is too far away. Likely lethargic and longing for food, Jesus understands that to eat bread during a period of fasting will sever the sacrificial connection required for spiritual discernment. In a famished state, perhaps he reasons that this first temptation of hunger is synonymous with the desire of the Sadducees to prioritize their material well-being over psychological and spiritual wholeness. Therefore, he speaks back to the malevolent voice, "Humans do not live on bread alone." While bread is necessary for physical survival, neglecting the hungers of

the mind and spirit leaves one psychologically empty, spiritually malnourished, and ill-prepared to fight for social change.

Even more wearied from the pilgrimage journey, Jesus finds himself atop a high cliff when the malevolent voice returns: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." The tempter is saying to Jesus that the world is not orderly or structured, so control what you can: yourself. "There is no fundamental dependability upon which you can depend. But if you can get into a certain position of immunity, then the ordinary logic of life can be handled and manipulated."³¹ Did not the Pharisees, through isolation, seek a form of immunity to control self and shun all else? Jesus understood that physical isolation does not immunize one from the psychospiritual ills of bitterness and shame. To move in the world with a diminished sense of self and a belief that one is internally flawed is to live life on the edge of a high cliff. In Jesus' response, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test," he contests internal forces of self-doubt that can snuff out his life before his ministry of resistance unfolds.

Near the end of his forty-day pilgrimage in the wilderness, Jesus finds himself at another high place overlooking the splendid kingdoms of the world. Then a final word from the tempter: "All this I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me." The final temptation of power proves no less difficult to overcome. Jesus is surrounded by people under the press of despair, whose futures seem blocked by the oppressive regime of Rome. As a poor Jew from an underprivileged minority group, young man Jesus feels the needs of his people and is willing to lay himself on the altar for the skinned and flung down. Looking down upon the kingdom, a tempting quest for power and an impatience for change lie at his fingertips. Maybe Jesus considers the following: If I accept the tempter's final offer, I can land a strategic position, like governor of Palestine, and work within the political systems to better the lot of my people. Or I can rally the Zealots and antiestablishment insurgents to organize a movement to overthrow the empire by force. The historically adept Jesus knows the substantive kingdom-building works of his politically savvy forebears Joseph and David. He also cannot dismiss the militant passions of the Zealots. Resistance through political action and direct force are in view. Yet these options of resistance run counter to Jesus' life course: "Away from me, Satan!" Blazing a trail out of the wilderness, Jesus uncovers another way to resist, which starts from within.

I AM, THE WAY BEYOND FIT AND FLAT: FIVE FEAR+LESS ALTERNATIVE PATHS OF RESISTANCE

I Am the Way

Upon exiting the desert, all of the sand, rocks, and high cliffs had new meaning for young man Jesus. In the vast openness of the wilderness, his face-off with the Big Three tempters clarified that his path to contesting Rome would not take the form of assimilation or isolation, or be limited to direct action. Before him lay a seemingly endless road from head to heart. So, in an intemperate social climate that denied him full citizenship, dehumanized the disinherited, and left a narrow margin for contesting oppression, Jesus set in motion a vocation of resistance that would be revered, studied, and duplicated the world over.

Far from assimilationist, Jesus laid a path to social change that placed him in constant contact with unlikely partners. He dined with tax collectors and sinners³² and touched lepers defiled as unclean.³³ He sipped water with a Samaritan woman³⁴ and came to the aid of a Roman soldier, though both were detested by Jesus' people.³⁵ In the company of unlikely partners, he taught and learned, healed and liberated.

Neither did Jesus live a life of withdrawal. To the contrary, he engaged in heartfelt conversation on taboo subjects. Standing in earshot of Pharisees, Jesus healed a man in the synagogue, and then explained why he broke the religious law to do so on the Sabbath.³⁶ So too Jesus placed his body between a woman caught in adultery and a crowd of Pharisees intent on stoning her for breaking Moses' law. In a master class on interruption, Jesus stooped to his knees, wrote in the sand, and spoke back to her accusers, "All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!"³⁷

Though he never took up arms, time and time again Jesus altered spaces by directly confronting dissenters. To reclaim the sanctity and sacredness of the worship space, Jesus turned over tables and drove out money changers who set up shop in the temple courts.³⁸ On the day of his arrest, an unarmed Jesus placed his body between the disciples he loved and a band of soldiers who carried torches, lanterns, and weapons. Preventing a melee, he stood directly before his accusers and stated, "If you are looking for me, then let these men go."³⁹ Shortly thereafter, the accosted Jesus found himself an arm's length from Pontius Pilate and the Roman authorities. As an angry mob outside of Pilate's chambers

called for Jesus' life, Pilate inquired of Jesus' kingship. With his life in the balance, Jesus fearlessly responded, "My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world."⁴⁰ Far more than a death certificate, Jesus' words to Pilate were the magnum opus of a good life.

A perfect synthesis of vocation, hope, and social change, his life and death were of equal importance, for they were of "a single respiration."⁴¹ While Jesus' kingship confession before Pilate precipitated the expiration of Jesus' final breath, the inspiration of his short life of alternative resistance can be distilled in a brief formula: "The kingdom of heaven is in us."⁴²

According to Thurman, the base of Jesus' formula of resistance "focused on the urgency of radical change in the inner attitude of the people."⁴³ Lacking protection from ruling authorities, Jesus' revolution began with reclaiming control of the heart.

