



INSPIRATIONS |



Rev. Dr. Cari Jackson is the author of the insightful book, *The Gift to Listen, The Courage to Heal*. She's an ordained United Church of Christ minister, holds a law degree and PhD in Christian Social Ethics. Rev. Jackson is the founder and director of The Center of Spiritual Light, a nonprofit empowering people to use spirituality as a source for healing. We could not be more delighted to have her as ILERA's next INSPIRATIONS feature.

ILERA: *How do you think American society and culture influences sexuality?*

Rev. Jackson: In American culture there is a split personality as it relates to sexuality. There are still vestiges of very Victorian and Puritan notions of sexuality as nothing to be discussed or engaged in – only for procreation.

There's also an incredible fascination, almost obsessive focus on things related to sex because of that split personality within the culture. I think most people in this culture have very mixed feelings. They are constantly stirred sexually through advertising and entertainment – even as little children. Because sex and sexuality are regarded as exciting but nasty, it leaves people feeling broken and conflicted about their own sexuality. That's so unfortunate.

ILERA: *How did American culture influence your sexuality?*

Rev. Jackson: Growing up in the black Pentecostal Church was a greater influence than the broader society. My religious teaching shaped my understanding of sexuality. I've had to do a lot of intentional healing to recover from a lot of that [laughing]. Within the church teaching there was so much emphasis on being "exactly right". I grew up hearing songs like 99 ½ Won't Do. So if you're almost perfect, that's not good enough for God. Things related to sex and sexuality were big taboos. The only purpose for sex was procreation so any expression of sexuality that did not lend itself to that was regarded as very taboo.

I was only nine years old when I realized my sexuality leaned more towards same gender. Trying to make sense of all that in the broader culture where sexuality is kind of exciting but taboo greatly shaped my understanding of me. I spent from age 13 to almost 33 trying to change my sexuality because I wanted to be right with God.

It took me some years to ask God, "Why do you give us these capacities and then say, 'Don't enjoy it'." It's like saying, "Here's some water. Biologically you need it. But don't enjoy it while you're drinking it! Only drink water when you're going to use it in some prescribed way." That's what it always felt like for me so I was really confused.

What I had to do early on to help me manage those kinds of conflicts was to ask God directly rather than rely on what I was hearing in church and the broader culture. If I could zap the world and make it different, I don't want other little children to go through what I did regarding their sexuality, or any aspect of who they are. I am fortunate in that when I was six years old, this incredible knowing that God loved me unconditionally seized me. If I had not been seized at age six, I don't know what would have happened to me at nine and twelve and fifteen. If I didn't have that grounding, I would have believed what the culture was telling me. "God doesn't love you because you have this inclination within your sexuality."

ILERA: *How do you view your family's role in your sexual development? How did they influence your sexuality?*

Rev. Jackson: When I was 13, I had my cute little shape. I only weighed about 100 pounds or 105. I wasn't as well developed like some of the 13 year olds today. My mother started making me wear a girdle to church so that when I was up clapping my hands in my Pentecostal experience, which is very embodied, I would not cause men to lust.

The teaching was that I'm responsible for how men relate with me. When I was a teenager I said, "Now something's wrong with this paradigm here. You mean they don't have any self-control? And I gotta be contained and constrained so they can halfway act right? Oh no, I'm not taking that kind of responsibility." I stopped wearing girdles when I was in my twenties but I still kept wearing them to church. So I probably wore them a good 15 years. After I stopped, I still didn't throw them away. I had them in my drawer. One of my former partners

helped me throw them out. We did a ritual. It was a decisive moment in my life – pivotal moment. I was really letting go of the teaching. When you are a child and your parents or minister or schoolteachers, teach you something, the level of influence is incredible.

ILERA: *What inspired you to start the Taking Back My Life women's support group through The Center of Spiritual Light?*

Rev. Jackson: My work as seminary pastor at Union Theological Seminary. I met and counseled many students – female and male who were training to be ministers. Many had experienced some form or other of sexual abuse. They didn't know how to manage the brokenness that they were experiencing. Its in a context like seminary that whatever has been plaguing you gets very intensified because you are looking at all of these life foundational issues constantly – the things that hold your life together – like theology.

I feel so strongly that ministers need to deal with their own injuries and wounds because of the kind of influence we can have on people's lives. Our stuff can ooze into other people's lives. The lens through which we see their life stories and experiences is shaded by our own journey and story. Therefore, it became very important for me to provide safe space for people in ministerial formation and ministry to deal with a variety of issues – sexual abuse being one of them.

Also, when I was 45, I recalled that I had been sexually abused. I kept thinking something happened as a child. I knew I had been raped as a teenager. One thing that helped me get in touch with that was working with all of these seminary students and pastors. Something kept chipping away at the encasement I had built around my own story. So I decided to do some therapy work around this because I realized something was going on.

This is my own story as well as those of the people I work with. I kept hearing this again and again and again. I needed to create a space that incorporated spirituality as a resource for helping people to heal because I knew it had been that for me.

