

Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation
2025 Award Acceptance Speech
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One of my favorite quotes is by Sufi mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan who said, “God breaks the heart again and again and again until it stays open.” Twenty-four years ago this week, our hearts were broken open. Our nation experienced a collective trauma. We witnessed the shattering of what we knew as security, safety, and comfort. Our nation was thrown into this collective grief of which we were not equipped to handle.

I was living and working in NYC at the time at the Church of St. Francis of Assisi. We lost members of our church community, including Friar Mychal Judge and a beloved Secular Franciscan, Carole LaPlante. Less than two weeks prior, I lost my life partner; so I had already been grieving. People started coming to me saying I was their grief warrior, and I had to help them handle their own grief. Thus began God’s call on my life and my life’s mission.

It became my call to midwife the stories of loss – loss of loved ones, loss of life situations, loss of health, and today, more than ever, loss of hope. We read in Proverbs (13:12) that “hope deferred makes the heart sick.” We are a heart-sick people who have forgotten that we belong to each other. As a nation, we were shook and brought to our knees by violence and hatred. But violence and hatred did not have the last word. As we were already on our knees, we gathered together to pray. Walter Wink, who was a prominent theologian, once asserted that prayer is the most important discipline. He went on to say that prayer gives God the openness to enter into the world and achieve a transformation. As we prayed, our hearts stayed open.

In her wonderful book, ***The Amen Effect***, Rabbi Sharon Brous tells the story of the ancient ritual of going to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the city on a hill. Thousands of people are going up to this Temple on pilgrimage and once they reached the top they would go through this enormous archway into the Temple Courtyard. They would then turn to the right and circle around the perimeter of the courtyard. Hundreds of thousands of people would circle around this massive courtyard. Once they completed the journey, they would walk out the same way. But for the person whose

heart was broken, that person still had to go up to Jerusalem to the Temple Mount. But that person would enter the courtyard and turn to the left, walking against the current of those thousands of people. And every single person who passed that broken-hearted person would have to stop and ask, "What happened to you? What's your story?" And they would have to answer, "My father died" or "I lost a child" or "My partner left me" or "I feel so alone." Whatever the source of their brokenness, they would have to say it out loud to a stranger and the stranger could not go on until they gave that person a blessing: "May you find comfort," "May you find consolation," "May the presence of this sacred community fill you with a sense of the possible." Then they would continue walking. And this would continue until the end of the circling.

What's amazing about this ancient ritual is there is emotional and spiritual healing for both the person who walks to the right *and* the person who walks to the left. This is a spiritual moment for these thousands of people and the last thing you want to do is interrupt this spiritual moment to encounter a broken-hearted stranger. But that is our call. After the majesty and the splendor of the Transfiguration, Jesus came down from the mountain to be with the suffering people whom he had compassion for. Saint Augustine once said, "You leave Christ, to be with Christ."

So as I was walking to the left, I connected with other broken-hearted people also walking to the left and we formed a circle to share our stories and our pain. And this is what I did after 9/11, I held circles to share stories of pain, loss, and healing. I come from a long line of storytellers and one way to convey stories is in circles. As a small child I would sit in circles and listen to the stories of my elders. And although I had no idea what those stories meant at the time, I held on to those stories and the process of holding circles. We are all a people of stories. Jesus taught in parables, in stories. When you sit at the tables to have meals, what do you do? You share stories. My grandmother would tell the stories and hold the circles. Her grandparents were Cherokee elders who held circles and told stories. So circles and stories are near and dear to me.

Fast-forward twenty-four years, I am still asking, "What's your story? Today's pain is of loneliness, violence, hatred, wars, racism, and environmental destruction. Today more than ever we need circles – to

mourn, to grieve, to share, to vent, to tell our stories of pain and hurt. We try so hard to steer clear of anything that smacks of pain and suffering, although we are a nation in pain with tremendous suffering. We are broken-hearted. But the Psalmist tells us that God is close to the broken-hearted.

So, when you encounter a tender soul doing the work of justice and peace, know that their heart has stayed open, it has broken open. Gently ask them what is breaking your heart today? And listen – don't judge, don't fix, don't combat – just listen. The more stories you listen to and witness to, you will see that slowly your heart too will break open again and again until it stays open.

If you are walking to the left and need a circle, check out the Franciscan Justice Circles at the Franciscan Action Network. I convene a Virtual Circle for folks with limited mobility. We learn and share about nonviolent living and action. Pope Leo said that nonviolence must distinguish our decisions, our relationships, and our actions. So, if you want to join a circle to help you do just that, the Franciscan Action Network has over 30 circles across the country to assist you in your journey to nonviolent action. Also, we are coming upon the Days of Catholic Nonviolent Action from the 21st to the Feast of our beloved Saint Francis. A perfect time to step up your nonviolence game. And tomorrow, please pray for the thousands lost and the many more thousands that mourn them. Pray for an end of violence and war.

I thank you for this recognition and for the validation of the mission and the many people I serve. And as in the circle process, I leave you with a blessing: May God break your heart again and again and again until it stays open and in the tenderness of your broken-open heart, may God grant you comfort and peace. Thank you.