

The Way It Is and the Way It Could Be: Fear, Lessness and the Quest for Fearless Dialogues™

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Abstract “Fearless Dialogues™ is the Civil Rights Movement of the 21st century,” says Dr. Bernard Lafayette, an original Freedom Rider and internationally renowned human rights activist. This article examines the history and philosophy of a burgeoning movement called Fearless Dialogues™, which seeks to alter the perspective of how we see and hear those who are perceived to be marginal. Drawing wisdom from a hard, heartfelt conversation documented in Ralph Ellison’s essay, “The Way It Is,” this interdisciplinary article utilizes resources from 20th and 21st century mystics to examine four primary fears that stifle dialogue and introduces an attitude of “lessness” that is necessary to create perspectival change.

Keywords Fearless dialogues™ · Fear · Less · Lessness · Mysticism · Activism · Ralph Ellison · Howard Thurman · Parker Palmer · Henri Nouwen · Caring with marginalized populations · The Selfless Way · Temptations of Jesus

Introduction

Mrs. Jackson’s eyes strayed to a line of potted plants crowding the windowsill. The foliage peered beyond the glass several stories down onto the noisy urban landscape. Competing for sunlight with the sprawling English Ivy, the vines of a jarred potato plant twined “hungrily against the wall of glass” and moved above the fray. From this vantage point the potato vine bore witness to an attorney and his family evicted on 126th street. Crowds of Negro onlookers gathered around the lawyer’s mattresses, bundles of table linen, and chest of drawers. Against the backdrop of chaos and shame, the fall wind leafed through the pages of his law books tossed out on the Harlem sidewalk. Back on the window’s ledge, the leaves of the corn plant stretched to the floor. The vibrations of passing traffic—maneuvering around the shell-shocked war veteran hurling imaginary bombs at cars from the center of the street—pulsed through its blade-like fronds.

Alas, “a single red bloom pushed above the rest” and blossomed in Mrs. Jackson’s “painfully clean” apartment (Ellison 1995, pp. 282–287). Its roots were watered by stories of hopeful possibilities where most could only see heartache and pain. In the fall of 1942, that

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red bloom overheard a hard heartfelt conversation between Mrs. Jackson and a 29-year-old aspiring novelist by the name of Ralph Ellison. If the red bloom could speak about the fearless dialogue between the 50-year-old single mother and the young writer, it might share something like this.

Widowed early in life and left to raise four children, Mrs. Jackson moved in the world with a “quiet courage.” The old-fashioned furniture crammed into the Harlem flat, mirrored the psychosocial wear and tear pressing in on Mrs. Jackson. Beyond the walls of her home she was seemingly impenetrable, but attentive eyes would notice her “work hardened fingers betray[ing] an anxiety that did not register in her face” (Ellison 1995, p. 283). For authentic conversation to emerge, anxiety had to lessen and the seemingly fixed space needed refashioning.

After welcoming Ellison into her home and offering him a seat, Mrs. Jackson eased herself tiredly upon the divan, and then pointed to a portrait of a young soldier. “That’s my boy Wilbur right there. He’s a sergeant.” Minutes later she told of how much she missed her son and explained the ways he supported the family. Then with the precision of a sharpshooter she fired a question at the young writer,

“So you want to know about how we’re doing? Don’t you live in Harlem?”

“Oh, yes, but I want to know what *you* think about it.”

“So’s you can write it up?”

“Some of it, sure. But I won’t use your name.”

“Oh I don’t care ‘bout that. I *want* them to know how I feel.”

Fearless she was. But, before she continued, she became silent. After the pregnant pause, she went deeper.

For the next several minutes, the conversation moved in and out of moments of tragedy and triumph as Mrs. Jackson chronicled the pictures lining the walls of the cramped apartment. In each crevice a story seemed to be tucked away in the inner recesses of her 50-year journey “searching for [the] gate of freedom (Ellison 1995, p. 291).” Notably, whenever the dialogue reached the cusp of a revelatory moment, Mrs. Jackson “became silent,” “paused,” “thought for a moment,” “took a deep breath,” “stared at [Ellison],” “smiled” or allowed her “eyes to stray to the window where a line of potted plants crowded the sill (Ellison 1995, p. 285–289).” Ellison held the tension and did not sway in the uneasy stillness. In the midst of fearless dialogues, these moments of quiet courage transitioned the conversation from a space of fear-ridden discomfort to one of “lessness” and authentic sharing.

For Ellison, Mrs. Jackson is “an old story,” one representative of countless invisible persons disenfranchised by poor housing, exorbitant food costs, sub-standard health care, and crime-ridden streets. But in the age-old tale of Mrs. Jackson, he still suggests tinges of hope exist,¹ even when reasons to doubt that change will be inclusive of her are slim. And for Mrs. Jackson, according to Ellison, “that’s the way it is.” Or is it?

Even in the face of difficulty, must life only appear bleak? That is not the *way* I heard the story of Mrs. Jackson. To be sure, Ellison tiptoed through the minefield of potentially explosive trauma, but in so doing, he found a way to invite Mrs. Jackson into authentic speech and *see* her as a gifted teacher with a unique lens and pedagogy of the oppressed. He cleared a way through the thicket of language traps to value the wisdom in her story and embrace her silences as gateways to revelation. Through a posture of humility, Ellison transformed a crammed space into a liberating one, and in this way, six decades after Mrs. Jackson spoke

¹ These tinges of hope are highlighted in the subsection on fear of oppressive systems.

her final word to Ellison that conversation still has the power to capture the imagination of readers and transform those who hear her cries for change.

