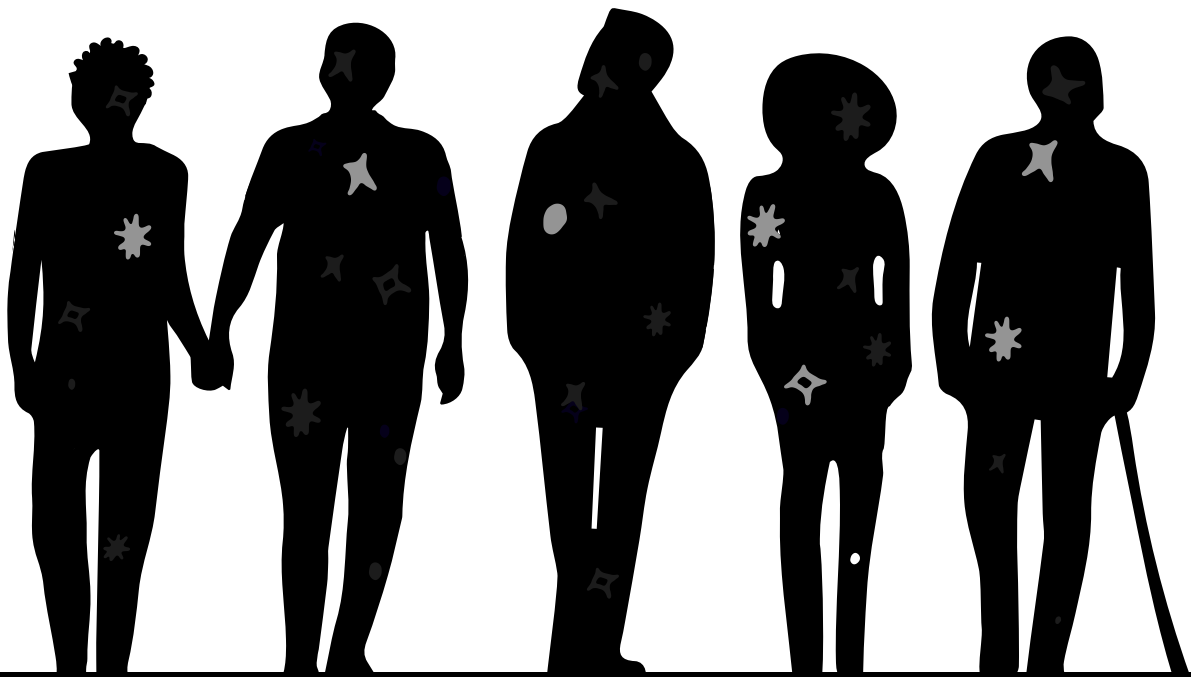


THE COSMIC WE

Episode 5:
Emptying Ourselves Into Fullness

with Gigi Ross



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Gigi Ross: For me, I would say that love is realizing my own oneness with the whole, and out of that sense of oneness and unity, wanting the best, and doing what I can to advance that, the best, for the whole. I think I'm at my best at this when I'm doing spiritual direction. If that's what's behind what I'm doing is wanting the best, then it's easier for me to get out of the way. And when I get out of the way, I'm listening to the whole, and allowing the whole to move and speak and act through me. And that to me is the way I practice love. It's hard to say what love is. It's easier to see love's effects, but that for me is the best way I can practice love, is to get out of the way and allow that love to work through me.

Donny Bryant: This podcast explores the mystery of relatedness as an organizing principle of the universe and of our lives.

Barbara Holmes: We're trying to catch a glimpse of connections beyond color, continent, country, or kinship, and we're going to do this through science, mysticism, spirituality, and the creative arts.

Donny Bryant: I'm Donny Bryant.

Barbara Holmes: I'm Barbara Holmes, and this is The Cosmic We.

Today we're going to be talking with one of the women who makes the CAC Living School a joy for both students and teachers. Now, I'm going to let her introduce herself, but I do want to briefly share how we know one another.

I know her as a wise spiritual teacher, steeped in grounded practices that she shares with the community. We invited Gigi to share with us today, because we're all on a path of discovery and growth. The life journey is often so intense that we seldom look up or at our neighbors to get a sense of how they're progressing. And I'm convinced we were never meant to travel alone. The companionship that we get just from hearing the stories of those also on the journey inspire us and help us to carry on when the going gets rough.

