

USH Sermon – October 15, 2023 Gloria Francesca Mengual, Pulpit Guest

The Price of the Ticket: Moving from Safe to Brave

This is a time of transition in more ways than one. With the arrival of Autumn, we have already transitioned out of that relaxed summer mode of beaches, amusement parks and cookouts, and are well into the faster-paced world of work and school. For me, this Autumn's arrival serves to enhance my transition from the world of work into retirement. Well, semi-retirement; I already have five contracts with schools and a museum scheduled for 2023-2024.

It's hard to let go of something that matters a lot to you, as my work does to me. For those of you not familiar with me, I am ... was ... a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Specialist for the CREC Open Choice Program, which places Hartford youth (most of color) in schools in 27 suburban school districts. (primarily white). For the past seven years, I've worked with educators in those suburban schools to reflect on racism and a range of other isms experienced by black and brown youth in their schools. And not only to reflect on the racism, but also to think through what to do – and **not** do – when incidents arise so that how they are handled will result in more equitable outcomes for all.

Incidents like our youth being told, “Take your black ass back to Hartford, where you belong.” Or a black second grader being told by her white classmate during a Black History Month class, “I wish Martin Luther King and civil rights never happened. If it didn't, you wouldn't be sitting here next to me.”

The teacher who shared that second grade MLK class experience during a workshop I was facilitating did so because she wants to do better next time. She was “saved by the bell” when the incident happened – the recess bell. And when the second graders came back into class following recess outside, she did not bring the incident up again. It had passed. I noted that for the Hartford second-grader, the incident probably did not just “pass.” Indeed, I added, she will probably think about it years from now, how hurt she felt; how nothing was done; how she didn't matter. She might have even made up a story in her head about the teacher agreeing with the boy who said that. After all, she did **nothing**.

I frequently note that saying or doing nothing can be just as harmful as the original offensive comment or act. Prior to working for CREC Open Choice, for 13 years, I

worked for an organization called Everyday Democracy, traveling to communities across the country, training people to facilitate dialogues to help address existing tensions, many related to racist incidents. You can't just jump into potentially uncomfortable conversations right from the start; you wade into a better understanding of the 'other' – the person across the table from you; their perspective – through storytelling.

I've facilitated several storytelling sessions here at USH, so some of you are familiar with this storytelling approach and its power. So much depth about the 'other' blossoms from being truly present – really listening. Similar to our Connections circles. Today I want to share some of my own stories. These stories are of instances when I 'passed.' Not the dying kind of passing, but the passing in terms of things not being what they seem.

Because I passed, I sometimes did nothing when appearances kept me in that 'safe' space we all know as privilege. I want to share how I moved from that supposedly safe space to a brave space, where I challenged oppressive things that were said or done. Not easy to do, but as Nike says, "Just Do It!" Over time, I've learned that it does get easier to step up into that brave space when you experience yourself or witness an injustice.

I "passed" in terms of my health situation, my sexual orientation within a work setting and multiple situations related to my racial/ethnic identity.

First, my health situation. For the first 28 years of my life, I had epilepsy. However, until I actually had a seizure, no one would ever know that I struggled with this medical condition. I recall Sister Sebalda, my 7th grade teacher at Saint Stanislaus School in Meriden, CT, walking me home during the lunch period after I'd had a seizure that morning in class.

"It's too bad about your seizures," she said to me as we walked.

"What do you mean, Sister?" I asked.

"Well, whenever you have a seizure, some brain cells die and you have them often. So someday, you'll be feeble-minded."

My heart sunk and my thoughts raced. But my sense of terror was accompanied by indignation. How dare she say that to me? For the rest of the walk home, I looked down at the sidewalk, angrily stepping on every crack that I could find. I'm sure some of you have heard the saying, "Step on a crack, break _____ insert whichever

name you choose, X person's back." On our way to my house, **that** was my wish for Sister Sebalda. I was determined to break her before she would break ever me.

