

11/9/2010 Interview with Dain and Constance Perry for the *Highland Episcopalian*

Molly – What impact does our church’s involvement with slavery have on its present condition?

D – I think it has us confused and not knowing how to deal with it and many people want to deny it and continue in what we refer to as “intentional amnesia”. It’s an uncomfortable topic to talk about but we cannot heal as a faith community and we cannot heal as a country until we are willing to confront the truth of the past and accept it and be willing to talk about it and work through the anger on the part of some people, the hurt on the part of other people and the confusion on the part of all of us.

Molly – How do you see the process of truth and reconciliation unfolding? Why can’t it happen overnight?

Constance – Processes take time. When we don’t want to deal with something that is as difficult and as painful for all of us, we want quick fixes and this is not a quick fix. A truth and reconciliation process allows the opportunity for all of us to tell our stories and to listen to each other’s story -not to argue, not to debate, not to question but to just sit and sacredly, sacredly listen and hear what the other is saying. Then, we can come up with solutions of what to do but there is discomfort on the part of white Americans who would prefer to put this in the past and there is (a similar) desire on the part of African Americans because it brings up painful experiences that we too would prefer to forget.

D– It’s take n us 391 years to get where we are. We can’t turn it around on a dime. It’s going to take generations and we’ve been at the turning around piece of it now since the late 1940s when they integrated the army and that’s really when the turning around began. We haven’t gotten that far because we haven’t been willing to talk about it openly and honestly.

We were at a screening this afternoon with a group of inner city high school students here in Boston and there were only a couple of white students in the group. In the conversation afterwards, a couple of girls got up and spoke about what they are experiencing today and they had a large part of the group in tears because of the very overt racism they are experiencing in Massachusetts, of all places, and so it is something that we are deeply immersed in and we need to win hearts one by one.

Constance – (Some say) it’s like peeling an onion. There’s layer after layer after layer after layer and just when you think you have gone as far as you can go there is more to it and the deeper you go the more difficult and painful the work is. We need to get to the bottom of it. There have been many efforts over many years.... fits and starts...and we continue to be grappling with this because of the sustained hard work of peeling that onion. We put it aside because we don’t want to go there.

Molly – Because you, Constance, have a history of slavery in your family, and Dain descended from slave traders, does your marriage outwardly signify that regardless of race, we are all brothers and sisters capable of loving each other and moving beyond the past? Beyond racism?

Constance- Absolutely – I believe that. I don't know how long it will take but I absolutely do believe that we are brothers and sisters - in every faith tradition. My faith tells me that and my belief as a human being tells me that there is more that binds us as human beings than I think we are willing to recognize at its core, and I think that we use things like race and class and these labels and put meaning to them that I don't believe our Creator intended.

D – and it's all a power play.

M – What is the nature of the hard work that whites must do to understand how important an apology for slavery must be?

D- recently retired Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold has said that the first things whites need to do is to hear the anger and hear it deeply and honor the anger that African Americans feel. And until we get in touch with that anger we can't move very far, and to understand the anger – why it's there and get in touch with that. Once we can do this and do the work prior to an apology - because one of the things that concerns us is that much of the work that the church is doing – a lot of diocese – not a lot – unfortunately, not many diocese because not many are doing this but some diocese are rushing to have a service of repentance before they truly learn what it is they are repenting for and they are putting the end at the beginning and never doing the work they should have done at the beginning. That is our challenge as a church – to do the hard work which you all are doing at the diocese of Western North Carolina - of looking at the history and talking about it and really living into that reality and then there can be a service of reconciliation that means something.

C- The other thing for me is that I would like for white Americans to come to understand that they are victims themselves and they may not be victims in the same way that African Americans are in terms of being oppressed because of the color of their skin but white Americans are also victims and are hurt. They are not blooming as human beings. They are being stunted and as long as white Americans view this as an African American problem, that we are the ones that need to do the work that we are the ones that need to do the fixing, we're the ones who have got to get over it instead of seeing that we are all in this together – all of us are in this together and as long as one group of us is suffering, we are all suffering. As long as one group feels that experience of being victims, we are all victims.

m- In your experience showing the film “Traces of the Trade” and facilitating truthful discussion, what seems to best register the subtle nature of racism?

D – I think white people hearing the experience of African Americans or really not just African Americans but any people of color and the slings and the arrows which they receive day in and day out throughout their lives is something that we simply are not the least bit in touch with and once we begin to get in touch with that, our hearts begin to open and we begin to understand the divide that separates us.

