

INSPIRATIONS |



ILERA had the opportunity to speak with a woman who proudly follows the tradition and passion of Ida B. Wells in her own unique way. Dr. Traci West is an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church and is Professor of Ethics and African American Studies at Drew Theological School. She received a Masters in Divinity from Pacific School of Religion and a PhD from Union Theological Seminary. Dr. West is the author of *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York University Press, 1999), and the editor of *Our Family Values: Same-sex Marriage and Religion* (Praeger, 2006). Her activism and commitment to speak for those who are vulnerable made Dr. West an obvious choice for our next INSPIRATIONS feature. Enjoy!

ILERA: *What were the messages you received about sexuality growing up and how did you resolve the conflict, if any, between sexuality and religion?*

Dr. West: There's no question that I grew up during a time when sexuality was not discussed in polite Christian families or communities. I certainly didn't receive any messages about how good my sexuality was. However, I do need to say the arts were always very important in my family. There was always a lot of dance and music in my household. My brother would ultimately become a performing artist and a choreographer, so as a child I frequently saw beautiful black bodies in motion doing interpretive modern dance which I understood as one of the finest contributions to American music and culture that could ever be made. My mother grew up in Harlem. All of the best theater, arts, dance, intellectuals and politicized religious communities came out of Harlem as far as she was concerned. So no matter how poor we were, we would always go to see theater and dance in "the City".

The most positive messages about sexuality for me came out of the feminist movement during the time that I was in college. In the 1970s and 1980s there was an explosion of public conversation about sexuality led by all of these amazing feminist activist role models. They deeply influenced me. I can remember seeing Audre Lorde speak on campus about being this proud beautiful black lesbian and hearing her talk openly about her black lesbian sexuality and her feminist politics, relating them to her Caribbean heritage. And I was awed by her incredible critique of U.S. foreign policy and how she linked it all together - sexuality and international politics. So I was influenced in a very positive way by feminists, particularly black feminists as a young adult.

Another example of early influences was going to see the very first cast of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enough* on Broadway. I remember being impressed by how boldly it addressed the sexual violence and intimate partner violence black women experience. As a young adult these feminist activist and artists taught me that we should talk openly about who we are as women. I think that's where I started to get really positive messages about sexuality, not so much from the church. Sadly, the church context was always repressive with regard to issues of sexuality.

ILERA: *Was there a lot of internal work you had to do because the Church had a repressive message about sexuality or was it effortless because you had so much outside of the church to affirm who you were as a human being?*

Dr. West: I had to struggle with reconciling spirituality and sexuality. To be honest, I continue to struggle with my own relationship to a church that is very repressive and hypocritical on issues of sexuality. The United Methodist Church, the tradition in which I was raised and am ordained is very homophobic. It teaches a completely distorted understanding of sexuality.

I don't like to think of my own journey as it relates to sexuality as merely about my own individual sense of self. It's broader than that. I think sexuality always includes a social dimension because vulnerability is a core ingredient of sexuality. So I know that I am implicated in perpetuating oppression because I am part of a church that specifically identifies and targets people who are already vulnerable for discrimination - I'm talking about the United Methodist Church's homophobic rules.

I also work more generally for equality on issues of gender identity and sexual orientation with members of other Protestant churches. For example, I edited a book called *Our Family Values: Same Sex Marriage and Religion*. I was able to include several Protestant traditions. Two authors in the volume talked about the history of their own religious traditions and issues of

sexuality, gender and marriage. The volume was mainly comprised of Protestants but did have representation from two Jewish traditions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Catholicism. I try to get people to think more broadly about which religious understandings encourage exclusion and hatred on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation. But it's also important for me to say that sexuality includes much more than sexual orientation.

The way in which church traditions limit sexuality to sexual orientation and negative restrictive understandings of sexual orientation can make you feel that if you don't fit into their very narrow definition of human identity then you are not a child of God. We have very diverse sexual identities and ways in which we express them. I'm trying to distinguish identities from the ways in which we convey them. Our sexuality involves our emotional, physical and spiritual selves.

The ways in which so many in the church insist upon limiting sexuality to sexual orientation erases the broader experience of our sexual selves and leaves us as spiritually hungry people looking for understanding the church does not provide. Another consequence of this inadequate theology is that so many faith-filled people feel shamed. For example, people with different-abled bodies who can't have a coitus heterosexual expression of sexuality are relegated to the margins as if they don't count or as if they are supposed to be asexual. Or if you are single and you are not in a heterosexual marriage then you are not allowed to be seen as having received God's precious gift of sexuality. This kind of shaming by the church can destructively impact a wide array of human bodies and identities. It negates what I think is so essential in a Christian moral approach to sexuality: Respect.

ILERA: *When did you realize you had a desire to become a minister?*

Dr. West: Wow. I felt called to ministry when I was a very young person. I was a sophomore in high school. I have to start with my Mom and the way in which I learned faith and Christianity in my home. My mother was a very devout Christian. Religion and spirituality were not just something that you do at church on Sunday but everyday activities. One of my favorite times with my mother when I was 4 or 5 years old was prayer time in the morning – especially in the summer because she always prayed outside at sunrise. She would have her bible, read it aloud and then pray aloud. As I was learning to read she would point to the words and I could say certain ones. I loved it because I had her all to myself...