I never became feeble-minded. I had an opportunity to share that with Sister Sebalda 20 years later, when I was working at The Connecticut Hospice and the Lady's Guild from Saint Stanislaus Church called us for a speaker to discuss hospice care. As the Communications Manager at Hospice, I managed the Speaker's Bureau. I called the convent, and lo and behold, Sister was still alive! I invited her to attend the presentation. She arrived early and greeted me with that stiff, insincere grin of hers. Some things never change. As attendees took their seats, Sister asked me about my seizures; I told her that I'd been cured by brain surgery. I also shared that I had graduated college, magna cum laude. Then asked her to "get the lights" so I could start my presentation. Clearly, I won't put up with low expectations of me without putting up a fight and proving that person wrong.

The brain surgery posed its own challenges. The day before my scheduled operation, as I lay in my bed at Yale, my mother pleaded with me not to have the surgery.

"Why would you say that?" I asked.

"I already lost your brother; I can't lose you too. Please ... don't do it."

How dare she ask that of me? Angry, I took a deep breath, kissed my mother's forehead, told her I love her and asked her to get out of the room. I refused to continue living in a world surrounded by so much fear, such low expectations.

The surgery resulted in my moving from sitting at home all day, drawing portraits and reading books while I collected disability benefits, to being cured, indeed, becoming seizure-free and working in various areas of social justice for the next 40 years. I feel a bit like a walking miracle. Repeatedly, my indignation, my anger with others' low expectations, has motivated me to prove the doubters in the world around me wrong. Step back ... sit back ... watch me.

My second encounter with the stifflingly safe space of 'passing' occurred, once again, at Saint Stanislaus School in Meriden. My brother and I, the first Latino students at this Catholic school, passed as whatever one might want to interpret us to be – Polish, Italian, Greek, French, English – take your pick. Often, over the years, people – whether they be students, co-workers, someone at a dinner party, a teacher during a training – have said to me, "You don't look Puerto Rican." Indeed, who would know, unless I divulged it? As a light-skinned Puerto Rican, my ethnicity, should I choose, could remain invisible.

One day, my mother noticed that I seemed upset when I returned home from Saint Stan's school.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Somebody called Laura a 'Spic' on the playground, and I didn't say anything," I explained. I felt awful. Laura Diaz, along with her seven brown-skinned Puerto Rican siblings, started attending Saint Stanislaus School three years after my brother and me. One afternoon, another student made that racist remark right in front of me. Laura and I had become good friends. I visited her house; she had dinner at mine.

My mother remained quiet for a minute or so, then advised me: "Your father is from Spain, so if anyone asks your nationality, tell them your family is from Spain. They don't need to know you're Puerto Rican," my Puerto Rican mother told me. I never 'admitted' being Puerto Rican for the next 12 years of my life.

During my mid-twenties, I rediscovered and celebrated my Taino heritage. Prior to being named 'Puerto Rico,' – literally, "Rich Port," which is what it was named by the Spaniard colonizers, the island was called 'Borinquen' by the Taino Indians who called that island home. Soy Boricua!

But even as I read about my history and reveled in the Puerto Rican cultural events throughout Hartford, I continued to encounter ignorance about and oppression toward my people. I found myself in situations repeatedly where racist things were said about my people by those who had never taken the time to get to know them ... to hear their stories. Sometimes it was a teacher. Or a cashier. Or the owner of a small restaurant that I had enjoyed going to for years ... until then.

As you can see on the cover of today's Order of Service, the image of a young woman holding some luggage (which includes a reference to Hartford), says to the world, "I don't need nadie to tell me si soy Boricua!" Once in a while now, I'll mention my Spanish ancestry, but most times when I'm asked my ethnicity, I proudly note: "Soy Boricua! I am Puerto Rican."

My third experience with passing that I'm sharing today took place while I worked for Saint Francis Hospital. After graduating from college, I developed some expertise in health care public relations and marketing. From my first job out of college, at The Connecticut Hospice, I moved on to a PR/marketing position at Saint Francis Hospital. By the time I started working there, I had been in a relationship with my high school sweetheart, Iris, for 13 years. Mind you, I was working in a Catholic

hospital and the year was 1985. Okay? Being ‘Out’ was not an option if I wanted to remain employed. Iris became “Ian” during lunch conversations in the hospital cafeteria or Monday mornings in the office as we recounted what we did last weekend.