This article frames the history, philosophy, and vision of Fearless Dialogues™, a grassroots initiative committed to creating spaces for unlikely partners to engage in hard, heartfelt conversations that sees gifts in others, hears value in stories, and works for change and transformation in self and other.² To cast this frame, I deconstruct the word “fearless”, by viewing “fearless” as a compound word (“fear” + “less”) and not as a root and a suffix (“fear” and “-less”). In the latter, the suffix “less” means “without” and would thus connote that hard, heartfelt conversations can exist *without* the presence of fear. However, when viewed as a compound word “less” means “to a smaller extent,” suggesting that in environments when fear is acknowledged and then reduced, fear + less dialogues between community thought leaders can emerge and flourish.

By considering the words “fear” and “less” separately, this article draws upon the works of 20th and 21st century mystics to examine four elements of fear that stifle conversation. Utilizing, these same mystical thinkers and their reflections on the temptations of Jesus, I craft a posture of “lessness” that is imperative for interlocutors to assume in order for fearless dialogue to emerge. As I type these words on August 28, 2013, the 50th Anniversary of the March Washington, I am honored to stand in the legacy of my ancestors and conclude this article by vision-casting the future of this grassroots initiative in hopes that we might live out the bold proclamation of Dr. Bernard Lafayette, an internationally renowned peace activist, and original Freedom Rider, who coined “Fearless Dialogues™ [as] the Civil Rights Movement of the 21st century.” But, before casting the vision, I start with the history of how a pastoral care professor stumbled into the lifelong work of seeing the unseen, hearing authentic speech, and working toward individual and communal change.

The way it was: planting a movement to see, hear, and change blade-by-blade

For over 7 years I devoted much of my spiritual and intellectual energy into examining the inner lives of African American young men who felt muted and invisible. This quest led me into probing conversations with convicted felons and gang leaders who had been stereotyped as “problems” since early childhood. Likewise, I swapped words with students in elite schools and corporate executives who felt typecast and had only been seen myopically by their peers. Across the socioeconomic spectrum these young men felt strategically unseen and unheard. In the words of William James they were “cut dead”, or snubbed completely (1890, pp. 292–93). While mediating these conversations, I, too, reckoned with my own feelings of invisibility and muteness.

In addition to countless hours of therapy, I wrestled with the themes of muteness and invisibility by typesetting words on printed pages. Over the years I have published articles on dormant hopes, fantasy aggression, unbridled rage, and pedagogical strategies to care alongside the marginalized. Each of these articles laid the groundwork for my first book, *Cut Dead But Still Alive* (2013), a full-length manuscript that proposes best practices to see and hear African American young men (and all marginalized people and communities) who feel invisible and voiceless. Chief among these best practices is “fearless dialogue,” defined in the book, “as a form of conversation marked by shared control, mutual vulnerability, and navigation through the potential pitfalls of narrative, space, and time” (Ellison 2013, p. 51). After presenting that definition, I allocate twenty-one additional pages in the book to building a

² For more information see www.fearlessdialogues.com.

theoretical infrastructure around those two words. While it is the fourth of seven chapters, it was one of the last to be completed because I felt so much hinged upon its theoretical underpinning. Little would I know how much those words would change my life.

In the summer of 2012, I submitted the book manuscript to the publisher, but by then fearless dialogue was becoming more than a theoretical supposition; it was altering how I existed in the world. With the guidance of a trusted community organizer, I led a group of students into a rural Appalachian community that most people drive by with their doors locked and windows closed. Once out of their cars, the students sparked a conversation with an African American young man standing on the corner in a white T-shirt and jeans sagging beneath his waist. Fearless dialogues revealed he was the captain of his college football team and a few credits away from earning his degree in physics. Weeks later, a group of students journeyed with me to Peru. There we met Arramando, a groundskeeper of a retreat center, who wore the same tattered clothing our entire stay and spent over ten hours planting grass *a single blade at a time* in a greenspace the size of four football fields. While neither of us spoke the other's language, we engaged in fearless dialogue without the aid of an interpreter. He learned of my family, and I of his. We departed as brothers.

Back on American soil, Fearless Dialogues™ was being planted as a grassroots movement a single blade at a time. Three dozen consultants agreed to journey with me and a group of committed students to five urban cities, meet with diverse community stakeholders (referred to as community thought leaders) in these areas, envision better lives for young people, and work strategically for change. To nurture the fertile ground, in March 2013, I went to Washington, DC to meet with our senior advisors (a White House Communications representative, a philanthropist, and a Congressman). On a Tuesday evening, I sat for two hours hashing out strategy for Fearless Dialogues™ with my mentor in the National Democratic Club, a members only dining facility for Congresspersons. On Thursday morning of the same week, I was walking through the “trap”³ with colleagues. Moments later we were talking with four non-legally employed young men at work on the corner about the condition of their community and the untapped gifts within them that might change their lives and those around them. On the drive home it struck me, that in a matter of days fearless dialogue had taken me from Capitol Hill to the “trap,” and few could walk this narrow path.