Jesus recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life and that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at last long destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them. "To revile because one has been reviled—this is the real evil because it is the evil of the soul itself." Jesus saw this with almighty clarity. Again and again he came back to the inner life of the individual. With increasing insight and startling accuracy he placed his finger on the "inward center" as the crucial arena where the issues would determine the destiny of his people.⁴⁴

From this vantage, Jesus understood that when outside forces control the inner life, the disinherited are backed against the wall and heads remain constantly on swivel. Jesus perceived that with the spirit overtaken, self-worth becomes shackled and questions of fitness, flatness, and belonging confine creative alternatives of change. Further, Jesus grasped that when the inward center rests in the hands of external forces, disequilibrium befuddles the disinherited, and malevolent others gain control of how the uncentered exercise power and respond to crisis.⁴⁵ Therefore, under the press of Roman occupation Jesus launched a movement of social change to reclaim the landscape of the inward center.

As a technique of survival for the oppressed, through word and action, Jesus contested social inferiority by impressing a profound sense of belonging upon all (lepers, adulterers, tax collectors, and

even Roman soldiers) that crossed within his three-foot orbit. "The core of the analysis of Jesus is that [humans are children] of God, the God of life that sustains all nature and guarantees all the intricacies of the life-process itself."⁴⁶ This great affirmation stabilizes personal worth and dignity, and positions the listener "to appraise [one's] own intrinsic powers, gifts, talents, and abilities."⁴⁷ The challenge to reappraise one's dignity creates a different lens for the disinherited to assess their present crisis, envision new possibilities, and work toward creating change.

In Thurman's oft-quoted baccalaureate speech "The Sound of the Genuine," he describes an encounter between Jesus and a demon-possessed man. Though the man was sequestered to a living death of rattling his chains in a graveyard on the outskirts of town, Jesus posed two dignity-altering questions that struck the man's inward center: "Who are you? What is your name?" and for a moment his tilted mind righted itself and he said, "That's it! I don't know. There are legions of me and they riot in my streets. If I only knew, then I would be whole."⁴⁸

By inquiring of the grave-dweller's name, Jesus bestowed upon him dignity and personhood. Scripture further tells us that after driving out the demons, Jesus sent the once-possessed man back home to face those who had marginalized him. Not only was he commissioned to serve as a credible messenger of the healer who welcomed him as a child of God; the once-possessed man was tasked to love those who attempted to destroy him.

Radical in every right, Jesus' said to the disinherited, "Love your enemy." In outlining the taxonomy of hatred, Thurman explains that contact without fellowship leads to unsympathetic understanding, and finally to an active functioning of ill will. To disrupt the breeding of hate, Jesus advocated love.⁴⁹ "The first step toward such love is a common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value."⁵⁰ Jesus understood that while the underprivileged remain in constant contact with many who can threaten their well-being, there exists chance opportunities when foes find themselves at arm's length and on common ground.⁵¹ The Samaritan, the tax collector, the Roman soldier, even Pilate himself, stood on different ideological and cultural grounds than Jesus. But through dignifying words and compassionate actions Jesus forged pathways to mutual discovery with unlikely partners. Through this example, Jesus modeled for the oppressed an unwillingness to have his inward center tainted by hate and a refusal to have his soul disfigured by evil opposition.

To be certain, Jesus' position was "deeply resented by many of his fellows, who were suffering as he was."⁵² For some, a path of resistance that flowed through the inward center may have seemed acquiescent to the enemy. For others, his alternative may have seemed incapable of making any significant change against the towering house of Rome. However, during his life and for ages following, Jesus' thoughts and actions have served as a compass for the disinherited seeking direction and a template for resistance that exists far beyond the bounds of activism. Knowing that he was and would be both compass and template, he stood before his disciples and teachers of the law and assuredly self-identified: "*I am the way!*"

I Am a Mystic

It felt like heaven, but it was hot as hell. While the ceiling fan had no chance against the three-digit summer heat, my sister teacher's invitation to help catalog her home library placed me at the pearly gates.⁵³ With universities interested in appraising Ms. Mari's library, she gave me a list and pointed me in the direction to pull the rarest of her collection. Sifting through thousands of books stacked from floor to ceiling, I excavated signed first editions of her sister writers Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, and Maya Angelou. With sweat pouring down my back I continued the dig, and I floated on cloud nine when I uncovered the green-inked personal correspondence from her teacher, Langston Hughes. I sifted through books categorized in history, religion, literature, and law. Then, in the corner of the sweltering attic, I found Howard Thurman's name written on a spine mixed in with a stack of miscellaneous books.

Howard Thurman defied categorization many of his living days. A teacher with an inquisitive mind, in 1935 Thurman voyaged to India and was among the first African Americans to sit in the company of Mohandas Gandhi, discuss tenets of nonviolent direct action, and examine tactics to vitalize the dignity of persons deemed untouchable.⁵⁴ Thirteen years later, Thurman published *Jesus and the Disinherited*, which some historians believe Martin Luther King Jr. carried throughout the Montgomery bus boycott⁵⁵ and which some activists credit with shaping the philosophy of the civil rights movement.⁵⁶ In 1953, *Life* magazine recognized Thurman as one of the twelve greatest preachers of the twentieth century.⁵⁷ Given his credentials as an

ambassador for his people, an accomplished author, and an acclaimed preacher, many thought at "last someone has come who would be our Moses."⁵⁸ But Howard Thurman resisted the categories that might label him as a front-page activist for causes of racial justice. He sought another way to resist the social ills.

