

December 2025 Justice Jottings

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Experiencing Inner Freedom During These Turbulent Times:

Embracing Hope and Belonging

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At the beginning of November, I had the great privilege of serving as a co-presenter at a retreat weekend for LGBTQ+ persons and our loved ones. The theme was “Experiencing Inner Freedom During These Turbulent Times: A Sacred Interfaith Gathering of Hope and Belonging for LGBTQ+ Persons, Their Families, and Allies.” Our planning team was very intentional about the selection of the theme, because we know that our society is experiencing tumultuous times, particularly affecting members of marginalized groups. This includes migrants who are being rounded up and terrorized by masked Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)/Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents wearing military uniforms and bearing weapons. (As I write this essay at the beginning of December, the ominously-named “Operation Swamp Sweep” has commenced in my home state of Louisiana and is being conducted by these agents. According to the Associated Press, its aim is to arrest 5,000 people in southeast Louisiana and nearby Mississippi.) Along with this, thousands of people across our country who are already in economic strife are set to lose access to SNAP, Medicaid, and other health benefits. And, as we all know too well, years of progress on LGBTQ+ rights are being stripped away by a tidal wave of new laws and policies on the state and federal levels. Our transgender siblings are particularly being singled out.

During the retreat, participants were asked to consider how fear and turbulence shows up in their lives during these times. They were then invited to reflect on where they are being invited to experience true inner freedom and how can they cultivate a sense of hope and belonging. Many beautiful and poignant thoughts and feelings were on display and much wisdom was shared by this lovely intergenerational group. This process certainly provided much encouragement and food for the journey for fellow participants.

Besides what our retreat participants shared, I have wondered what other wisdom figures of our time are saying about these issues and how could we draw sustenance from their words?

Concerning **inner freedom**, Rev. Seifu Anil Singh-Molares, the Executive Director of Spiritual Directors International, shares that it is

- Freedom from fear, of so-called “birth” and so called “death,” knowing that we arise, reside, and extend far beyond both.
- Freedom that continuously reminds us of the boundless expanse of God/Higher Power/Universe.
- Freedom to live our lives in full accord with our higher principles/authenticity.
- Freedom from unnecessary stress and anxiety. Freedom to become seamless and flowing in our actions (1).

Regarding **hope**, Bob Shine, Executive Director of the Pax Christi International Fund for Peace, reminds us that, “Hope is not optimism. It is a choice to act for a better world despite all evidence to the contrary.” (2) On a personal level, knowing that there are many groups and individuals around the world who are “doing the work” of justice - making the choices to act for a better world - gives me hope. Some are very large, some are small; some are loud, and some are rather quiet; but they are nonetheless making a positive difference at many levels. Much of this is “seed-sowing,” and I anxiously await a bountiful harvest.

What about belonging?

The Office of Diversity and Inclusion at Cornell University defines belonging as “the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group.” (3) Yavilah McCoy, American Black Jewish Woman and diversity consultant, describes this term as a place where one feels **trust**, **enthusiasm**, and **in solidarity** across the diverse identities and cultural endpoints that we bring in our humanity to the prospect of seeking spiritual resource and community (4).

Staying grounded and focused.

During our retreat weekend, our sages informed us that, to have a firm foundation in our quest to reach inner freedom, hope, and belonging, it is important that we first be grounded and focused. Another great spiritual leader of our time, Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde, Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Washington, D.C., agrees. She has her own thoughts, stating that we can accomplish this by addressing 3 major areas of our lives:

- **Spiritual practices and faith**
 - Daily spiritual grounding: Regularly engage in practices like prayer, meditation, or breathwork to connect with your inner self and a higher power.
 - Remember divine love: Draw strength and a sense of belovedness from God's love, which serves as your "north star" during challenging times.

- Embrace hope: Acknowledge that hopelessness is not an option, even when the success of your efforts is uncertain, because your hope is ultimately in God's love.
- **Community and service**
 - Lean on community: Stay grounded in your community by connecting with others who share similar values and goals.
 - Serve others: True courage often emerges through serving others with compassion and selflessness.
- **Courage and mindset**
 - Cultivate courage: View courage as a muscle that strengthens with practice. Make small decisions that build courage, even if they involve facing fear or risk.
 - Practice self-awareness: Be present and aware of your own internal state to navigate challenges with clarity and grace.
 - Reframe your narrative: Recognize that you can live a life of "great adventure" regardless of your circumstances by choosing a path of courage and resilience.
 - Prepare for adversity: Anticipate that obstacles will arise and develop resilience and problem-solving skills to face them with confidence (5).

Wise words, indeed.

As we exercise these efforts in staying grounded and discerning our next steps forward, scripture scholars St. Joseph Sister Mary M. McGlone and Dominican Sr. Carol J. Dempsey provide some important reminders for us: “Each of us is imbued with the prophetic spirit of the divine. Each of us has the potential and capacity to exercise our prophetic vocation and calling, and in doing so, to en flesh the presence of the divine in the here and now.” (6) Further, Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, tells us that, “The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.” (7) This means that, instead of simply protesting what is wrong, one should actively build and live according to a better way.

Thus, by virtue of our baptism, it is incumbent on us that we remember our own call to prophetic action by virtue of our baptism.

The MSJC LGBTQ+ Initiative is thus doing its best to respond to this prophetic call and to do the “practice of the better,” hopefully creating a ripple effect in our world. As our team’s Mission states, we “respond to the Church’s call to be welcoming and compassionate by offering effective pastoral care and spiritual support for LGBTQ+ Catholics and their families. We foster dialogue, education, and understanding among the diverse communities and institutions affiliated with the Marianist Family . . . Through our work, we hope the Marianist Family becomes a prophetic witness to the Church and the world on how to welcome and embrace LGBTQ+ people and their gifts.” (8) By

embracing such action, our hope is that our efforts will create fertile ground and resources for all of us who live on the margins throughout the world to find our inner freedom, embrace hope, and find a sense of belonging.

As a person who is constantly discerning how to respond to the many injustices of the world, my spiritual director often reminds me, “Brad, you must do what *yours* is to do.” As beloved children of God infused with our own gifts and who yearn for justice, we are beckoned to discern, as Mr. Shine challenges us, what individual and corporate choices to exercise to make for a more loving world. May we all be informed and inspired by the words and actions of the many life-giving wisdom figures present in our lives.

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