I was deeply inspired by the awesome beauty of nature and understanding that God was the source and creator of our whole world and called us to be faithful. But watching the news about the civil rights movement and seeing clergy leaders of the movement on television had the biggest impact on me. Based upon those scenes, I formed an image of clergy as people who went out and took risks in our world to bring about more justice for everyone. They stood up in public and told unpopular things about those who are socially oppressed, making themselves vulnerable to attack and criticism. But they did so in the name of the gospel of Jesus Christ trying to create a world that was more compassionate and less filled with hate, war and discrimination. So I put those two experiences, prayer with my mother and images of clergy, as being very strong influences on me.

ILERA: *Did you become ordained first and then pursue the academic path?*

Dr. West: Yes, when I went to college I was a religious studies major. I was certain that I was going to be ordained in my own church tradition which was and is United Methodism. I was baptized in this tradition as an infant. After college, I went on to seminary and then served a church as their pastor. At the time I was pretty clear that I did not want to go back to school after completing the Master's degree required for ordination in my denomination. I just wanted to serve the local church but God had other plans for me.

I found that after serving in a church as a pastor for a while, I wanted to do ministry that was more community based. So I went to serve as a campus minister. While serving as a minister on three college campuses, I encountered so many stories from students of all ages about intimate violence. I was serving as a campus minister at community college as well as traditional-age college campuses. Women students came to me for counseling and I heard a range of stories about violence from date rape to college age students talking about being sexually molested by a father during winter break and trying to figure out how to tell her Mom about it. And adult students were disclosing suddenly experiencing flashbacks of childhood sexual abuse.

I was overwhelmed by the volume of it and my own sense of inadequacy. I just did not know how to respond in a way that I felt had enough efficacy and knowledge about the social, psychological, spiritual and wide range of concerns and emotions that were coming up for women. Certainly men and boys are victims of violence too but my experience was with women. There were male students of course but the students who came to me for counseling were women.

ILERA: *So when you worked on college campuses was that when you felt a strong pull to address violence and violence against women?*

Dr. West: Yes, specifically violence against women and violence against black women. I was especially struck by the inadequate resources that talked about violence against black women. As a campus minister I could find very few resources that were as comprehensive as I needed. At that time most of the resources and studies of intimate violence were predominately based on white women's experiences. Black women were mentioned to the extent that there was a sentence or two that said something like, "*and this problem is worse for black women*". I felt frustrated by the lack of depth and analysis of the overlapping issues involved. Certainly there were issues of racism that black women encountered but those issues were relegated to just the public sphere encounters with the police and courts. There was nothing written about, "*How are issues of racism related to black women's spirituality?*" Spiritual injury and spiritual resources overlap and connect in ironic ways. I was interested in coming up with a more complex way to think about these issues based upon what I was hearing from my campus ministry students and my sense of feeling inadequate and unable to address the questions and needs that were being raised by the students.

ILERA: *Did the desire to write **Wounds of Spirit** come from your work in campus ministry or did it arise from another series of events?*

Dr. West: Where were the seeds planted to write *Wounds of Spirit*? The seeds certainly began with campus ministry and certain voices I encountered there. One or two voices of women students in particular pushed me and held me accountable for writing something that addressed the experiences of black women. I certainly met senior scholars and publishers in the academy who said, "*A project that only focuses on black women is too narrow.*" Or, "*I hope that your book project will be broader and relate to more than just black women's issues and concerns.*" But I really felt like this was something that I needed to do. To be honest, I did feel discouraged when I was told my work was too narrow but I felt called to write *Wounds of Spirit* because I knew how much it was needed by folks who have been hurt by people they loved and trusted in their black families and communities.

ILERA: *Have you noticed any changes in your work or life since the 2006 release of the film, **NO! The Rape Documentary**?*

Dr. West: I greatly admire the creator and producer of that film, Aishah Shahidah Simmons. I find *NO!* to truly be one of the best conversations out there on the subject of violence against black women. When I say "conversations" I'm referring to some of the controversies about how to interpret African American slave history and the ways in which there is disagreement among folks in black communities from the civil rights generation down to the current college-age generation. The complexity of black communities is represented in that film. It creates a dialogue and allows contemporary audiences to enter the discussions at different points while watching it. In short, I felt very honored to be included in it.

I have received email or Facebook messages from all kinds of people, some that I met long ago and some I didn't know at all who've seen *NO!* They've been touched in some way by the kind of witness that's offered in the film which states so unequivocally that violence against black women is wrong. It demonstrates how we can offer our voices and activist work to end the violence. We have to, even though there is often so much pressure in black communities to be silent about it.