Like Jesus, who was conditioned by birth to live among the disinherited, Howard Thurman as an African American in the segregated South also moved on the margins of society. As a sensitive child, Thurman suffered much from the racial violence in his hometown of Daytona. When "life became more and more suffocating because of fear of being brutalized, beaten or otherwise outraged," Thurman turned within and sought control of resources that were accessible to him and God alone.⁵⁹ By claiming his inner landscape, young man Howard laid the ground that soon led him to declare, "*I am a mystic.*"

In order to understand the lifework of a mystic, one must first define mysticism. For ages, theologians have sought to distinguish mystical experience from metaphysical doctrines of the soul. For the purposes of this book, I am less concerned about the latter. In this regard, I side with the renowned Quaker mystic and scholar Rufus Jones, who states, "I am not interested in mysticism as an 'ism.' It turns out in most accounts to be a dry and abstract thing. . . . It is mystical experience and not mysticism that is worthy of our study."⁶⁰ To this end, I have derived the following understanding of how the mystic's experiences heighten consciousness and inform relationships with God and the world. The mystic perceives that the ultimate dwells within finite experience; therefore, careful examination of one's life can disclose truths, yield wisdom, and unlock revelations about humanity, nature, and God.⁶¹ Three fundamental convictions frame this assertion:

1. In the essence of all life and creation there is an underlying spirituality.
2. The soul as well as the eye can perceive and have direct and unmediated interaction with God. Therefore, revelatory insights from the living God are attainable even without the conduit of institutional religion.⁶² Additionally, through this perceptive spiritual sense the soul can pass from the temporal to the Eternal.⁶³
3. Unlike the dissociative qualities of mental illness, mysticism is inherently integrative such that connection with the living God can deepen discernment and enhance relationship with others and self.⁶⁴

While a heightened mystical consciousness enables unique pathways to discern God's presence and will, accompanying the mystic's spiritual gift of perception also comes a social responsibility to care and serve. As "spiritual issues are the very ground of all material issues (e.g. politics, civil rights, poverty, crime),"⁶⁵ the mystic bears the weight and commitment of utilizing spiritual attunement to call out injustice, negotiate peace, and create pockets of resistance. In response to these commitments, the mystic engages in the work of building the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.⁶⁶

Guided by the wisdom of Jesus, the tutelage of teachers, and a host of transcendent personal encounters, Thurman as a mystic located within himself "the door that no man could shut" and discovered that even under siege he could retain "the equilibrium and the tranquility of inner peace."⁶⁷ As a path of resistance, Thurman employed mystical insights to help others "restore and discover self-worth"⁶⁸ and "to remove anything that prevented the individual free and easy access to the [inward center]."⁶⁹ Thurman's mystical approach to social change moves within the individual, between communities, and beneath the surface of the evil order.

In *Deep Is the Hunger* Thurman asked the ever-pressing question of souls assaulted by oppressive systems: "What is it that we want and need in order to be worthwhile persons in our own sight?"⁷⁰ Taking cues from Jesus and Gandhi, who both sought to dispel notions of inferiority lodged within the hearts of children of God, Thurman believed that transforming how individuals perceived themselves was the first step in remaking the social order.⁷¹ Since the battle for self-worth is waged within, Thurman stressed the power of daily decision making. In a brief reflection, just a few pages after his question on finding worth, Thurman contended that all humans are confronted with options that reveal "a philosophy of living." Even in times of social upheaval, decisions can be made on when the body rests and when it wakes. For the rich and poor alike, choices on how money is allocated reveal values. Furthermore, decisions on relational presence, allocation of energy, and pursuit of vocation demonstrate volitional power.⁷² So Thurman devoted many of his writings, speeches, and sermons to helping individuals move within and take ownership of seemingly insignificant daily decisions as assertive acts of defining self-worth.

On the campus of Eden Seminary in October 1978, Thurman delivered a lecture titled "Mysticism and Social Action." Among the key themes in his lecture was the obligation of the spiritually sensitive

person not to lose a sense of "particularity." His concept of particularity suggests that regardless of one's lot in life, every person should be seen as a subject and not an object, as a particular human being and not representative of a larger body. For example, it is possible to feed the hungry and lose sight of the particular famished person. In this regard, by not seeing the particular hungry individual, the act of caring torments the one in need. The same is true for the outsized who look in the face of giants and fail to realize that systems are made of particular persons who must be seen and held accountable for their individual actions against others.

Recognizing that human contact without fellowship between particular persons breeds a cycle of hatred, Thurman saw the need to create communal spaces for mutual discovery, where unlikely partners might search for common ground. In the broader scope of history, such person-to-person resistance may seem inconsequential. Yet consider this: In 1944, as Jim Crow laws governed social spaces and individual interactions, Thurman and a white Presbyterian clergyman named Rev. Alfred Fisk founded the nation's first interfaith, interracial congregation. Over time, Thurman's sermons would be broadcast nationwide. Ever so slowly he chipped away at an oppressive system built on diminishing particularity and driving a wedge between unlikely partners. A seemingly small ripple can indeed become a wave.

Thurman's approach to activism not only sought to vitalize individual self-worth and create spaces of mutual discovery between unlikely partners; it also sought to move beneath the evil order. In a recorded meditation titled "Those Who Walked with God" Thurman laid out how mystics can channel the power of God through word and deed to subvert systems of oppression:

[Mystics] do not withdraw from the struggle, but they feel the way to do it is to move underneath the foundation that stabilizes the evil order. And if you move at that level, when you stir, everything that is above you will begin to crumble and fall because there is no power less than the power of God that is capable of withstanding the power of God. Therefore, if I can release as a living channel, a living energy, of God into the situation, anything that is in the situation will be destroyed.

That is what the mystic does as social action. He is no coward, sticking his head in the sand. Praying to God because he is scared or because he does not have the nerve to do anything else. But he is sure that he is in touch with terrible energy. And if his life can be a

point of focus through which that energy hits its mark in the world, then the redemptive process can work. That is why the way of the mystic is so difficult and yet in some ways so simple.⁷³

The work of Fearless Dialogues continues in the lineage of Thurman's mystical tradition by calling individuals to be mindful of small decisions, by challenging communities not to shun particularity, and by using the Laboratory of Discovery to artistically release a living channel, a living energy of God, to destabilize the foundations of evil resting in the hearts and minds of others.