Welcome, Gigi. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what brings you to this point in your life?

Gigi Ross: I guess I'll start, when I was a child. I remember just being interested in spiritual things. And when I was eight years old, I was in the library, and I was one of those people who wanted to know everything. And so I figured that I could read every single book in the library. It was a Dewey Decimal System time, so I was in the 200s and there was this book called Religions of the World. It was in the kid's library. I opened it up and there was this photo of this Hindu monk in meditation. And when I saw it, I felt like I was coming home.

And so that got me on this interest into all kinds of spirituality. The thing is, my parents and I, we all went to the church of the National Baptists Convention. And so me studying religions of the world was not something that they would've been overjoyed with, if they had known that that was what I was doing. But they never checked what I read. They were just happy that I was reading.

And so I, from that time on, was just interested... And most of the kind of contemplative spirituality things that I could find at that time, this was in the '70s, it was Eastern. So I did a lot of looking over yoga and transcendental meditation. And all I could do as a kid was books. I would just try to try on my own what they were, what they were doing. And so that kind of has stayed with me for basically all my life.

We'll fast forward to me moving to DC to practice law, which actually didn't last very long. By mutual consent, we decided that I wasn't good, and I said, "Okay, I'll go if you don't fire me." So that's kind of what happened. But it got me to DC and my way of figuring out communities in DC was to look for where the contemplative spirituality was. And there was a lot of programs happening at the National Cathedral.

So my church at that time was the Taize services at the National Cathedral. I love that because there was no sermon, there was just silence. So that was great not to have to hear a lot of things and lots of singing. So that was really, really good. And then eventually I stumbled into centering prayer. I had been reading about it but didn't want to practice it without a person to guide me. And so they had one of these introductory workshops and I think somebody that you know, I know him, Dr. B. I don't know if, Donny, you know him, but a guy named Gene Sutton was leading that particular workshop.

And that got me into centering prayer. And that got me into eventually being on the leadership team in the DC Contemplative Outreach chapter. At that time, I was also studying to be a spiritual director and became a spiritual director and was working for an organization called the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, where I did some of what I'm doing now. I was basically the assistant. I ended up being the assistant director of their spiritual guidance program. But then shortly after that, we're talking 2008, they cut the budget and therefore they cut my position. This was right before the great recession and a year later I ran out of money.

Barbara Holmes: Okay, let's pause there.

Gigi Ross: Okay.

Barbara Holmes: Let's pause there Gigi, because this is so packed. I mean, I'm back at where you said you opened up a book, you saw Tibetan monks and you were at home. How do you jump from Baptist to home with to Tibetan Buddhist monks? I mean, I was a library geek too and I know the worlds it opens up. What gave you a sense of home, and what did that mean to you?

Gigi Ross: I'll back up a little. A few years earlier, I think it was when I was four, but maybe it was when I was six. I learned how to read when I was four. But I remember reading the Bible, I had one of those King James versions where the Jesus' words were in red and just really, really reading it and taking it. And something in me told me that there's a lot of deep stuff here and the adults of the church can't show it to me because they don't know. And so there was just something there, always something there that was just looking for some kind of way into that deep place. So I think that's how I got to the fulfilling home. It just felt right when I saw that picture.

Barbara Holmes: You had an instinctive knowledge that the formal kind of religion that you'd been exposed to, just didn't have the roots, didn't have the depth, couldn't take you where you were going. The other interesting thing you talked about is your short career as an attorney. Now we were both attorneys.

Gigi Ross: You lasted way longer than I did Dr. B.

Barbara Holmes: But that was just because I was hanging on by my fingernails. I thought contemplatives, they also have to eat, and how do contemplatives make money? And so I thought, okay, if I just get good at this lawyer thing, even though it's like scratching nails on blackboard for me. I can't stand it. But if I just get better at it, maybe I'll like it more. And it never happened that I liked it more. I tried every kind of law there. I hated each more than the last.

And finally, thank God, the law firm I was in closed down. As it turns out trial lawyers don't just fight in trial or in court. They fight with each other too. And so the whole firm imploded and I went home to my mom and I also didn't have a job. So there you are. Our parents are not that different. So now you're a spiritual director and you've taken this other path and suddenly you have this experience of not being employed and you talk about it as letting go. The Greek word for that is kenosis. Tell us how you define kenosis.