This was a time when some lesbians still played stereotypical roles – butch and femme. I was always, always, **very femme**. Through my appearance – long, wavy hair, makeup, dresses and high high heels (shoes I would never attempt to walk in today), saying nothing when co-workers made fun of gay men in the hospital lunch line, I perpetuated my passing. I used the privilege of ‘passing’ to remain invisible, safely maintaining external illusions of my identity while working in the hospital’s very visible PR/Marketing department.

Yes, the invisibility of my epilepsy; the expertise I built in creating images and illusions through my PR/Marketing work, being a light-skinned Puerto Rican. All of this gave me the opportunity to shadow my true self and benefit from the privilege of passing. It grew tiring – hiding the essence of what I believe, indeed, of who I am, weighed me down.

So why have I shared so many of my stories about “passing” with you today? For a couple of reasons. I’ve facilitated storytelling sessions a couple of times here at USH. I’ve facilitated a full round of weekly race dialogues here. I facilitated a three-part series of discussions about the book *Waking Up White*. I’ve been one of four facilitators who led Beloved Conversations here at USH a few years ago. I’ve both participated in and twice facilitated Connection Circles. Whatever form it takes, sharing our stories brings us closer together.

So here we are ... Fall 2023. Transition time, once again. We’ve been through some tough times here at USH, and they were not limited to the COVID experience. Some of you stepped up, big time. I personally stepped away for more than six months. Eventually, I started occasionally popping into Sunday services via Zoom. When I did, I was inspired by the work of our USH worship associates. Thank you, W.A.s. You gave so much of yourselves to keep our services going and our wounded community alive ... filled with care, with hope. You brought to life that love is the spirit of this church. Your commitment, your efforts, told a powerful story that for me, was nothing short of inspiring. You pulled me back in.

Yes, I stepped away from USH for a bit. But, mind you, and you can tell from the stories I shared today, that it is **not** my style to walk away and give up. M-m-m! You’re my ‘peeps.’ You were there for me through my divorce, my breast cancer, the loss of my mother, the loss of my job eight years ago. Repeatedly, you’ve been there for

me ... a quiet voice in my ear, persistently reminding me "You are not alone., Gloria. You're not alone."

Yet many of us did suffer alone during the trying last few years with our former ministers. So, many of us felt unheard ... alone. How much better it would have been to share our experiences, our thoughts, our concerns. How much better it would have been to share each other's stories as they were happening, rather than months, indeed, years later. That listening and healing started after our ministers left. From those conversations, we learned that our concerns were plentiful, the hurtful incidents experienced by many. So what now?

Today, I shared some of my stories so that you have a better take on who Gloria Francesca Mengual is, what matters to me, and hopefully, you better understand the prism I see the world through. I can't control how you perceive my stories, but I can allow myself, through this sharing, to be vulnerable ... to chance sharing my essence honestly. Can I become a whole story to you, and you to me?

In closing I want to slightly revise some of James Baldwin's words from today's Reading here:

We are the generation that must throw everything into the endeavor to remake USH into what we say we want it to be. Without this endeavor, we will perish. What can we do to make this a congregation where all voices are heard, where all hopes and concerns are regularly expressed, and where visitors, when they walk in, can feel the life, the love that indeed, is the spirit of this church?

As James Baldwin also noted: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." I put a call out for some storytelling. Some openness, honesty and risk-taking as we move into a brave space, sharing with each other, not only when things are going well, but when we feel they're not.

That may make some of us uncomfortable. Maybe even occasionally angry. I'm a big fan of productive anger. I joyfully accept our efforts as a congregation to examine, crack, change and make ourselves anew.

I am wishing all of us an honest, brave today, into tomorrow. May it be so.