Through the generosity of a sabbatical grant from the Louisville Institute, I was afforded the 2012–2013 school year to grapple with my vocational evolution. In those months, I surrounded myself with volumes of books from modern-day mystics intent on launching my next research project, *The Silent Fraternity: Minority Male Trauma and the Mystical Power of Silence*. Yet, those mystical voices wrapped me in a cocoon of sorts. Encased within the thin membrane, I began a process of vocational metamorphosis. Slipping in and out of gestational consciousness, I not only heard the voice of modern day mystics, but also the steady hum of ancestral prayers, and the cries of unborn children. Tightly swathed and struggling for meaning, five questions emerged: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my gift? How does it feel to be a problem? What must I do to die a good death? In the months of incubation, those questions kept me honest. I have not only been challenged to repurpose my understanding of what it means to be an educator, but I have also been convicted by the compound word fear + less. The fact that I am penning these paragraphs is evidence that my struggle to crack the cocoonish shell is underway.

³ The “trap” is an urban slang term for a place where narcotics are illegally sold.

The way it is: paradox as a way through fear

To know that you are ignorant is best;
 To know what you do not, is a disease;
 But if you recognize the malady
 Of mind for what it is, then it is health.”
 Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (1983, p. 147)

“Son, you are ignorant...” These words still ring in my ears nearly two decades after I sat on my high-top metal stool in Mr. Arnold’s shop class. Many of my eleventh grade colleagues found humor in the cantankerous and seemingly senile old man who stood outside of his dusty classroom in his uniformed tweed blazer shouting at students to get to class on time. Once the tardy bell rang, Mr. Arnold sauntered from the doorway to the front of the room and sat at his elevated desk. “Turn to page 61,” he would belt out. With no book in front of him, he quoted the words on the page verbatim. Each day a different page. Each day a different recitation. Each day a different prankster in the class interrupted Mr. Arnold with an absurd and unrelated question about life. To these disruptions, Mr. Arnold would fire back, “Son (or Girl), you are ignorant. You are unaware of the facts.” Without fail the class would burst into laughter. By the end of the semester all 30 students in the class had been called “ignorant” at least once, but from the lips of Mr. Arnold these words were paradoxically not received as slights because he, too, admitted his own ignorance and his lifelong quest for knowledge. Instead, his challenge to veer from the way of ignorance and be unafraid of what you do not know served as a daily invitation into engaging conversations about life. From his crude invitation, students mustered courage to speak without fear and seek the facts of life from a dusty, cantankerous old sage.

Echoing the ancient wisdom of Lao Tzu, Mr. Arnold understood that “knowledge of one’s real ignorance is indispensable to mental health” (p. 147). Mr. Arnold also intuitively grasped that fear, like unacknowledged ignorance, sabotaged meaningful conversation. In my yearlong study of modern mystics and resource handbooks on community development, I have uncovered four primary fears that stunt authentic engagement and stifle fearless dialogues. Each of these fears is rife with paradox.

Fear of appearing ignorant: the paradox of empty words filling space

Picking up where Mr. Arnold left off, contemporary mystic and educator, Parker Palmer explains that the fear of appearing ignorant compels speakers to pack conversational spaces with projections and pretensions. In his book with the very apropos title, *To Know as We are Known*, Palmer explains the “fear of not knowing” is a barrier to heartfelt engagement because speakers hide behind a mirage of meaningless words to distract hearers from their own covered truths (Palmer 1983, p. 71). Consider Palmer’s examples within learning environments when the fear of appearing ignorant diverts teachers and students from clearly articulating their truth:

Teachers lecture longest when they are least sure of what they are doing; that is when they parse concepts without end, unwind the interminable and irrelevant “illustration.” Students write the longest and most convoluted term papers when they do not know what to say; that is when they invoke more adjectives and adverbs than the average English sentence can support (ibid.).

In short, both teachers and students, both dominant voices and marginal ones, clutter conversational spaces with convoluted concepts and irrelevant illustrations as smokescreens

to cover their own fears of being discovered as ignorant. However, as identifiable in Mrs. Jackson's case, the smokescreen of hiding behind words in fear of appearing ignorant before Ralph Ellison was not apparent. In contrast, that evening conversation was marked by plain, authentic, unfiltered speech about Mrs. Jackson's joys and sorrows as a working single mother traversing an urban landscape. The entry point into this fearless disclosure was Mrs. Jackson's inquiry about Ellison's intentions for recording her story. Once the young writer assured Mrs. Jackson that her voice was a valued resource and that her unfiltered story could impact how others viewed her community, she proceeded with greater assurance that her words were meaningful and would not be misconstrued.

In a future article on the pedagogy and practice of Fearless Dialogues™, I will examine how this model upends the fear of not knowing by seeing the unknown as a space of creative possibility where unspoken truths can be shared, untapped resources can be discovered, and underutilized gifts can be maximized. Within this creative space of possibility, community thought leaders perceived as marginal are given freedom to speak their truth. Equally, those perceived as wielding power are challenged to wrestle with their demons of needing to know and to appear *relevant* in the eyes of others.

Fear of plopping: the paradox of full authenticity creating feelings of emptiness

While the fear of not knowing may compel speakers to fill conversational spaces with inauthentic, meaningless words, an inverse fear exists. Many of us have felt the void of sharing our most authentic truth in our most authentic voice only to have our words received with blank stares and empty faces. Master pedagogue and author of *Learning to Listen to Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults* (2002), Jane Vella refers to receiving no affirmation or acknowledgement of one's thoughts as "plopping."