Gigi Ross: It comes from that hymn in Philippians. And it's Jesus letting go of his identity as divine and taking on a human form. And then he lets that go and it's back to divine. So this idea of self-emptying of not hanging on. So it's really more about not hanging on, I would say. So things come your way and I am by no means a master at this, but the tendency is if something's really good you want to hold onto it. But kenosis is just allowing it to go. That's how I think of it, is just open up your hands and just allowing it to go.

Barbara Holmes: Even the good things?

Gigi Ross: Yeah. I wish I could remember who, but someone recently talked about how if you have something in your hand and you don't open it up, you can't get what's coming up next. So even the good things. Yeah.

Barbara Holmes: So this experience was an emptying time for you, and this is the way you put it. You said kenosis came to me unbidden when you lost your job in 2008 and ran out of money a year later. So how did you survive?

Gigi Ross: I was fortunate enough. They say Theresa Vavala says that God has no hands and feet but ours. I had a community that really took care of me. Some of them took me at different times. Some of them found people who wanted people to house sit. I spent about 20 months in exchange for a room helping an older activist stay independent. She was in her eighties and on the verge of dementia. So I just took whatever came and sometimes it didn't come till the 11th hour and 59th minute and I was pretty sure I was going to be out on the street. But it never happened.

Donny Bryant: Gigi, you came to this experience of kenosis or gentle release or letting go through life's journey, through the realities of life. But for those who may be interested in becoming more familiar, becoming more intimate with the art of kenosis, or the reality of kenosis, is there a way that you can help our listeners to maybe practice kenosis? Are there some nuggets of wisdom that you can offer through your own life experience that our listeners, if they're interested in becoming more practitioners of the art of letting go, or this self-emptying as some define kenosis?

Gigi Ross: Yeah, I can think of a few things. I mean think when it comes to practice you start small and start easy. So I wouldn't start with something that you really, really love and don't want to let go of. But there may be some things. For example, maybe there's someone like me and Dr B., I don't know, maybe you too Donny. We have lots of books. So what if you looked at your bookshelf and said, "Oh I can let this book go or I can let this book go." Dr. B said, "No I can't."

Donny Bryant: Those are my children.

Gigi Ross: Or these things that we do like fast. People take data sabbaths. They say, "I'm going to spend one hour a week less on my phone," and let go that way. Just find little, little things that won't cost you a lot, but they are something that you really like so there is something that you normally would not let go of. That's one way I can think of as a practice of doing that.

Donny Bryant: No, that's powerful. There's a story in the Torah about Abraham who was given an assignment by God to offer up his only son, his beloved son. And that narrative, that story of Abraham's journey to the mountaintop and laying down the altar and getting the fire. And I think that story gives us some insight into the struggle of letting go. Right? It's oftentimes the thing that you love the most, that you have the most difficult time of releasing, and relinquishing or self-emptying and that narrative.

I remember, Gigi, I had an experience several years ago where I had to come to the reality of letting go of a relationship that I really was holding onto. And that was something that was really important to me in this concept of self-emptying or surrender. I think a word that I really became more familiar with was surrender, and kenosis is really a surrendering to what is, a surrendering to your fears, a surrendering to the reality that you're trying to control.

Dr B, last week we talked about certitude. Right? Or a couple weeks ago, certitude. Right? A surrendering, a letting go of your truth of what you believe is right or what you believe it has to be. And so I thank you for that because even some of your work, I think you wrote a piece on love and kenosis. Can you speak to the juxtaposition of love in kenosis and how they're interrelated or correlated?

Gigi Ross: That's interesting because as you were talking about surrender, I was thinking

that surrender could only happen in love. In that piece that you're referring to, I talk about the commandments that Jesus has, that there are two commandments, loving God with all of who you are and loving your neighbor as yourself. Many spiritual traditions talk about love as an act of will, something that's an action, it's not an emotion. It's something that you do. And so for me, I would say that love at its best for me is number one, realizing my own oneness with the whole, and out of that sense of oneness and unity, wanting the best, and doing what I can to just advance the best for the whole.

