



MIND THE GAP

keynote address by Dr. Reverend Nancy S. Taylor

Annual Change Your World Celebration

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Oh, my, you are so beautiful. Look around you. Look how beautiful you are!

Turn to someone next to you, look them in the eye and say to them: *You are beautiful!*

It is a beautiful thing when sisters and brothers come together.

When I tell folks back East that I lived in Idaho for ten years, their eyes widen. They don't know much about Idaho, but they don't think much of it either.

That's okay ... for me it is an evangelical moment.

I tell them about Idaho.

- More white water than any other state in the nation.
- The deepest canyon in North America and the tallest sand dune.
- That Idaho's Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness Area is the largest contiguous area of protected wilderness in the continental U.S.
- I tell them that Idaho is home to the World Center for the Birds of Prey and the National Old Time Fiddlers Contest.
- I tell them Idaho was the second state in the nation to elect a Jewish Governor.
- In 1896 Idaho was the fourth state in the nation to give women the right to vote.
- And Idaho was the fifth state in the nation to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment. That happened under the leadership of the state's only female senator at the time, a member of First Congregational Church, Edith Miller Klein.

- I tell them that with a little help from the Southern Poverty Law Center, you sued the Aryan Nations clean out of existence.
- Greg Carr, human rights activist and philanthropist...
- That this conservative, Republican, Christian state defeated two anti-gay ballot initiatives and then passed a minimum wage for Idaho's farm workers
- I tell them about Congregation Ahavath Beth Israel ... the oldest synagogue building in continuous use in the United States west of the Mississippi River ... and about their kayaking, environmentalist, 12th generation Rabbi
- I tell them about the congregation I was privileged to serve for ten years ... about First Congregational Church and pastor Kim Cran... and their endeavor to give witness to a faith and way of life that is multicultural, multiracial, open to and affirming of LGBT folk, and accessible to all ... not because it is pc ... but because diversity is a theological commitment ... because God is big ... so big ... because the more we know of God's world and God's people... the more we will understand just how big God is.

When people ask me about Idaho, or raise an eyebrow, I just tell them about Frank and Bethine Church

And Idaho state senator Nicole LeFavour who cut her teeth doing human rights work ... \

And Representative Cherie Buckner-Webb, co-founder of Idaho's Black History Museum

Idaho's First Lady of Human rights, Marilyn Schuler

I tell them about Jen Ray who you trained up and sent to DC.

I tell them about the first openly gay attorney in the great state of Idaho, John Hummel

I tell them about Don and Susan Curtis... a deeply faithful, Catholic couple who are fierce advocates of LGBT rights.

I tell them about Leslie, Lisa and Sydney and how they get outraged by injustice ... and about hard they work and how much they laugh.

I tell them that smack in the middle of the capital city there is a world-class memorial to human rights ... and that here, right here, you have planted the full text of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights! ... that you are one of only 11 US sites to receive a sapling from the Anne Frank Chestnut Tree in Amsterdam.

I tell them that it was in Idaho that my husband, Peter—may he rest in peace---an English gentleman, Anglican priest, was named an honorary Lesbian ... a status in which he delighted and dearly cherished.

I tell them that Idahoans are a lot like wild Salmon: that you are strong, so strong, so powerful, so incentivized by love and justice that you swim upstream, leap tall waterfalls.

It is good to be back, Idaho. It is good to be among you.

We have come together to be about the high and holy business, the hard and tricky business of human rights ... tricky and treacherous business for the ground is contested ground and the stakes are high.

On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, on the central panel is Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*.

God's powerful body stretched to its full majesty and might, is supported by angels in flight and wrapped in a mantle. God leans and reaches towards Adam...

Adam, represented as a resting athlete, languidly reaches his hand toward God's hand, his finger towards God's finger.

Here's the thing: those inches between God's finger and Adam's finger – those most electric and charged inches of space –is life and death, justice and mercy, suffering and healing, good and evil. that is where the work of human rights takes place ... there, in that space: taught, fraught, charged.

For you, who are embarked upon vocations justice, those inches between God's finger and Adam's finger – those most electric and charged inches of space – are your office, your place of work, your studio and study, your operating room, your kitchen and classroom.

It is there, in that charged and dangerous space that we acknowledge the suffering of others ... acknowledge it, name it and witness it and then, in so far as it lies within us, endeavor to relieve the suffering of others.

It is in that space--fraught, charged, contested--that you lobby legislators, march in the streets, occupy financial districts, walk with refugees, write letters, read, listen, learn, argue, organize campaigns, travel to encounter others.

It is there, in that most electrifying space – in those inches between Adam's finger and God's – that the arts and crafts of civil rights and human rights are exercised.

It is in that space that our docents engage with school children; our educators teach our curriculum.

It is there that we are incited to anger at the site of a starving child, or a person of color languishing in jail. It is there that we hold the world and its huddled masses on our hearts ... and do not, and dare not, forget them or forsake them.

That is our work ... high and holy, precious and privileged, treacherous and tricky, solemn and tender work.

It is to that charged and treacherous space, to that gap between Wall Street and Main Street, between the 99% and the 1% ... that we are called.