I Am an Artist

We were crossing the Mojave Desert in a two-seater when the aftershock of my vocational crisis hit. Miles away from the bustling cities, I looked out from the passenger seat onto the dry parched land. Before me a seemingly endless road. To the left and right, sand, rocks, and high cliffs as far as the eye could see. Then, with a certain suddenness, I lost my breath. Gasping for air and suffocating by paradox, I felt closed in by the vast, open space of the wilderness. Never stricken by asthma or immobilizing anxiety, I turned to my youngest brother behind the wheel. "I think I'm having a panic attack!" Channeling a sagacious calmness like the desert fathers of old, Jahmel called my name and instructed, "Gregory, just breathe."

Hours after the tremors of my vocational crisis calmed, I asked Jahmel to pull the two-seater over onto the highway shoulder. As we came to a rolling stop, the gravel crunched under the tires, and a dust cloud bellowed around the car. I cracked the door, and the dry desert heat rushed into the vehicle, proving its dominance over the cool streams pushing through the air-conditioned vents. Just steps away from the car, with rocky sand underfoot, the setting sun appeared as painted watercolors across the desert sky. Lavender, fuchsia, hues of green and orange blended across the horizon. Then it happened. While beholding the setting sun, it dawned upon me . . . *I am an artist!*

Though I was standing on dry, parched land, creative possibilities of being in the world beyond the confines of scholar, minister, and activist flooded to the fore. I don't paint, draw, or sing. But like a master potter at the sculptor's wheel I create spaces for hard conversations. Like an iron chef at play, I stand in pulpits and mix Scripture with music,

drama, abstract theories, and folk wisdom to help the faithful see invisible people hidden in plain view. Like a museum curator assembling rare collections, one-third of every class I teach is off campus, so that students can hear the untold stories of master practitioners who bind communities together with little recognition. Like an imaginative child with crayons in hand, I sketch visions of an interrupting hope in the minds of business tycoons, gang leaders, and activists, who have been pummeled by the Big Three. I am an artist who teaches, preaches, and acts upon conviction to create spaces that catalyze change.

Can you grant yourself the freedom to dream beyond the tight boxes of vocation? How might your service to the world look different, sound different, feel different, if you unhinged your creativity and your efforts to fit the norm? What would our world, our communities, our families be like if small cadres of the "vocationally uncategorizable" committed to band together and change the three feet around them?

I Am an Interrupter

I devote the entire fourth chapter of my first book, *Cut Dead but Still Alive*, to exploring how an interrupting hope foils the woeful ills of despair, apathy, and shame. As defined in the text, "an interrupting hope is a disruptive desire for existential change that is generated and sustained in a community of reliable others that names difficulties, envisions new possibilities, and inspires work toward transformation of self and other."⁷⁴ This definition proves so central to the work of seeing the invisible and hearing the muted that I definitively state, "Interruption lies at the heart of hope and is the bloodline pulsing through [the] entire book."⁷⁵

An interrupting hope actively disrupts the mundane, predictable, and routine by interjecting a new outlook and way of being. This concept of disruptively halting the continuous progress of hopelessness emerged from examining the work of Gary Slutkin and his colleagues at CeaseFire.

Slutkin, a medical doctor who spent most of his career fighting epidemic diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera, and AIDS with the World Health Organization, proposed that the epidemic of violence could be contained like a contagious disease [if transmission could be interrupted]. . . . Slutkin explains that in a flu epidemic doctors immunize to block transmission. To block the transmission of

violence, Slutkin's organization developed a "cadre of workers called the violence interrupters who can detect and interrupt events and block one of them from leading to another."⁷⁶

Violence interrupters move toward the place where violence is nearing eruption; then they literally place their bodies between the warring factions to immunize violence and broker peace. The violence interrupters, comprised of former gang members with street credibility, serve as a disruptive stopgap in the heat of rage. Each CeaseFire interruption faces a difficulty, envisions a possibility beyond violence, and takes a risk to create change. My boyhood hero lived a good life and died a good death adhering to such a philosophy.

In those early days of kindergarten, Brandon interrupted the cycle of bullying and infused hope in my life when he stood between me and the Big Three—despair, apathy, and shame. A dozen years later, Brandon put his body between two warring factions to interrupt another violent cycle. Others at that postgame hot spot could have intervened. They did not. Yet young man Brandon declaratively knew, "*I am an interrupter.*"

Had Brandon not stood between me and my kindergarten bullies, or between those hotheaded teens intent on harming each other, much of my life would have been different. While I never heard Brandon call himself an activist, his interruptions changed the three feet around him, wherever he went. I contend that hope-igniting interruptions are kindled by a divine spark within that compels our eyes to see the invisible, and trains our ears to hear the muted who stand with their backs against the wall. With clarified vision, attuned hearing, and hearts aflame, activism expands beyond a set of actions and becomes a way of being, a way of living, a way of moving in the world as an interrupter.

Can you feel the warm flame of interruption growing in your belly?

I Am Fearless Dialogues

Fearless Dialogues is far more than a series of theory-based experiments. It is a lifelong inward journey that manifests itself in how individuals change the world around them in three-foot increments. Fearless Dialogues' artistic way of resistance challenges unlikely partners to face the Big Three that bully from within, so that they may move fearlessly to spark interruptions in their daily lives. It is our belief that in time these

incremental changes shake the foundations of oppressive systems that tower over the outsized, who live with their heads on swivel.

Like striking the abrasive edge of a matchbox, Fearless Dialogues animators seek to scratch the subconscious of unlikely partners, so they may consider how to interrupt the Big Three on a daily basis in their homes, schools, workplaces, and communities. For some unlikely partners, ignition occurs from experiencing Radical Hospitality, engaging art in the Living Museum, or exploring theories of invisibility, marginalization, and ostracism. For others, flicker turns to flame when facing the Five Hardest Questions or while taking a Long Loving Look at the Real. In the Laboratory of Discovery these experiments smolder in the hearts of unlikely partners; but once they return to their communities, the flame gains oxygen, and a wildfire within clears a path of new questions for life to start afresh.