And so that can sound abstract. I think I'm at my best at this when I'm doing spiritual direction. If that's what's behind what I'm doing is wanting the best, then it's easier for me to get out of the way. And when I get out of the way, I'm listening to the whole, and allowing in the whole to move and speak and act through me. And that to me is the way I practice love. It's hard to say what love is. It's easier to see love's effects. But that for me is the best way I can practice love, is to get out of the way and allow that love to work through me.

Barbara Holmes: As we reflect back on those times and your experience, it seems almost like a spiritual practice, but at the time that it was happening, you said it came tasting like betrayal, like a setup. Who was betraying you? Who was setting you up?

Gigi Ross: Well I was on this path thinking I was doing exactly what I was called to do. And I'm going to say I did have advanced warning because about three or four months before I was told that my position was being cut, I heard this voice because at this time I was looking at a program on interspiritual wisdom. It only happened once because they couldn't afford to do it again. But it was a program focused on practices of the five major religions. So Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

And so when I was applying for that, looking at that, this voice said you might want to apply for this because you may not be at Shalem much longer. You might want something to fall back on. And there was nothing in the air at all saying that was going to happen. But even when it did happen, it just felt like here I was doing what I felt I was called to do. Here I was, I was using my best gifts and all of a sudden it's not there anymore.

Another funny thing is that a few months later someone told me about a job to be an assistant, or no, to be a director of a spiritual direction program at another place and my body would not let me apply. So as much as I wanted to apply, I couldn't. So I didn't and there I was. And I ended up being without a job for seven years and homeless for six years. So.

Barbara Holmes: You mentioned when you were telling your story that you stayed for a while with an aging activist and you talked about the challenges of helping her. A lot of our listeners can relate to that because they're caring for aging relatives and they understand how difficult it is. You talk about an argument you had with her that exposed the anger inside of you. Talk about how that happened and how that exposure changed everything for you.

Gigi Ross:

Basically, I theoretically had one day when I didn't have to clean or do anything. And so one of those days, I can't remember if the cat threw up or if something else happened, and it was up to me to clean it and I was just not happy about that. And obviously when I was angry it was because other things were piling up inside of me. It wasn't just that one particular incident.

We talk about letting go, but letting go isn't easy and I wasn't always gracious and graceful when I was letting go. There were many times when I was just angry. This was probably maybe about three years into my being homeless. So this is probably around 2012 or maybe 2013. And this had happened. It wasn't the first time this had happened, it had happened before. And so at some point, I guess it was one of those last straw things and to this day I still don't remember what I said but I remember how it felt and I know what I said.

I said something that was really meant to hurt her and it did hurt her really badly. And I remember going back, and I felt bad too. It's funny, it's like you think you're going to feel better when you let things go and explode, but I have yet to feel better when I explode at somebody. We talked about it, I made a promise. I said that I would never take that out on her. I'd take it out on God because God can take anything. But I was not going to take it out on any other person, my frustration. Because in some ways it felt like being stuck because here I am, someone who actually has a decent education thinking it would be easy for me to get a job but it wasn't. And so there was a lot of my own frustration. Three years in, I'm still in this place and I have no idea how it's going to end.

I figured I'll just... Donna, you talked about the Torah. In the Jewish tradition, I'll just yell at God. And so it was just not feeling good about myself as well as not wanting to hurt somebody and seeing that I did and just deciding, okay. So really I didn't get angry at her. Or I had a neighbor because in the bedroom where I was staying, the wall was next to the neighbor's house and every night her television was up really, really loud. It was really hard to go to sleep. But I wasn't going to tell her not to turn on television down because I figured she was hard of hearing and it just wouldn't make sense. So there was actually a lot of discomfort in those 20 months, but I learned to take my frustration to God and not take it out on other people.

Barbara Holmes:

Is that how you handle anger these days? Is it still a matter of turning toward the divine? What are your practices when things just build up so much that an explosion is almost inevitable? What do you do then?

Gigi Ross:

I hope I've gotten to the place where they don't build up, that I find those trigger points before they get to that place. One of the things I think that my contemplative practices helped me with, and in recent years this got even better. But I also remember the first time it happened. And I'll say that one first. I was actually working at Shalem and was angry at a colleague. But instead of saying something, I think because of my contemplative practice, it was the space. Because often when we're angry there's no time. It just comes out. But I think at least from what I can tell with contemplative practice that you can sometimes be gifted with this opportunity to have a space and you can make a choice. And I remember the first time that happened that I could

actually see the anger coming up from behind my head and I made a choice and it went right back down. And so I didn't get angry.