For Vella, one of the great dangers and fatal moments of authentic sharing is for a courageous speaker to say "something in a group, only to have the words hit the floor with a resounding 'plop,' without affirmation, without even recognition that she has spoken, with the teacher proceeding as if nothing had been said" (Vella, p. 10). Plopping is destructive to creating a space for authentic conversation because it not only has the potential to diminish the worth of the speaker, it also induces fear and anxiety for others in the room. According to Vella, the fear created following a "plop" has a visceral effect, and after which the observant educator can see and feel the energy draining out of the room.

To be sure, the conversation between Ellison and Jackson was loaded with plop-potential moments. In instances of heightened intensity, Mrs. Jackson "became silent," "paused," "thought for a moment," "took a deep breath," "stared at [Ellison]," "smiled" or allowed her "eyes to stray" (Ellison 1995, pp. 285–289). However, instead of allowing these moments of quiet to create disturbance, Ellison, like the 20th and 21st century mystics that I will write about in a future article, "held the silence" as a site of meaning-making. While discomfiting at times, Ellison recognized, if even intuitively, that these pregnant pauses could birth deeper understanding and more authentic witness. Part of preventing plops, as exemplified through Ellison's patience in allowing meaning to develop, is embracing silence and remaining carefully attentiveness to pace.

Energy levels remain high and plopping is kept at a minimum in conversational spaces where stories are valued and affirmed. In the forthcoming practice and pedagogy article, I articulate how the Fearless Dialogues™ model intentionally creates physical, temporal, emotional, developmental, and pedagogical spaces that hold individual and communal stories with care. Far from the colloquial "safe space," Fearless Dialogues™ finds meaning in silence, establishes a rhythmic pace for conversation, and creates incubators for beloved community.

Fear of strangers: the paradox of strange freedom

Brokering hard, heartfelt conversation between diverse community thought leaders remains central to the work of Fearless Dialogues™. “Community thought leaders” are recognized authorities on relevant, context-sensitive topics who have the respect and influence to inspire others to action.⁴ And, not all community thought leaders are elected or salaried. Expanding the breadth of the definition of “leader” opens a space to receive the expertise and giftedness of community stakeholders in the forms of small business owners, underfunded non-profits, students, seniors, and heads of small organizations (i.e., fraternities, little league teams, lodges, gangs, etc.). Placing local leaders who may have less prominent public voices, smaller bank accounts, and fewer credit hours of formal education in conversation with professionals who have formed portions of their identity around honorific titles, financial gain, and public prowess is no small feat. Chief among the challenges of gathering community thought leaders into common space for heartfelt conversation is overcoming the fear of strangers.

Outside of Fearless Dialogues™, few opportunities exist for a single mother on public assistance, a foundation executive, a city councilman, a drug dealer, a college provost, a pastor, and a factory worker to share a common space and to discuss a common theme. (This eclectic group, in fact, did gather for a Fearless Dialogues Community Conversation at Emory University). While shared interests or concerns may draw these individuals together, even the most confident community thought leader might sense a nagging fear of the strangeness of the stranger pervading. Parker Palmer’s *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of American Public Life* (2003) explores the peculiarities of fearing strangers.

At a base level, our public lives are intertwined with those of strangers. However, in our private lives “strangers do not intrude (except illegally), and if we invite the stranger in, it is usually because we want to alter our relationship from that of strangers to friends” (p. 40). But, under the auspices of common territory, common resources, and common concerns, Fearless Dialogues™ draws community thought leaders who are strangers onto common ground and intentionally disrupts these norms of public and private life.

According to Palmer, fear emerges because our private circles of loved ones and associates usually mirrors our race, class, and life-experience. In the silos of similarity within our private lives, we are deprived of authentic contact with strangers, “and we tend to grow afraid of those who are different, afraid of hidden threats which ‘otherness’ seems to contain” (p. 41). This fear makes it difficult to enter public life because once in interaction with those who are different preconscious prejudices percolate, subconscious stereotypes surface, and fantasies flicker and flash across our minds.

The shared knowledge and experience of a common struggle bonded Ellison and Jackson, though they hailed from different parts of Harlem and traveled in different circles. Both the laborer and the writer recounted the heart-wrenching story of the dispossessed lawyer and his evicted family. Likewise, they both witnessed the invisible bombs being tossed by the shell-shocked war veteran who dodged oncoming traffic in the middle of the street. While standing at different vantage points, Ellison and Jackson could see and feel the impact of economic depravity and war on their community. Once engaged in fearless dialogue these seemingly distant strangers stood together on common ground.

Diminishing the fear of strangers and the perplex packaging of preconceived notions of others formed in our private lives requires Fearless Dialogues™ to set a space bound by practices of radical hospitality. Radical hospitality infuses attitudes of *unspectacular*

⁴ This definition was adapted from an article written on thought leadership by Michael Brenner on forbes.com. The article is entitled, “What is Thought Leadership? 5 Steps to Get it Right.” (2013)

“lessness,” and remains open to the unremitting grace of God to heal and transform the private and the public in the midst of boundary-breaking conversations. Open boundaries create a strange freedom and common ground between strangers allowing them to enter into intimate relationship with those perceived to be wholly different.