How might we employ Radical Hospitality in our daily interactions with Public Strangers whom we encounter on our morning commute, with Familiar Strangers whom we sit next to in crowded classrooms, and with Intimate Strangers who grace our lives when we least expect?

How might our parental engagement with our school-age children deepen if we looked at television, movies, and magazine images as part of a Living Museum, and asked our school-age teachers: Who do you see? Who don't you hear? Where is hope?

How might our organizational understandings be altered if senior and support staff wrestled with theories of marginality and ostracism by inquiring together: What does it feel like to be cut dead, to be muted, to be invisible? How can we create an organizational ethos that supports our fundamental human needs of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence?

How might we create spaces in our homes, churches, and temples, to face life's hardest questions? How might our sense of identity, purpose, and legacy change if these seemingly insular communities asked: Who are we? What is our gift? What must we do to die a good death?

How might we alter the harried pace of our daily schedules to take a Long Loving Look at unlikely partners from different faiths, political ideologies, sexual orientations, or socioeconomic backgrounds?

Finally, in an age when civil conversations in the media often devolve into punitive punditry and divisive debate, how might we engage in Fearless Dialogues that spark flames of hope and change the three feet around us?

If these questions swell your flame, whisper to yourself, "*I am Fearless Dialogues!*"

A FINAL WORD: ON CHANGE, THREE FEET AT A TIME

For far too long, the behemoths of racism and classism and the mammoths of sexism and ageism have cast shadows on the outsized and distorted vocations of resistance. But you, Beloved Reader, are in close proximity to these words. It is my prayer that from your reading a spark is smoldering that will serve as a pillar of fire to traverse the shadow. I am not calling for you, Beloved Reader, to change the world. Yet I beckon you to hear the wisdom of my Aunt Dotty, who more than three decades ago unknowingly set the course for Fearless Dialogues, with these words: "I don't know how to change the world. But I can change the three feet around me." So, as we go forth from these pages, to extend Radical Hospitality, face hard questions, interrupt the Big Three, and live fearlessly, let us do so, three feet at a time.

Notes

Chapter 1: Fear+Less Dialogues Introduced

1. Kevin Quashie, *Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 4.
2. Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 5.
3. Seni Tienabeso, Matt Gutman, and Stephanie Wash, "George Zimmerman Found Not Guilty and Goes Free," *ABC News*, July 13, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/george-zimmerman-found-guilty-free/story?id=19653300>.
4. *Daily News* Staff, "George Zimmerman Verdict: Twitter Erupts After Ex-Neighborhood Watchman Walks on Trayvon Martin Murder Charge," *New York Daily News*, July 13, 2013, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/george-zimmerman-verdict-twitter-erupts-ex-neighborhood-watchman-walks-murder-charge-article-1.1398213>.
5. Ryan Devereaux, "No Justice: Thousands March for Trayvon Martin," *Rolling Stone*, July 15, 2013, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/no-justice-thousands-march-for-trayvon-martin-20130715>.
6. Jehmu Greene, "After Zimmerman Verdict, Trayvon Martin Isn't Only Victim," *Fox News Opinion*, July 17, 2013, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2013/07/17/after-zimmerman-verdict-trayvon-martin-isnt-only-victim.html>.
7. Tom Cohen, "Obama: Trayvon Martin Could Have Been Me," *CNN Politics*, July 19, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/19/politics/obama-zimmerman/>.
8. Jeffrey Weiss, "White Churches Uncommonly Quiet after Zimmerman Verdict," *CNN Belief Blog*, July 20, 2013, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/20/on-zimmerman-verdict-a-loud-silence-from-white-churches/>.
9. In the words of Parker Palmer, the name tags serve the purpose of leveling the playing field of conversation, so that participants in dialogue meet "soul-to-soul" and not "role-to-role." A host of techniques, structured around Radical Hospitality, is employed to ensure that both dominant and marginal persons are fully seen and heard.
10. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 36.
11. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 37.
12. Studies show that when persons feel unacknowledged, the fundamental human needs of belonging, self-esteem, control, and a sense of meaningful

existence are threatened. If these fundamental needs are in question, it is most unlikely that head-to-heart conversations like the ones in the four vignettes above will occur. For a summary of Kipling Williams' four fundamental human needs and the adverse effect of their absence on persons who are unseen and unheard, see Gregory C. Ellison II, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 22–24.

13. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York: Harper One, 2014), 92.

Chapter 2: Conversations with Country Dark

1. James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Penguin, 2008), 17.

2. In his psychoanalytic interpretation of caves, Harold P. Blum likens the underground cavernous spaces inhabited by our Paleolithic ancestors to the birth canal or womb where living organisms produced undying art. Furthermore, exiting the cave was a dangerous proposition, as the living being left the security of the comforting object (Harold P. Blum, "The Psychological Birth of Art: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Prehistoric Cave Art," *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 20, no. 4 [2011], 201).

3. While the earliest known rock art, found in Africa, dates from nearly 75,000 years ago, art historians date prehistoric cave art in select locations in France and Spain as less than 40,000 years old (Blum, "Psychological Birth of Art," 196).

4. John Halverson suggests that cave artists largely portrayed animals that posed little threat to our prehistoric forebears. He explains, "The subject matter of this art, so far as it is representational, is overwhelmingly animals. A good number of humans . . . and perhaps a few plants are depicted, but the vast majority are animals, and of these, the great majority are large, edible herbivores, especially horse and bison, and also cattle, deer, ibex, mammoth and rhinoceros; more rarely depicted are felines, bears, fish, birds, and reptiles" (John Halverson, "Paleolithic Art and Cognition," *The Journal of Psychology* 126, no. 3 [1992]: 222).