And so most of the time that happens. And there was also a time, just to do the opposite, where I did have that space, but I was so hurt, I went forward anyway and I really felt bad. But these days most of what I do is, my body lets me know. If I'm contracting or tight or something, that means there's something I need to be paying attention to. And so I make an appointment with myself and I sit with it with God and we just look at it. And sometimes what I need happens then. Sometimes it takes a few times. Recently it was in the shower when I finally figured out what the really, really deep trigger was that I needed to pay attention to. And so if I feel like if I do that, it doesn't get to that place where I explode.

Donny Bryant:

Well Gigi, as you're talking about your experience and your handling emotions, I was reminded of a sermon by Jesus in Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes. There's a particular lesson he teaches us and he says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And as you were describing the process of self-emptying or your process of not allowing your anger or your emotions to control you, one way of interpreting that particular lesson is blessed are the poor in spirit, poor. In other words, those who relinquish themselves from the control of their emotions, or those who self-empty. Poor meaning just to release if you will, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

In other words, there was a certain level of connectivity that you described with your fellow people around you, the people who may have triggered you. There was a certain aspect of love and oneness in seeing yourself in them. And I think that describes, that Beatitude does in some way describe what you were describing, a way of experiencing the true power of the kingdom of heaven on earth, or the divine in humanity.

So in some of your work you write about that. That's to me even a better description of how you describe your love and the flow of love with kenosis. So are there other ways outside of anger that you can help us to be able to practice this level of seeing and being with the practice of kenosis? Are there other ways that you can help us to see that outside of anger? Maybe there are other emotions, like fear for example. Many of us struggle with that.

Gigi Ross:

Two things come to my mind. One is what is the spiritual path? And what are our invitations to the spiritual path? And one of the roles I think of suffering and discomfort is an invitation to the spiritual path, because you can't really be on the spiritual path if you are not ready to open yourself up for discomfort, open yourself up to have your world turned upside down. I think there's sort of a basic spiritual practice and that is to turn toward whatever it is. So just as I turn toward anger, turn toward fear and fear. I have a thing with fear too. And sometimes I just decide it's not worth it. I just won't do what I'm afraid of. But there are other times when I need to really look at what is happening. And I think that when I'm afraid it means that there's something about not trusting God that's happening for me.

And so that's where I turn my attention to, is to look at where am I having those

issues of trust. And the love also comes in because I don't beat myself up for being afraid or not trusting. It's just the way it is and how am I going to grow if I don't do some things that I need to grow with? So for me that that's the first thing, is to just acknowledge and not resist. Because this is my reflex. If I'm afraid I'm going to try not to be afraid. And that just seems to make things worse. And so to just actually acknowledge and then take that time to be with it. And I find that the less I resist, the more I welcome it in, the smaller it seems to get. And then just acknowledge that that's a part of who I am.

I went on a retreat this past September and ever since then the parable of Jesus', wheat and tares, wheat and the weeds, have been with me. And one way of looking that is we may think of our fears as weeds. But they actually have a role and they actually have a purpose. And they actually may in some ways, if we allow ourselves to look at them and listen to them and learn, let them teach us in some way, they may actually be more wheat than we think of. And so I think that for me is basically loving those parts of us that we think we should get rid of. And just turn toward them, welcome them, allow them to bathe in God's love as well. So for me, the practice itself is the same even as the emotions change.

Barbara Holmes: You said something disturbing and powerful at the very beginning. You said that this path of spiritual seeking is not going to be a rose garden. That the moment you set off in this desire to have reunion with God in peace you are going to be on rocky ground. In this world you will have trouble, in the words of Jesus. That's not very comforting. So we are supposed to leave the trouble in the world and get on the spiritual path, we have trouble on the path. Is that what we're facing?

Gigi Ross: Well Jesus talks about the broad path and the narrow path and everybody wants to go on that broad path. They do. And that's actually the path that leads to trouble. That narrow path is rocky and steep. It's not comfortable, but it leads to life. And I think what you learn if you actually take that in and turn and allow yourself to be taught by that discomfort is you grow deeper into the trust, you grow deeper into love, you're able to see other people as your fellow siblings. You're able to see them as children of God. You're able to be in solidarity with them because you have a feeling of what suffering is like. So even though there is that discomfort there, you're not traveling and alone, and it's meant to actually take you to a place where you can become more who you are in God.