Fear of oppressive systems: the paradox of seeing strength in weakness

While the preceding fears of not knowing, plopping, and engaging strangers are inhibitors to conversation, the final fear has the potential to be most assaulting. Weeks ago, I was asked why I believed corporate entities and foundations who do little work with African American young men and violence would have interests in my book and my research on muteness and invisibility. My response, “The devaluation of human life is a violent act and that is a human problem not relegated to a particular race, age, or class.” Howard Thurman’s ground-shifting text, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1996) devotes an entire chapter to the all-consuming fear of oppressive systems that violently devalue human life.

For Thurman, “fear is one of the persistent hounds of hell that dog the footsteps of the poor, the dispossessed, the disinherited” (p. 36). Like thin-air leaking out of an airtight room, Thurman’s fear stifles, closes in, and isolates. Hounding 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” (ibid). This pervasive fear is expectant of conflict and is deeply rooted in the “heart of relationships between the weak and the strong, between the controllers of the environment and those who are controlled by it” (p. 37). Often times this fear appears one-sided as the weak are seemingly intimidated by the strong. However, an un-discussed and undisclosed fear often ruminates in the inner recesses of many strong persons in power that they might be forcefully knocked from their pedestal.

Most debilitating within this element of fear is the stifled ability to see beyond the perceived powerfulness or the perceived lack of power in the other. The gulf of fear between seemingly disparate groups hampers the ability of the weak and the strong to see the fullness of humanity (and divinity) in one another. Thurman explains, “There are few things more devastating than to have it burned into you that you do not count” (p. 39). Within oppressive systems, both the oppressor and the oppressed experience the violence of devaluation—of not feeling counted in the eyes of the other.

In closing his essay, Ellison describes Mrs. Jackson’s plight as “an old story,” of structural oppression. At first glance, Mrs. Jackson is a representative figure of the innumerable unseen persons disenfranchised by poor housing, exorbitant food costs, sub-standard health care, and crime-ridden streets. However, a closer look reveals that Ellison *sees* vestiges of hope in the lives of Mrs. Jackson’s well-mannered and thoughtful children, her unflinching work ethic, her sacrifices for her offspring, and her unrecanting honesty. An abiding hope that her son, Wilbur, will return as a whole human being and secure meaningful work to support the family also trickles as a steady brook of promise flowing beneath the conversation. Hope seemingly cut dead still lives in Mrs. Jackson’s story. Seeing hope and hearing Mrs. Jackson’s story as one of possibility in the face of fear-mongering oppression stands as a subversive tactic to upset a domineering structure.

Fearless Dialogues™, in its essence, is a radical form of prayer that deconstructs systems of power on a perspectival level. Grounded in my mantra, “Once you see, you cannot not see,” Fearless Dialogues™ speaks truth to power by altering how others see and hear. We challenge people to see the humanity and divinity in strangers in lieu of the preconscious and subconscious projections that divide communities and draw us apart. We then push community thought leaders to listen intently for gifts and resources in others instead of mindlessly focusing on stereotypes and prejudices. In the

best of circumstances, a “pocket of resistance”⁵ is opened and community thought leaders see redemptive qualities in persons that at first glance might have been cast off. Once this type of seeing happens, they can no longer see otherwise. Fearless Dialogues™ decenters systems of power by altering the perspective of those perceived to be weak and those perceived to be strong.

Fearless Dialogues™ embraces strengths and weakness. Fearless Dialogues™ uplifts the tense complexities of fear as a conduit for creativity and vitality. Fearless Dialogues™ appreciates that the way to knowing is unknowing. We call this form of downward mobility, “lessness.”⁶

The selfless way of Christ: downward mobility as a way of life

Throughout time the word “temptation” has been cast as a lure, a snare, an attractive course of action into something that is wrong or unwise. In spite of its longstanding negative connotation, the word “temptation” actually has an instructive root: “the Latin word *temptare*, means to touch, to try or test, to feel experimentally. Deep in the word itself is the truth that we must act out some things to discover who we are in relation to them” (Palmer 1990, p. 103). For centuries, scholars and theologians have waxed eloquently on the snaring temptations faced by Jesus in the wilderness. However, my readings of contemporary mystics coupled with the origins of the word temptation, have prompted me to reframe the desert landscape into a “laboratory of discovery” in which Jesus experimented with his temptations to uncover an alternate way of being.

Equipped with makeshift apparatus (a rock that looked like bread, a vista to envision consuming power, and a high place from which to jump) and a potent cacophony of toxic voices, Jesus concocted in the desert laboratory a different way of existing in the world. This selfless way of living and moving in the world reconstructs identity by directing energy at who one *is* rather than what one *does*. The way reignites humble sojourners to push forward by uplifting an unspectacular journey rather than a destination. This way reframes power differentials by focusing attention on having power with others rather than power over others.

The Selfless Way of Christ (2012), a lesser-known text in Henri Nouwen’s corpus, posits that the countercultural quest of Jesus and His followers is the path of downward mobility. For Nouwen, Western living conditions children early in life to strive for the top by conquering knowledge and people, wielding influence, and being successful (pp. 23–24). Without wholly denigrating ambition, Nouwen contends such striving toward upward mobility often becomes a religion with deleterious consequences. He furthers

We are taught to conceive of development in terms of an ongoing increase in human potential. Growing up means becoming healthier, stronger, more intelligent, more mature, and more productive. Consequently we hide those who do not affirm this myth of progress, such as the elderly, prisoners, and those with mental disabilities. In our society, we consider the upward move the obvious one while treating poor cases who

⁵ According to Brian Blount, “pockets of resistance” unfold when human action and divine interaction align and “the future kingdom forcibly and miraculously pierces into the present moment to overturn oppressions of the present age.” For a summarized version of this concept see, Ellison’s *Cut Dead But Still Alive*, pages 66–70.