C – it's especially powerful when we have the opportunities in our screenings to be in a place where people – whether it's our parents or a school or a company – an organization, where there is some familiarity with each other so that when someone gets up and they tell their story and as Dain said, when the white people in the room hear those stories from someone they worship with each Sunday or sit across a meeting room table from or see in the community as they go about their lives, it becomes less about them, as statistics or some abstract person out there but it becomes personal. They're actually looking the person in the eye and as Dain said, taking in the emotion of the stories that people of color are sharing. It personalizes it and the more personal we become with each other in our storytelling and I'm saying this from own experience as an African American, listening to white people tell their stories and share their pain, it becomes less and less easy to shut someone off or dismiss what they have to say.

D – and yet, we were at a very prominent boarding school last year and spent a weekend with them – the entire student body - and during one of the discussions some of the African Americans were talking about their experience at the school and a white girl later said, "I think they are embellishing" and she just gave no credence to it at all and it is so far out of the realms of the white experience that we have great difficulty believing that it could be true and that is one of the critical components of this. I used to be a very racist snout-nosed kid growing up in Charleston, South Carolina and now I'm married to Constance, but I've been at this work for most of my adult life but it's only in the last 10 years of having done the film and now sharing my life with Constance and through that having the privilege of spending a lot of intimate time with African Americans as the only white person there - that I get to hear the frustration and the fear and the anger and pain in a way that I never was able to hear it before. The light bulb first began to go on for me when I heard a number of times African Americans in different parts of the country use the phrase, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired." Hearing that from totally unrelated people from different parts of the country finally got my antenna up to the point where I knew I had to pay a different degree of attention to what was going on.

C – I said to Dain just the other day, "I don't think my heart is hard enough to deal with the pain that I feel when I hear some of the stories from so many people of color and what helps me – gives me the strength is my faith, God and the teaching of the gospels. I draw strength from my ancestors – some of whom I knew and most of them who I never knew who were slaves and who give me the strength and the courage to speak up and speak out and share this ministry with Dain – the fact that I'm doing this with Dain gives me the strength and the courage to do this work and if we are able to do it in our parishes and our diocese where we are all grounded in

the gospels and we're members of the community of God that we can do this work together. We need each other.

D – and there is no better place to do this work than in a faith community. It creates a safe space where this hard and painful work can be done.

M – what can you tell us about the success of your work?

D – we are working on our 4<sup>th</sup> trip back to the diocese of Ohio. There are several places where we've been back more than once. Several of them fortunately in the South. Give you an example. there is a southern diocese that we were at last year at their diocesan convention and showed the film and when we left we thought that it was one of the least successful conversations that we had facilitated after the film. We were wondering why it just didn't seem to gel. Then when we were at gen convention last July, and the canon who had arranged for us to go there saw us across a crowded room and came over with his wife and said, "Thank you so much. You all have transformed the diocese and we need to have you back." The people at this afternoon's showing - we must have had 7 or 8 come up and ask us for cards so that we can go to their schools and we unfortunately don't have a tracking system to be able to scientifically gauge the impact that we have or are having but simply the comments that we hear from people and their invitations back enables us to keep at the work.

M – In the book, *Inheriting the Trade*, your cousin, Thomas DeWolf, quotes you assaying, my deep concern is that racism is a part of the human condition. People want to feel superior to other people. I don't think it can all ever be shed. What I can do is move how I interact with people beyond where I used to be, and embrace them. That is the best I can do." Do you still feel this way after working with over 10,000 people?

D – No. I had said that to Tom when we were on the trip. None of us had any idea of what the end product was going to be and what we could do with it. And so I have indeed found a way working with Constance and I don't think I would be able to do this working on my own. But the two of us because of who we are, are able to speak to audiences in a way that I could not do alone. I still think that racism is part of the human condition all over the world. We have a particular kind of it and I think the most insidious form of it in this country because of our history of slavery and because of the way that was carried out and the way the attitudes have stuck with us so deeply.

M – is there anything else you would like me to include or anything I haven't touched on that you think is important?

D – yes. I would appreciate it if the article were to state this because there will be some people out there who will read it and might not participate because they are afraid to go. This is not an exercise in finger-pointing, in placing blame or in placing

guilt or feeling guilt. It's an exercise in looking to the future and looking to the past so we can understand how we got where we are and so that we can move to the future in a healing way.

C- One of the quotes that I use as we begin the conversation is from Kierkegaard. "We live our life going forward but we understand our life looking back." It's important that we all understand how we got where we are today so that we can together move forward in a more whole and healthy way. It's about healing.

D – and the future.