Barbara Holmes: What I find amazing is that you are able to stand having been homeless for six years without income for activism that is so deeply rooted. And I think, don't you, that having lived marginalized, that you have a different perspective on how to deal with, approach, support folks who have long-term marginalization. Is that true?

Gigi Ross: Yeah, I remember I didn't do all the things that you do when you don't have money. I didn't do what I grew up learning to call food stamps. But I did do Medicaid, and I remember going down to wherever that office was and just being in line for hours, and just seeing just how dehumanizing that system is. And I know the people there have good intentions and they're doing the best they can with that system, but it is just really dehumanizing. And there are people who are not just doing it for Medicaid, but

they're doing it for trying to get food, getting things for their kids and all that. And there's just so much of the way it's set up that is dehumanizing.

But I mean would you really know that if you didn't actually go down there? You don't have to be homeless, or you don't have to be marginalized yourself to get a feel for that. But you do have to be willing to open yourself up to places where you can see what's happening to people who are marginalized, without trying to save them or tell them what to do, but to allow yourself to open your eyes and not close your eyes.

Because I mean especially if you're in a city, if your eyes are open, you're going to see the marginalization. I mean here in Albuquerque for sure, you can see the marginalization of all kinds of people. And I know that even in smaller towns, although smaller towns in general tend to take better care of other people than people in cities do. But the thing is you're going to see it. And there is a correlation I think between our ability to love and be in solidarity with people who are marginalized. There's a correlation between that and to love and be in solidarity with the marginalized places of our own inside of us as well.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah, I kind of think it's a blessing. I mean I was in a similar circumstance because once I stopped practicing law and went to seminary, I had no money, I had no job, I had, whatever, Medicaid was it. And it was dehumanizing. And here I am. I'm an attorney. I'm in school getting a PhD and I got to stand in line and be asked ridiculous questions. And what it does is it says to you, "You know what? All this that you think about who you are and who you're getting ready to be, it doesn't mean anything if you lose the status that the world values." That once you choose different values, it's a whole nother path. But I think that that experience of being with other people who were impoverished while I was in school as an adult, helped me to see that community completely differently.

I no longer, when I'm working or activist on their behalf or with them, think of myself as doing anything from on high. I think of myself as temporarily not there, but could be there. One paycheck away, two paychecks away. It doesn't matter how far away you are, it can happen to you. And so you got to love your neighbor as you want to be loved, even when you're in a better circumstance. That's wonderful, Gigi. This is a quote that that's attributed to you. "God offers us quiet contemplative eyes and God calls us to prophetic and critical involvement in the pain and sufferings of our world, both at the same time." Would you say a little bit more about that?

Gigi Ross: I don't think you really can have one without the other. To really be involved in the pain and suffering of the world and doing what you are called to do to relieve that in some way, I think you could only do that from a place of contemplation. And I think I should say what I mean by contemplation. Contemplation is not the practices that we do. Those are I think are just meant to open us up to be receptive to allowing contemplation to happen. In some ways for me contemplation and love are synonyms because the deepest part, what makes contemplation, contemplation is love. And for me, contemplation is more like how we perceive, our attitude to the world, our stance. It's this place of really being open and receptive to reality as it is. And there's absolutely no way you can be with anyone who is poor if you don't really see them as they are.

I think a lot of times, you were talking about often, I know I felt this too when I was homeless, that sometimes people feel like they're on high and they're doing you a favor or something. And that's because they're not coming from a place of contemplation. They're coming from a place where they themselves are separate from what is reality. But for me you need to have both of those. Even though contemplation and lack of noise or distraction are not synonyms, there is this kind of inner stillness that is a part of contemplation. Because without that inner stillness you're not going to be able to see, because there's too many things going on inside of you as well to keep you from seeing what's actually really real. So they go together. As far as I'm concerned,

Barbara Holmes: A lot of the activist movements don't seem very contemplative at all. The LGBTQIA movements, the Black Lives Matter movements, all of the movements for justice, the immigration initiatives at the border. What do you see that's contemplative in our current social problems?