Blum offers a grimmer picture and explains that in addition to renderings of docile herbivores, the images on cave walls also portrayed animals that posed a more immediate threat. He believes that the animals painted with such life-like virtuosity were those observed, hunted, feared, and perhaps honored or worshiped by prehistoric humans. They include the extinct mammoth, woolly rhinoceros, auroch (a fierce oversized ox), giant elk, horse, bison, reindeer, bear, unidentified herbivores, and rarely fish, for example a salmon." His inclusion of fear-inducing predators suggests that cave artists were utilizing art to process external stimuli that potentially threatened their existence. Blum further posits that carve art may have also been "counterphobic" against frightening night-

mares, haunting imagery, and ancestral ghosts of the supernatural world (Blum, "Psychological Birth of Art," 202).

5. Blum, "Psychological Birth of Art," 200.

6. *Ibid.*, 196–97.

7. *Ibid.*, 200. While Blum's research focuses primarily on the discoveries of cave art in France and Spain, Sven Ouzman, a rock art researcher from the University of Western Australia, details how 14,000 years ago members of the San society in the heartland of central South Africa hammered, rubbed, cut, and flaked rock in order to produce sound. Like the cave art discussed in this chapter, the rock-art sites provided the San societies opportunity to contemplate, question, and make sense of both the ordinary world, where people physically dwelt, and the spirit world, where God, the spirits of the dead, supernatural people, and potent animals existed (Sven Ouzman, "Seeing Is Deceiving: Rock Art and the Non-Visual," *World Archaeology* 33, no. 2 [2001]: 237–38).

8. Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Bright Cloud of Unknowing," Day1.org, March 2, 2014, http://day1.org/5560-the_bright_cloud_of_unknowing.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Dr. Seuss, *Green Eggs and Ham* (New York: Beginner Books, Random House, 1988), 16.

14. Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1993), 41.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 42.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 41.

19. Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 30.

20. *Ibid.*, 56.

21. *Ibid.*, 120.

22. *Ibid.*, 32.

23. *Ibid.*, 40.

24. *Ibid.*, 19.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 20.

27. *Ibid.*, 22–23, 27.

28. *Ibid.*, 21.

29. Anne C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 91.

30. In certain African traditions, the Chakaba don sacred garb and dance on stilts to bless spaces and dispel negativity. Some traditions also surmise that the height of the stilt walker reminds us to look up to the ancestors who came before. For more information on Chakaba see Kariamuwelsh-Asante, ed. *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998), 25.

Chapter 3: The Welcome Table of Radical Hospitality

1. Arnold Rampersad, ed., "I've Known Rivers," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 23.
2. Throughout the book, I capitalize the words Public Stranger, Familiar Stranger, Intimate Stranger, and the Stranger Within, because the terms are utilized as proper nouns that represent individuals and groups who participate in Fearless Dialogues conversations. In this footnote and throughout this chapter, I credit Parker J. Palmer, Stanley Milgram, and Robert C. Dykstra as the theorists who developed the terms Public Stranger, Familiar Stranger, and Intimate Stranger, respectively.
3. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 46.
4. *Ibid.*, 47.
5. Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 58.
6. For more information on the stories of hardship and sacrifice during the Great Migration of African Americans from the southernmost regions of the United States northward, see Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).
7. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, 35.
8. *Ibid.*, 38–39.
9. *Ibid.*, 42.
10. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10.
11. Stephen A. Mitchell and Margaret J. Black, *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 126, italics added.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 127.
14. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 3.
15. *Ibid.*, 4.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Stanley Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* (London: Pinter & Martin, 2010), 29–33.
18. *Ibid.*, 42–55.

19. *Ibid.*, 60.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, 60–62.
22. *Ibid.*, 62.
23. "Greyhound" is a colloquial abbreviation for Greyhound Lines, an inter-city bus carrier with more than 2,700 destinations in the United States.
24. Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World*, 62.
25. Robert C. Dykstra, "Intimate Strangers: The Role of Hospital Chaplains in Situations of Sudden Traumatic Loss," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 44, no. 2 (1990): 139.
26. *Ibid.*, 148.
27. *Ibid.*, 131.
28. In an amazing, hilarious display of cultural analysis, comedian Chris Rock uncovers the lack of appreciation and attention afforded to many African American fathers of his generation. In this particular skit in his HBO stand-up special titled *Bigger and Blacker* (1999), Rock discloses that all the "ready daddy gets for all his work is the big piece of chicken."
29. D. W. Winnicott, "Cure," quoted in Adam Phillips, *Winnicott* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 11.
30. Dykstra, "Intimate Stranger," 124.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, 135.
33. Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber, eds., "How Good It Is to Center Down," in *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman and Religious Experience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 305.
34. Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 53.
35. Rogers's title is inspired by a quote that he came across in Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 29.
36. Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 167.
37. *Ibid.*, 168.
38. Gregory C. Ellison II, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 56.
39. While not given treatment in this chapter, Rogers finds that his clients also made the moves away from meeting expectations and pleasing others. See Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, 169–70.
40. *Ibid.*, 173.
41. *Ibid.* Also not addressed in this chapter are Rogers's movements toward self-direction, being process, being complexity, and trust of self.
42. *Ibid.* Rogers's carefully worded explanation of the epiphanies experienced by clients undergirds my understanding and articulation of how the Stranger Within becomes integrated in the whole of the self . . . and, for this I am grateful.

43. *Ibid.*, 174.

44. Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 53.