⁶ Throughout this article, I occasionally use the collective pronoun “we” instead of the singular “I” because many of the innovative ideas around creating spaces for hard, heartfelt conversations emerged organically through trial-and-error practices, on-the-ground research, and thoughtful exchanges with community leaders and Fearless Dialogues staff members.

cannot keep up as sad misfits, people who deviated from the normal line of progress (p. 27).

But the Gospels tells us that Jesus aligned himself with the deviant, the misfits and the disinherited who fell out of the purview of progress and potential.

On the downward road, Jesus trod the valleys of temptation and climbed hills of fear in order to ground His kingdom-building vision. From these travels Jesus heightened His sensitivity to the humanity and divinity in those around him. On his downward journey, Jesus acquired grace-healed vision that convicted him to look into the eyes of the lowly, pay humble attention to the ways of their living, and listen gently to their observations and perceptions (p. 34).

The humility, perceptiveness, and deliberate intention to not lord above others is a posture of “lessness.” Lessness serves as an antidote to the four previously noted fears that stifle hard, heartfelt conversation. This way of being in the world also explodes possibilities for uncovering truth and wisdom in unlikely people and places. Following, I examine how Jesus discovered the selfless way of lessness when tempted in a most unlikely place of discovery: the desert.

Experiment one: stone, bread, and the temptation of relevance

In Fearless Dialogues™ both community thought leaders and animators,⁷ face the ever-present temptation of upward mobility. Nouwen exegetes Jesus’ temptations in the desert as an avenue to address three lures to the upward path. In *The Active Life* (1990), Parker Palmer contemporizes Nouwen’s interpretation of Jesus’ three desert temptations. They both categorize Jesus’ first trial in the desert as “the temptation to be relevant and respectable in the eyes of the world” (Nouwen, p. 51).

Somewhere in Jesus’ 40-day quest in the desert was a test of identity. In the ear of a beleaguered and hungry Jesus, a tempting voice billows, “If you are the Chosen One, tell this stone to turn into a loaf (Matthew 4:3).” Far from a magic trick, the tempting voice challenges Jesus as the Chosen One to prove himself. This was not only a call to prove to others his worth, but it was also an internal test to verify his special calling from God (Palmer 1990, p. 106).

The gnawing temptation to be relevant stands as a constant battle to show oneself approved in the eyes of others and even before the mirror. Relevance simply asks the question, “What can you *do*?” In this line of inquiry, those tempted by upward mobility are lured “to believe that we are what we produce.” As a result, the relevant person becomes preoccupied with titles, social standing, visible results, tangible goods and figures in a bank account. Just as those with a fear of ignorance fill conversational spaces with meaningless words, relevant people have a need to prove their productivity, knowledge, and worth. But what is the alternative?

For many it is hard to conceive of an irrelevant life, its presumed discomforts, and the social backlash it might afford. Palmer unfolds the difficulties of such a life:

When you refuse to meet the terms of an external demand, refuse to produce publicly verifiable results, you do not prove anything in the normal sense of that word. Instead, you leave yourself open to charges of evasion or cowardice, and you forfeit the external confirmation on which so many of us depend; you may become inwardly shaky on who you really are (Palmer 1990, p. 106).

⁷ Instead of the words “moderator” or “facilitator,” animators guide Fearless Dialogues™. While facilitators and moderators manage conversations, animators are trained to ask probing open-ended questions that bring conversations among disparate groups to life.

Resisting the inner temptation to lead with his title as a writer or to uplift his social stature as one of the educated elite, Ellison assumed a position of irrelevance to clear a way to connect with Mrs. Jackson on a basic human level. Not prodding for a certain answer, yet probing for deeper clarity, Ellison did not succumb to the temptation of rushing to *do* or say something to prove his worth. One might easily accredit his position to the journalistic integrity of not soliciting answers or creating bread where only stone existed. However, Ellison's example, like that of Jesus' lessness in the desert, is instructive.

Jesus' response to the tempter is simple and profound. "One does not live by bread alone (Matthew 4:4)." Bread, as are titles, verifiable results, and monetary worth, is important but not to the diminishment and devaluation of others. In short, identity is not based on what you do or provide, it is grounded in who you are and how you exist in the world. This approach to identity fashions the interactions of our work at Fearless Dialogues™. For example, upon entering a Fearless Dialogues Community Conversation, community thought leaders are warmly greeted in the following way: "It is good to *see* you. Welcome to Fearless Dialogues™. Are you ready for *change*?" This salutation acknowledges the worthwhile presence of every person entering the space and sets the tone for collective action. A host of other practices are employed to create a perspectival shift so that upon entry and throughout our time together the factory worker, foundation executive, and felon-on-the-mend, can see themselves and those around them as gifted people with stories of value.