Gigi Ross: There are pockets of activists here and there that are actually, and I'm finding it more and more. I mean they talk about bringing love more into what they're doing. I have to say I'm not a huge follower of all the things that are happening in the social activist world. But I do see more and more people are understanding that they have to take care of themselves. I think that's the place where contemplation, that's the opening for contemplation. I mean too many people have burnt out doing activism and they're starting to really, really talk about taking care of themselves.

And part of taking care of yourself is to really get to know yourself and to really get to know who you are in that greater whole, whether you call it God or whatever. We're not these separate entities. We are part of something larger. And I think that people are coming to see that if they're not in a place where they can take care of themselves and where they can act from that centered authentic place, they can't do the activism. I think that's slowly coming into many different places. And I think the self care has been one of those doors that has allowed it to show up.

Barbara Holmes: How do you connect all of this to your African diaspora origins? I mean, how do you ground this? Most of the spiritual direction programs are very Anglicized, I know because that was what I was going to do. I was going to be a spiritual practitioner and I was studying that in seminary. And the more I studied, the less it seemed to be grounded in my culture, my people, and what their needs were. It didn't seem to make sense to me. And so I stopped and went into ethics where I had a broader pallet that I could work with. How do you tie the two together? How do you make sure that the work that you do with your own community is grounded in what's needed for them?

Gigi Ross: There are two sides to that question. One is my own relationship with the African American community that I grew up in. And that relationship was really fraught because of my sexual orientation. I'm not heterosexual. And growing up in the National Baptist Convention, basically I was told I was going to hell. And so I really felt exiled from that community. Another thing, not only did I want to read all the books in the Bible, I felt like I could listen to any radio station I wanted to. And because in Milwaukee where I grew up, there were three Black radio stations and the Black people only listened to those three Black radio stations. They didn't listen others.

But I felt, I got a whole dial AM FM, I'm going to listen to the whole thing. So I think there's a part of me that has always taken wisdom wherever I find it.

I wasn't one of those people who had to see someone who looked like me to think that I could do something. I felt like if anybody was doing it, then I could do it. I didn't care. To me it didn't matter what they looked like. I spent a lot of my time outside of the African American community because I didn't feel welcome in the one that I grew up in. It wasn't until I moved to DC and had been there for a while that I was able to find other African American communities where I was more welcome.

And I think my ability to give back to the African American communities happened organically, just as I have found my way back and I don't really seem to need to do anything. I just am who I am because even though I didn't really ensconce myself in the African American community that I grew up in, I'm still African American. I can only be African American. And it's there my DNA no matter what you do.

And so I don't have a really good answer for that. It just seems to happen organically. And so as you know I'm doing work with the BIPOC students at the Living School. And that same thing. The CAC, like most mainstream Christian organizations is predominantly White. And that brings what I call extra credit work that BIPOC students have to do. And so for me, knowing that from my own experience and having a feel for what that looks like and what really is the call for BIPOC students and working with them to find that. It just seems to just come out organically. I don't really tell you what I did, or how I do it, or whatever. It just seems to be an outgrowth for what I do.

Barbara Holmes: For those who don't know what BIPOC means, it's Black, Indigenous, People Of Color. Do you think things are better now in the Black community? I mean I'm certainly aware because I grew up during the same time period as you did, that there was a great aversion and a lot of abuse of folks who were not heteronormative. So do you think that's better now in the churches? Or is it just more subtle? Has it gone underground, but not healed?

Gigi Ross: I think it's kind of like the country itself. There's a spectrum. There are some Black churches that are still. But there are a lot more who are welcoming. There's a lot more who are more welcoming. And also as this younger generation has become adults, and they're used to having especially more of a diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities. And so for them it's just not a big deal for the younger generation. So I do think on the whole, it's better. I think it's mostly better in cities than it is in smaller towns. And that being said, still I remember before I left DC in 2015, I could still go in the metro and hear kids talk about, really dissing people who were gay. So it's a spectrum. I think on the whole it's gotten better, and like other places where people are oppressed, there's more work to do.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah. Like racial justice in America.

Gigi Ross: Exactly. Yeah.

Barbara Holmes: We've made some strides, and still have many more strides to go.

Gigi Ross: And there seems to be a really big conservative push to make all of that racial, trans, gender identity and sexual orientation to go back, all of it to go back into the closet, so to speak.

Barbara Holmes: Right. Well, they're trying. But I don't think we're going to fit back. None of us are going back to those closets anymore. There's too many clothes in there. I mean, not going back.