45. Not until many years later did I come to realize that this “church song” was indeed a folk song composed at the Highlander Folk School. The leaders at Highlander taught this song to the students of SNCC, and the eschatological imagination of these words would embolden the collegians to remain steadfast as they staged sit-ins at lunch counters and were categorically unwelcomed by the management and dining clientele.

Chapter 4: When Pupils See

1. Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” in *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1922), 71.

2. Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Listening to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 10.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Kipling D. Williams, *Ostracism: The Power of Silence* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), 1–2.

5. The following semester, I took a course on psychobiography taught by Dr. Capps. Uncharacteristically, he allowed me to revise the course syllabus and replace three required texts with books that I deemed more relevant to the African American context. That summer, Dr. Capps asked to reread every paper that I had submitted to him that year. By summer’s end, he mailed the papers to my home with a second level of comments. Long before my days as a doctoral student and a professor, Dr. Capps *saw* something in me. His thoughtful feedback and investment in my becoming a better writer proved pivotal in my development. For this I am grateful. Dr. Capps, may you rest in peace.

6. Capps frames James as a religious melancholic, who worries about the remote future of the world but possesses a philosophically deeper understanding of God than religious idealists. Referring to James’s pivotal chapter, “Sick Soul,” in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Capps explores the psychological and religious overtones of melancholia. He extracts two examples from this chapter to make this point. The first is that of a French mental patient, symbolizing the materialists, who was afraid of God and was led to a life of despair, panic fear, and near suicide. The second example refers to James himself, a religious melancholic/idealist, who in grappling with panic found hope in biblical assurances that God was his refuge. In the latter example, the texts of Scripture functioned psychologically for James and made a decisive difference in his mental stability and survival. See Donald Capps, “The Letting Loose of Hope: Where Psychology of Religion and Pastoral Care Converge,” *Journal of Pastoral Care* 51 (1997): 139–49.

7. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: H. Holt & Co., 1890), 292–93, emphasis added.

8. African American young men are particularly susceptible.

9. Gregory C. Ellison II, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013).

10. Howard Thurman, *Inward Journey* (New York: Harper, 1961).

11. *Ibid.*, 61.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Kipling D. Williams, Joseph P. Forgas, and William Von Hippel, eds., *The Social Outcast: Ostracism, Social Exclusion, Rejection, and Bullying* (New York: Psychology Press, 2005), 22. For more information on the necessity of belonging for human flourishing, see Baumeister and Leary, “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497–529.

14. Williams, *Ostracism*, 62.

15. *Ibid.*, 65.

16. *Ibid.*, 63.

17. Proverbs 20:12.

18. Williams, *Ostracism*, 1–2.

19. Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life: Welcoming the Soul and Weaving Community in a Wounded World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 58.

Chapter 5: Listening for the Love Below

1. Lucille Clifton, “Seeker of Visions,” in *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010*, ed. Kevin Young and Michael S. Glaser (Rochester: BOA Editions, 2012), 453.

2. James A. Vela-McConnell, *Who Is My Neighbor?: Social Affinity in the Modern World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 8.

3. *Ibid.*, 7; emphasis added.

4. *Ibid.*, 8.

5. *Ibid.*, 9.

6. *Ibid.*, 10.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Walter J. Burghardt, “Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real,” *Church* 5, (winter 1989): 14.

9. I was introduced to the Long Loving Look at the Real experiment by my dear friend and colleague Rahiel Tesfamariam. I initially utilized this experiment in workshops and in my classrooms at Candler School of Theology. Over time, the Fearless Dialogues team has adapted and revised the experiment’s instructions

and debriefing to meet the needs of unlikely partners and strengthen connections between seemingly disparate groups at community conversations.

10. Burghardt, "Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real," 15.

11. James Melvin Washington, ed., "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 254.

12. Burghardt, "Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real," 16.

13. Ibid.

14. Mari Evans, "Celebration," *A Dark and Splendid Mass* (New York: Harlem River Press, 1993), 20–21.

15. Recognizing that silent eyes tell a story, individuals often respond that they have heard untold stories of strength, perseverance, and determination, lying behind the pupils of people they do not know.

16. Burghardt, "Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real," 14–16.

17. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: H. Holt & Co., 1890), 292–93.

18. Henri Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 49.

19. Ibid.

20. Karen Scheib, *Pastoral Theology: Telling the Stories of Our Lives* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 64.

21. Ibid., 62.

22. Ibid., 63.

23. Ibid., 63–64.

24. Ibid., 64.

25. Ibid., 63.

26. Ibid., 64–65.

27. Ibid., 65.

28. Ibid.

29. Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life: Welcoming the Soul and Weaving Community in a Wounded World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 27.

30. Ibid., 25.

31. Ibid., 23.

32. Ibid., 65.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., 26.

35. Ibid., 120.

36. Deborah Cramer, *The Great Waters: An Atlantic Passage* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 184.

37. Rebecca Hersher, "The Universe Has Almost 10 Times More Galaxies Than We Thought," National Public Radio, npr.com, October 14, 2016.

38. Thomas Duffy, "Crystallography's Journey to the Deep Earth," *Nature* 506, no. 7489 (2014): 429.

39. Edgar H. Schein, *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking instead of Telling* (San Francisco: Berrett Koehler, 2013), 2.

40. Ibid., 4.

41. Ibid., 9.

42. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Guide for Reflection and Renewal* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 126.

43. Schein, *Humble Inquiry*, 41.

44. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 126.

45. Ibid.

46. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2017), 156.

47. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000), 35.

48. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 120.

49. Psalm 139:8, New International Reader's Version.

Chapter 6: To Die a Good Death

1. "The Third Sermon on the Warpland," in *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*, ed. Elizabeth Alexander (New York: Library of America, 2005), 101–2.

2. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 35.

3. Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971), 71.