It's not okay for people to be limited in the life choices they have for themselves because of what somebody else did. That's the work I really want to do: Help people be able to perceive what options they have for their lives and perceive what is possible in their relationships.

I said, "God show me what I can do in my corner of the world that enables people to use their spirituality – whatever it is, as one of their resources." This is such a multi-faceted issue that it needs multiple resources to help people really do the healing. It impacts you, not just physically but emotionally, spiritually and relationally. If its impacting in all those ways, then you need multiple strategies to help deal with it. Just dealing with it from a therapeutic standpoint is not enough.

ILERA: *As a minister how do you spiritually counsel people dealing with sexual abuse and sexuality related issues?*

Rev. Jackson: I believe everything that happens in our lives impacts us spiritually and influences who we are spiritually. There are some things that impact us so deeply that they leave their spiritual imprint and wounding. So I approach sexual abuse from that perspective. While working with individuals I help them look at some of the relationship issues that sexual abuse created or how they work on their jobs with issues of authority. I also talk with them about what has happened spiritually. In that way I'm able to give people the space to talk about their anger at God. "Why did God let this happen to me? Where was God?" Many people who are theistic in their religious orientation may have that question but haven't felt safe enough that is was okay for them to ask. And they're scared that if they ask, God won't be there for them at all. The range of fear and pain around the God construct people bring is very deep. Part of my work is helping people feel safe enough to talk about the spiritual pain.

ILERA: *It seems like religion is on one end of the spectrum and sexuality is at the other end. What do you think needs to happen to create a bridge to heal some of the sex negative messages from religion?*

Rev. Jackson: Having a theology that is very "hell" and "judgment centered" makes people much more inclined to issue these prescriptions of what's right and what's wrong. In this culture because of our Puritanical approaches to sexuality, it's even more the case that judgment and heaven/hell focus more on sexuality. I almost see it as a smoke screen. We have people mistreating widows and the poor. There are white-collar crimes and bank scandals but we're not focusing on them.

If you keep advertising and flashing it before me and then tell me, "But you know this is bad. You know you're gonna go to Hell. You can have a little but only the way it's prescribed for these particular things. If you do it any other way, God's gonna be mad at you." Christianity and the "people in the pews" will

need to say, "Wait a minute, let's stop." We're really talking about issues of social control. What better way to control your society than to talk about sexuality, because it's as important as water.

When the goal is to get a society to grow, you outlaw anything that would limit the society from growing numerically because you want to make sure there's enough people in your group. Anything that would be pleasurable sex between two people of a different gender that does not lead toward procreation is outlawed. Any sex between two people of the same gender is outlawed because it seems to go against survival of the society. As well, if the sexuality limits how many people practicing that religion are produced, then that sexuality will be tabooed.

ILERA: *So how do you build the bridge?*

Rev. Jackson: I think it really calls for a shift in theology. There's an intersection of theology, science and culture, all of which come together shaping peoples notions of and their engagement with issues of sexuality. Unless some of the theologies shift, much of the same treatment about sexuality will still exist.

When more people stand, like me who are in the religion say, "I'm fully in love with God. I have this connection with the Divine. Here I am as a sexual being and it's a beautiful gift from God," I think that helps begin shifting people's theology. The more people of different religions experience deeply spiritual people, who are committed to their spiritual practice and have multiple expressions of sexuality; I think that will help - whether the issue is homosexuality or sexual abuse.

ILERA: *What do you think needs to happen for communities of color to be more comfortable with discussing sexual abuse or anything sexual?*

Rev. Jackson: That question raises all these vestiges of slavery where we were so over-sexualized - in terms of the objectification of our being. Men over-sexualized as the buck. White men were so drawn to the incredible African woman physique.

We're sexual but we don't want to talk about it. We've been socialized and its part of our collective orientation as Black Americans to not talk about slavery. We don't really talk about how horrible that was and what the implications are for us in our collective psyche.

People have just begun talking about Post Slavery Trauma over the last ten years. That's recent. Anything abusive, we don't talk about. There's a collective consciousness to not talk about the ways in which men abuse women or parents abuse children. As a group we don't want to talk about those things. And of course if you don't talk about it, you can't have the diagnosis you need and you can't have the healing you need. And you keep cycling it generation after generation.

Christianity and Islam have tremendous influence on the lives of Blacks in America. As a religious leader, I feel very strongly with regard to the black community that we need to say, "Hey ya'll. We really need to talk about this. And here's why we need to talk about it. Here are the consequences of not talking about it and the benefits of doing so. I know it's hard but we've got to do it." I think that's what it will take to give people permission. So I'm glad there are growing numbers of churches and religious leaders within the black community who are talking about AIDS, "down low" and beginning to talk about domestic violence and issues of sexuality over all. All of those are at their early stages but at least they are beginning.

Rev. Cari Jackson, PhD is the Senior Pastor at First Congregational Church of Stamford, CT. She can be reached through the church's website at www.fccstamford.org. Rev. Jackson's book, *The Gift to Listen, The Courage to Heal* (Augsburg Book, 2003) is available at www.amazon.com.

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