What's interesting is that you have been able to become almost this ecumenical spirit in the midst of the most difficult times that you've had. And I love the idea that you gather your wisdom wherever it can be found. I mean, I've always been very interested in searching my DNA to find out my origins. I don't know if you've done that for yourself or not yet, or if you have any interest in it. But to be able to relate to the world as part of your family, and as a source for your learning is very, very rich.

Gigi Ross: Another part of my story is that I was adopted. So in the family that I grew up in, they were not my biological parents. I did eventually meet my biological mother. We became really good friends for the last 16 years of her life. She died in 2013. I never met my father. And the one thing I know about my father is that he is, assuming he's still alive, from Guinea, West Africa. So there's a whole side of myself that I don't know. So I'm living on the half of myself that I do know.

Barbara Holmes: That is fascinating.

Gigi Ross: And I remember when I met my family. It was the one and only time they had a family reunion in the DC area. They had it in Alexandria, Virginia. And it was kind of like a piece of the puzzle was missing because I found that piece of the missing puzzle, because I met my mom. It was like we're just so much alike even though we never spent a single day together. It was just pretty amazing to see just what that bloodline, how strong it is, even if you've never had any kind of connection before.

Barbara Holmes: We're coming up on the end of the interview and I don't want to surprise you with this, but I was going to ask you to do a closing sit for the audience. Let me just give you a little prompt. So it comes from your work. You say that Jesus is the example that we use to talk about love as contemplation and action. And you said that's because Jesus starts with oneness, the Shema. [foreign language]. That's the first thing you start with. Then you let go of that and you allow separateness to arise. Then you let that die, and you let the coming together and the oneness merge again in cycles.

So I don't know when this episode is going to air, but we've just had an election and some people are overjoyed, and some people are not. And all of us are concerned about the state of the union, one way or another. And I was wondering if you could take us through a sit, starting with oneness and letting go, and separation and coming together, based on where we are socially and politically right now. Because you have a way of taking the every day and the ordinary and giving us the spiritual practice that resonates right to your soul. So I'm going to give you a few minutes while we just sit quietly and let you think about that. And I'll let you start whenever you feel ready. Donny, did you have anything to add before we go into the sit?

Donny Bryant: No, let's let this go. This has just been an awesome experience and I'm so grateful for this opportunity to participate in the sit with you, Gigi.

Gigi Ross: Thank you. It was nice to meet you for the first time. And thank you Dr. B for asking me to be here. So let's take some quiet time.

So I like to start with our breath. That breath is our connection with oneness because it's God's breath that breathes through us, into us, and gives us life. And so just being aware that we are breathing in God's breath and breathing out God's breath.

And then I guess I'd like for us to use our imagination, whether it's visual, or just getting a kind of feel for just being out in the field, a field of, we'll say, red and blue flowers. And just being out in that field of red and blue flowers. And just maybe noticing the breeze of God's breath, letting those flowers just kind of blow in the breeze.

And those red and blue flowers can look any kind of way. They can be separate, red on one side, blue on the other. They can be intermingled. However they look to you is fine. There's no right way to visualize a field of red and blue flowers.

And as you look over that field, see if you can notice one flower that may be getting your attention. It could be red, it could be blue. But one flower that's getting your attention. And just go and stand next to that flower. And again, you can visualize it or just have a body feel if that's what you're doing.

And as you stand next to that flower, just breathe in the fragrance of that flower. And as you breathe in the fragrance, also see if you can feel that breeze of God's breath blowing on you and the flower. And maybe notice that the breeze of God's breath blows on all the flowers, no matter what color they are.

So just allow yourself to think of that flower as a symbol of you in the field. That you are one in a field of many. And you are one of many who is blessed by God's breath and blessed by God's breeze. And see if you can lean into that connection that you have with all the flowers in that field, the connection you have because all of you are breathed into life by God.

And so when God breathes into you, God is also breathing in a part of everybody else in that field. And just rest for a few breaths, a few of God's breaths breathing into you, breathing into you the life that is yours, and the life that is everybody's in that field. And just maybe breathe in three more breaths. And then open your eyes if your eyes are closed. Or just come back to an awareness of the room, if your eyes are open.

Barbara Holmes: Blessings upon you and your work.

Donny Bryant: Thank you, Gigi.

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