4. I am grateful to fellow writer friends Bernard Kynes, Iyabo Onipede, Patrick Reyes, Toby Sanders, and Matthew Williams, who encouraged me with probing questions about this chapter to dislodge me from my writer's block.

5. Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), 23.

6. Ibid., 38.

7. Personal Conversation with Luther Smith on December 14, 2016, emphasis added.

8. Luther E. Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1991), 39.

9. Ibid.

10. Howard Thurman, "My People Need Me," in *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*, ed. W. E. Fluker (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 1–3.

11. Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 24–25.

12. Thurman, "My People Need Me," 1.
13. *Ibid.*, 2.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 49–50.
16. Known at the time as Ceylon.
17. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 15.
18. Luther E. Smith, "Howard Thurman," in *Christian Spirituality: The Classics*, ed. Arthur Holder (New York: Routledge, 2009), 342.
19. I supplement these three points made in *Jesus and the Disinherited* with references to this subject in an earlier convocation address given by Thurman in the summer of 1935 titled "Good News for the Underprivileged." I find it intriguing that Thurman had done the preliminary research and delivered this talk on the religion of Jesus months prior to his conversation with the Hindu administrator. One could only imagine that Thurman made mention of the remarks from this convocation lecture during the five-hour fearless dialogue. See Howard Thurman, "Good News for the Underprivileged," in *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*, ed. W. E. Fluker (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 263–69.
20. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 16.
21. *Ibid.*, 15–16.
22. *Ibid.*, 17.
23. *Ibid.*, 33.
24. *Ibid.*, 22–23.
25. *Ibid.*, 23.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, 26.
29. Howard Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus: Five Sermons Given in Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 1962* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1997), 18.
30. "Apathy is the state of not caring about what is happening around us, to us, or within us. This threat stands counter to the hoping process that is fueled by desire, because the apathetic person is unaware of having any desires." For more on apathy, see Gregory C. Ellison II, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 92–93.
31. Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus*, 27.
32. Matt. 9:10.
33. Matt. 8:3.
34. John 4:9.
35. Matt. 8:5–13.
36. Matt. 12:9–12.
37. John 8:1–7 (NLT).
38. Matt. 21:12–13.
39. John 18:2–8.

40. John 18:28–36 (NLT).
41. Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 71.
42. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 27.
43. *Ibid.*, 21.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, 28.
46. *Ibid.*, 49.
47. *Ibid.*, 53.
48. Howard Thurman, "The Sound of the Genuine," in *Crossings Reflection 4* (Indianapolis: University of Indianapolis, 1902), <http://eip.uindy.edu/crossings/publications/reflection4.pdf>.
49. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 75–78.
50. *Ibid.*, 98.
51. *Ibid.*, 101.
52. *Ibid.*, 28.
53. My beloved sister teacher, and Yoda, Mari Evans breathed her last breath on March 10, 2017. Hours before her transition, I submitted the draft of this manuscript to my editor. I am grateful for her wisdom, wit, and love. Deep in my heart, I believe that she was with me then and now, as this work makes its way into the world. I love you, Ms. Mari.
54. Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 101. For more information on Thurman's travels to India, see Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011).
55. Smith, *The Mystic as Prophet*, 140–41. In connecting Thurman's writings with the work of Martin Luther King Jr., Smith references an interview between King and historian Lerone Bennett Jr.
56. In reference to Thurman's influence on the philosophy of nonviolent direct action, Smith captures the sentiments of noted civil rights activist Otis Moss, who states: "It might be that he [Thurman] did not join the march from Selma to Montgomery, or many of the other marches, but he has participated at the level that shapes the philosophy that creates the march—and without that people don't know what to do before they march, while they march, or after they march" (Smith, *The Mystic as Prophet*, 202–3).
57. "Howard Thurman Collection" at Boston University, <http://hgar-srv3.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/howard-thurman-collection>.
58. Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and Social Action* (London: International Association for Religious Freedom, 2014), Kindle location 371 of 1080.
59. Howard Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 16.
60. "Rufus Jones," *Quaker Religious Thought* 46 (1978): 1–7.
61. Smith, *The Mystic as Prophet*, 167.
62. Robert G. Collmer, "The Limitations of Mysticism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 116 (April 1959): 130–31.

63. Margaret Smith, *The Way of Mystics: The Early Christian Mystics and the Rise of the Sufis* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1978.

64. Personal email correspondence with Barbara Brown Taylor differentiating mental illness (specifically psychosis) from mystical experience (June 9, 2017).

65. Luther E. Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1991), 34–35.

66. Drawing from the work of New Testament scholar Brian K. Blount, I conceive of the kingdom of God as “a transcendent space created through human action and divine intervention. When these forces align, the future kingdom forcibly and miraculously pierces into the present moment to overturn oppressions of the present age. Blount calls these kingdom inbreaking moments that alter time ‘pockets of resistance.’” For additional information on how I expand this definition; see Gregory C. Ellison II, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 66–70. Also see Brian K. Blount, *Go Preach! Mark’s Kingdom Message and the Black Church Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 13–18, 68.

67. Thurman, *Mysticism and Social Action*, Kindle location 114 of 1080, 12 percent.

68. *Ibid.*, Kindle location 335 of 1080, 31 percent.

69. *Ibid.*, Kindle location 272 of 1080, 26 percent.

70. Thurman, *Deep Is the Hunger*, 62.

71. Smith, *The Mystic as Prophet*, 16–17.

72. Thurman, *Deep Is the Hunger*, 73–75.

73. Howard Thurman, “Those Who Walked with God,” in *The Living Wisdom of Howard Thurman: A Visionary of Our Time* (Louisville, CO: Sounds True, 2010), audio recording.

74. Gregory C. Ellison II, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 82.

75. *Ibid.*, 83.

76. *Ibid.*, 79–80.