Not leading with titles, but with gifts and stories, creates a different paradigm for conversation. The perspectival shift of seeing everyone as a valued resource for change is layered upon other practices of radical hospitality. From these intentional choices the fear of appearing ignorant lessens, the temptation of relevance diminishes, and a dynamic space for fearless dialogue emerges. After one Fearless Dialogues Community Conversation, a noted drug dealer told me, "This felt like heaven. This is the first time I could share my story with people different than me and not feel judged."

The path of lessness hears people who feel cast away like useless stones. This selfless way sees beyond the façade of people who only view themselves as bread. The way teaches us that who we are and how we exist in the world supersedes what we do or did not do.

Experiment two: high place, jumping room, and the temptation to be spectacular

Atop a high place, the tempting voice whispered to Jesus, "Since you are God's Son, jump... He placed you in the care of angels" (Matthew 4: 5–6). The delusional voice seeks to convince the contemplative Jesus that he can defy the natural order by performing a supernatural act. Nouwen and Palmer label this prodding as the temptation to be spectacular.

Being spectacular and performing seemingly supernatural acts is entrenched in a Western culture that prizes pedestal-bound charismatic leaders, thrives off of sensational media, and vitalizes spectators to join the quest to be lauded and praised. Reflecting on the social pressure to be spectacular, Nouwen adds,

We have come to believe that a service [is only] valuable when many attend, a protest or demonstration is [only] worthwhile when television cameras are present, a study group [only] worth having when many want to be a part of it, and a church is [only] successful when many desire to become members....

We act as if visibility and notoriety were the main criteria of the value of what we are doing. It is not easy to act otherwise. Statistics do rule our society. The biggest box-office hits, the best-selling books, the fastest-selling cars, [the fastest growing churches]—these are the signs that we are dealing with something significant. To be spectacular is so much our concern that we, who have been spectators most of our lives,

can hardly conceive that what is unknown, unspectacular, and hidden can have any value (pp.54-56).

These statements about popping-flashes, gathering crowds, and chart-busting numbers, lead Nouwen to the probing question: “Who am I when nobody pays attention, says thanks, or recognizes my work?” Essentially, Nouwen and the Matthean writer of Jesus’ temptation are asking the reader, “What do you call yourself? Not, what does the world call you?”

Against the tides of spectacle, Mrs. Jackson presented herself as a hard working and devoted parent. Ellison, though an accomplished writer, presented himself as an inquisitive neighbor. At Fearless Dialogues™ events, community thought leaders are encouraged to self-identify by choosing one of seven name tags upon entry: neighbor, non-profit, student, healthcare, educator, government, or clergy. These community thought leaders are then challenged to share with others their gift. What then does it mean for a judge, in a conversation group with a felon-on-the-mend, to self-identify as a neighbor with a gift of prayer? Or for the judge to overhear the former gang leader to self-identify as a student whose gift is encouragement? These true cases were so jarring and perspective-shifting that after hearing these startling introductions from the strangers around them, many community thought leaders were inclined to sit in silence and disbelief. Left un-nurtured this silence can create a resounding “plop” that will incite fear in the group. But, guided by a trained animator the silence becomes a gateway to deeper revelation. The former gang leader sees the judge anew. The judge hears the former-felon afresh. The pump is primed for heartfelt conversation.

Beyond spectacle, the path of lessness “frees us from our needy self and thus creates a new space where we can pay selfless attention to others” (Nouwen, p. 58). This selfless way counters the compulsion to inspire awe in others. Resisting the temptation of being spectacular, Jesus compelled his followers to travel an uncharted and less than glamorous course, to be open to new people and new possibilities, and to uncover unfound truths in self and other.

Experiment three: vista, vision, and the temptation of power

Money, connections, fame, intellectual ability, and skills are forms of power that may have enticed Jesus while standing on the vista overlooking the city. And, then a voice arises, “I will give you all these, if you fall at my feet and worship me” (Matthew 4:8–9). The final temptation in the desert is power.

In *The Temptations of Jesus* (1978), Howard Thurman explains that Jesus’ good intentions for utilizing his power might have easily been corrupted. To be sure, Jesus was prompted by a “deep inner sense of involvement” in God’s will and His calling “to bring the kingdoms of this world under the rule, the order and the control of God.” However, in a carnal sense, even in Jesus’ time, ruling a kingdom meant controlling the minds and desires of the masses, and having *power over* the lives of other human beings (Thurman 1978, pp. 39–41). The vista represents a dangerous location because “the power that tempts us is never *power with* or for others, but always *power over* something or someone else” (Palmer 1999, p. 109). Power over, according to Palmer, is illusory and detaching because when one is above others, she is disconnected from the other’s suffering and struggle (ibid). When distant from distressing conditions empathy wanes, desensitization settles, and humans once-viewed as neighbors become objects and stereotypes.

Instead of power over, the selfless way of Christ is the path of *powerlessness*. Reflecting on the lessness in power, Nouwen pens,

It is through powerlessness that we can enter into solidarity with our fellow human beings... We are called to speak to people not where they have it together but *where they are* aware of their pain, not where they are in control but *where they are* trembling and insecure, not where they are self-assured and assertive but where they dare to doubt and raise hard questions; in short, not where they live in the illusion of immortality but *where they are* ready to face their broken, mortal, and fragile humanity (Nouwen, p. 63, italics mine).

Meeting people *where they are* is the quest of powerlessness. However, as connoted, *where people are* may be a troubled place, and meeting people in a troubled place is a very tempting space for boundary trespass and abuse of power.