ILERA: *What do you think should be done for ministers in training to help them address some of these issues? Most clergy will come in contact with someone who has experienced some form of domestic, sexual or intimate partner violence. Do you agree?*

Dr. West: Oh yes, there is no question about that. First, I think there has to be an inner journey

that takes place. I just can't stress that strongly enough. In order to be responsive to the needs and crises of others, one of the things that has to happen is self-awareness. You have to come to someone else with enough self-awareness to be able to hear what they are actually saying. You can't respond to them in a helpful, adequate way, when your unresolved buttons get pushed - which so often happens with issues of abuse and sexuality. Then, you are reflecting on your own experiences and projecting your experiences onto that person. So first, there has to be an awareness of one's own sexual history and self, the healthiness or lack of healthiness of one's own intimate relationships and a way to know that there is Divine affirmation of one's own wholeness. I mean literally a spiritual affirmation and a conscious self-affirmation of who we are as ministers and who we are as people. That's the first piece.

Sexuality is a really important issue, even to normal life changes such as menstruation. If we come from a background where it was really shameful as a woman to bleed and taught that a woman's body is shameful because it bleeds, then you've got to start there. Because there's no way that I can be there to minister to other people dealing with sexual violence, for instance, and be a good listener and reflect back the generous sense that the other person - body, mind and spirit - is precious to God. You can't reflect that back unless the place you are starting from is feeling good about your own sexual/bodily self and sexual history. This is not to say that all ministers have to be completely without any dysfunctional past. That would be ridiculous. But certainly the unresolved issues have to be directly addressed from one's past. And if nothing else the blind spots need to be identified so that at least we can respond in a self-aware way, with the ability to place boundaries on our own experience and truly listen to the experience of the other person.

The second piece is the need to have a cognizance of the breadth of sexuality. There are so many ways in which your mind, body and spirit can be engaged in focusing on how the spirit of God is present and life giving that is related to sexuality. It's important in my view to have a broad understanding of the ways spirituality is manifest within and entangled throughout sexual identity because so often society will reduce sexuality to just a genital act done by oneself or with another person.

As someone sits in a doctor's office, for example, and is being told they have breast cancer, that's a moment when there's a deep, deep spiritual need when one needs to be affirmed as a sexual being no matter what the treatment requires. How can we have ministers who are able to see those needs related to sexual identity and address them so people who have such experiences can be equipped and know there are pastoral resources for them to talk through what's going on for them emotionally and spiritually?

As someone who teaches ethics, I'd like to point out that there is an ethical understanding or perspective that Christians often teach about sexuality where people say, "*don't do that act*" or "*do that act only under these marital conditions*". I'd like to replace that one. Instead, another ethical perspective is to acknowledge one's spiritual neediness as being broad and expansive in order to recognize how we can affirm and genuinely feel affirmed in all of who we are as precious creations of God.

ILERA: *Do you believe religion is one of the largest institutions that suppresses sexuality in this country?*

Dr. West: I can speak with most integrity about my own tradition of Christianity and be critical with more specificity of the tradition I know best, Christianity. The United States, moreover, is a Christian dominated country and in large measure Christianity has participated very strongly in helping to shape a repressive, body-shaming culture. Not by itself of course but Christianity certainly has contributed through its teaching and reinforcement of harmful hierarchies, specifically about male heterosexual dominance and superiority, that has resulted in cruel forms and sanctions for pervasive violence and discrimination. So yes, unfortunately that's been a large part of the role of Christian religion in our society. There are some places of hope but we spend more time combating the harm. I would like to see us be able to spend more time being innovative. What are innovative understandings of sexual-spiritual respect?

ILERA: *What do you think needs to be done in order for us to consciously live in a culture where we know and express our sexuality in a sacred way?*

Dr. West: This is going to sound contradictory because I think there is enormous potential and opportunity for that kind of innovation in faith communities. I think one of the advantages of

religious communal life is that it can be a place where people come together across generations. And they get together most often seeking supportive community relationships. That support can take the form of studying and actively participating in the community together. There is no limit to how that mutual support can be expressed. That's why most people gather in faith communities - to be guided in living a life that has a constructive purpose that can be a force for good.

How can children, for example, have a place where they can learn affirming, sacred, respect about their bodies individually and collectively? Playfulness. Joy. These are good aspects of God-created sexuality. You can celebrate respectful sexuality and include the sense that it is good and joy filled. How can you have respect and pleasure coexist while honoring pleasure as good and not something that we should think of as shameful?

Religious people can find innovative and creative ways to do this that are related to arts, music, drawing, painting and athletics. Differing forms of meditation can be incredibly sensual and athletic exercise too. There are so many opportunities, particularly in an environment where your starting premise is, "*Of course there is something that is a gift about how we are made sexually.*" For me as a Christian, sexuality is a gift from God that's something to be treated as precious, sacred, respected and affirmed as a source of delight, joy and pleasure. Pleasure is good. Religious communities can be a source of suppression but also hold the potential to create trustworthy, innovative, exciting and life-nurturing venues for people with differing configurations of identity, bodily abilities and racial ethnic backgrounds.

Rev. Traci C. West, PhD is a member of United Methodists of Color for a Fully Inclusive Church. She participated in an interfaith clergy delegation to Baghdad, Iraq and was interviewed in the highly praised documentary film on violence against black women, *NO!* To learn more this amazing woman visit <http://www.users.drew.edu/twest/bio.html>.

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