Those inches? They are the charged and contested space that exists between the Cross on Table Rock pretending to be on public land and the Human Rights Memorial down here, among the people, on bone fide public land!

Those inches: the over-crowded INS office with its labyrinthine sorting of alien from citizen, green card from passport, visa from re-entry permit, deportation from exile.

Those inches? ... where the refugee sits, hands wringing, in her ache, her loneliness, her vulnerability, her need.

Those inches are where the child bride is handed to the elderly husband who purchased her ...

Those inches are the urban hospital waiting-room chock full of those without healthcare ...

It was in those inches, in that charged and dangerous space, that Moses confronted Pharaoh and demanded, "Let my people go!"

These inches are the meetings, the endless meetings, where you and your colleagues wrestle for days and nights with demons, our nation's demons, and, of course, with your own demons... for to engage in the work of human rights is to engage with persons who are traumatized, victimized, broken, suspicious and sometimes brittle ... It is to engage at the raw, fierce, contested intersections of power and privilege.

These two inches are where we negotiate charged conversations with Mormon and Muslim ... Israeli and Palestinian, Catholic and Protestant, Spanish-speaking and English-speaking, citizen and alien ... rich and poor, privileged and disadvantaged

Those inches are the Memorial built of travertine marble, and bricks engraved with names of our loved ones ... and benches and trees, and water and quotations ... wrought from hours of debate, lively, sometimes heated conversations with the living and the dead, from Moses to Mead, from Martin Luther King to Billy Jean King ...

Those inches are the Idaho teacher in his classroom in Arco or Buhl, in Caldwell or Wieser teaching about difference and respect ... gently, but firmly nudging open young minds and hearts.

Those inches are words of understanding and forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation passed between sisters and brothers who have not seen eye to eye ... but who are willing to meet together, heart to heart, to listen and to learn.

That is where the action is to which we are called ... where the doing of this high and holy work takes place ...

These are the charged spaces – the dangerous and contested spaces in which those who care for others place themselves between good and evil, apathy and compassion, mercy and justice.

It is what activists such as you do ... We do our work in those inches between God's finger and Adam's finger... where it could go either way ... things could go either way there ... that's the risk, they could turn out to be very good ... or very, very bad.

Now, we are in a day, a time, a season, an era like none other. Everything is changing, turning, churning. We are in the throes of or at the dawn of a new era ... something is happening. Things are dying. Others being born.

Both the economy and the polar ice caps are in melt down.

We say we are a nation of red states and blue states. In reality, it is not just red and blue. It's more like screeching red and screaming blue ... loud, harsh, angry colors. Mind the gap.

This nation's fastest growing new residential construction projects? Gated communities! Mind that gap!

We sort ourselves out by which news sources we favor. So, who are *you*? Fox News or Public Radio? John Stewart or Rush Limbaugh? The New York Times or the Wall Street Journal? Mind the gap ... don't trip over that one!

Entering these contested inches of space is a major and dangerous undertaking under the best of circumstances. But these are not the best of circumstances.

Hanging out in this tricky and treacherous space is a complicated proposition. A lot can go wrong.

Because so much is at stake here – life and death are at stake here, power and privilege are at stake here – this space is hot, fraught, contested. It is tense and treacherous and tricky. It is dangerous.

If you stand and work in this space long enough you will experience persecution and jeering. You will be called naïve and silly ... and a whole lot worse.

And, there is something else about that space ... if you stay in it long enough, you will find yourself in the company of sworn enemies ... Israeli and Palestinian, Christian and Muslim, Gay and Straight ... you will feel the heat of anger ... and smell desperation... This space is hot, charged. Not everyone has the fortitude ... or the stomach for it.

What's more, if you stay in that space, that charged and tricky space, and work there ... it will break your heart and it will break your spirit. Am I right?

What we do at events such as this ... this dinner, this awards ceremony, this fund raiser – these are all in the service of equipping us, training us, to live and operate in this space. We come together, bind up our wounds, share our stories, and give each other courage to go back out there, enter that space and keep at it.

For we will be clumsy, dangerous amateurs in this hot, electric and contested space if we are not practiced in the virtues of kindness, self-control, peace and humility... if we are not skilled in mingling both laughter and tears, both dancing and mourning ... wincing at pain, but not turning from it.

And so it is that we come together for nights such as this ... to honor educators and catalysts and activists who have been doing quiet battle in their own small corners of Idaho ... we gather to refresh and replenish ourselves, to eat and drink and be merry, before we turn around and go back to face the suffering.

It hard work ... not for the faint of heart ...but there is reward in this work ... if you hang out long enough in this space you will find yourself in the company of Anne Frank and Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. King and Dr. Zeus, Chief Joseph and Eleanor Roosevelt, Marilyn Schuler, Rose Beal and Brian Berquist.

You will find yourself in the rarified company of presidents and slaves, children and philosophers, poets, prophets and paupers, the famous and the unknown ... those who, despising human suffering, gritted their teeth, entered the fray ...and give witness to justice.

I end where I began ... telling you what is true: that you are beautiful ... all the more beautiful for the scars you bear and the courage you have shown and the costs you have endured.

Turn to someone next to you and tell them the truth, tell them what you see, tell them how very, very beautiful they are.