As Mrs. Jackson's eyes strayed to the window, I imagined tears welling as she sat in the company of a stranger. But in this strange moment, aware of where they were, Ellison paused as she processed her pain. At the end of a recent Fearless Dialogues Community Conversation, a Fearless Dialogues™ staff member who formerly sold drugs corralled a group of rival gang members to the lobby of the auditorium. Pressing beyond the fear of strangers and law enforcement officers (perceived as oppressive structures) that were lingering, he told his story. With tears streaming down his face in the company of strangers, he met the rival gang members where they were and challenged them to face some hard questions about their present condition as only he could. Captured by the silence of this powerless moment, he fearlessly prayed for the rival factions, who were then encircled and holding hands. The final words of his wet-faced benediction: "God, help these boys get through this shit. Amen." The illusion of youthful immortality faded. The once-hardened faces of the young men were replaced with expressions of fragile humanity. In the spirit of lessness a seed of change was planted in a space of fearless dialogue.

The way forward: the vision of Fearless Dialogues™

The philosophy of combatting fear with a posture of "lessness" is spurring an international movement to assist seemingly disparate community thought leaders to see untapped gifts in those around them, hear innovative strategies, and work collectively toward change. Fearless Dialogues™ is composed of two distinct, yet interconnected programs. Both of these formats stimulate conversation about strategies to improve the well-being of African American young men, but each has a different approach.

Fearless Dialogues Community Conversations (FDCC) assemble a diverse community of stakeholders (such as educators, clergy, non-profit organizations, parents, elected officials, students, and even gang leaders) to engage in guided discussion on the untapped gifts and primary concerns facing African American young men. To set a tone for hard, heartfelt discussion, the FDCC features live music, visual arts, spoken word, context-sensitive workshops, and informational exhibits that celebrate the good works of local service organizations that support and empower African American young men. The FDCC is a half-day event and can accommodate up to 400 people.

Six days after the George Zimmerman verdict, three hundred community thought leaders voiced their gifts and vowed to change the 3 ft around them at a FDCC event on Emory University's campus. With thoughts of the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington fresh on their minds, 150 community thought leaders, including two dozen young men transitioning from prison, were trained to *see* differently at Pearl-Cohn Entertainment Magnet High School in Nashville, Tennessee. In late October, the Broward County School District in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, gathered nearly 300 community thought leaders and hosted a FDCC to

ponder the Black male achievement gap. In early 2014, FDCC travels to St. Louis to vitalize conversations about modern-day school desegregation, and the spike in Black male violence in Nassau, Bahamas. Later that year, in May, members of the Fearless Dialogues™ staff will learn with and train students and community leaders in Sao Paulo, Brazil on the philosophy and practice of Fearless Dialogues™.

While the FDCC, is short-term, has an international scope, and has received considerable media attention, the Fearless Dialogues Community Empowerment Initiative (FDCEI) is the exact opposite. The FDCEI responds to the silencing of African American young men with a strategic grassroots approach to long-term change. Utilizing the signature Fearless Dialogues™ training module, local leaders and consultants highlight overlooked and underutilized resources, strengthen existing community partnerships, and develop a strategic plan that addresses the three most pertinent issues identified by local community leaders. After development of this strategic plan, the Fearless Dialogues™ team commits to the community for 1 year to implement these three community specific goals. One year later, the Fearless Dialogues™ team returns to celebrate the realized goals and vision-cast with newly invigorated community leaders for the next 3 to 5 years. The FDCEI is at least an 18-month commitment, operates with little to no coverage media coverage, and the Fearless Dialogues™ team consults with two dozen local community leaders.

The FDCEI is in the early stages of data gathering in a local community near downtown Atlanta. Key to these efforts is pairing graduate students with young people who live in the community and embrace the philosophy of Fearless Dialogues™. Together these pairs serve as qualitative researchers, who will gather data and develop a community resources map to chart the gifts in this overlooked neighborhood that literally rests in the shadow of skyscrapers. The data from this resources map will assist in inviting a diverse pool of community thought leaders to engage in Fearless Dialogues™, vision-cast, and work collectively toward change. This process will be refined and duplicated in cities across America.

Conclusion

It took me nine pain-staking months to write the vision of Fearless Dialogues™ and make it plain on my MacBook tablet (Habakkuk 2:2). While these words existed in my head and dwelled in my heart for over a year, I had to face my fears to punch these words out on my screen. As a junior faculty member in a research one university, I must broker the fear of appearing ignorant in the eyes of colleagues who may view this community work as extracurricular instead of inherently epistemic. So, too, must I push beyond the fear of these words plopping in academic settings that may not view the mystics engaged here as reputable interlocutors. The fear of strangers who fail to grasp the communal-contextual paradigm upon which my approach to practical theology rests causes some trepidation. But, most fear-engendering is my vocational evolution into a scholar-activist in a national academic climate that struggles to see beauty in the mundane, hear wisdom in the unlettered, and work for change beyond the classroom.

With quiet courage, I acknowledge my fears and the fighting temptations that could derail the vision of Fearless Dialogues™ before the movement even gets down the tracks. So, from the desk of my home office my eyes stray out the window to the sprawling English ivy climbing up the southern Pine and into the

warming light. In silence, I am reminded of Mrs. Jackson, Ralph Ellison, the path to lessness and the hard heartfelt conversations looming on the horizon. The way it could be.

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