

**From Sorrow to Celebration:**  
**A Love Letter from the LGBTQ Movement to Room for All**  
Room for All National Conference, October 22, 2015  
Rev. Dr. Rebecca Voelkel

I grew up the only grandchild of my Scottish immigrant grandmother who took it as her role as my Grammie to tell me stories about our family. She did so, as she always told me, so that I might know who I am and so that I might know better how to live in this world.

One of those stories was about my grandfather.

My grandfather was also a Scottish immigrant who came to this country to escape grinding poverty. He was one of eleven children and he started work in the coal mines of the Lowlands of Scotland when he was ten in order to help support his family. At fourteen, he was buried alive during a collapse of part of the mine. Several days later, he was one of only three who made it out alive, but not without both a deep physical scar that ran the length of his back and a profound mental one.

As my Grammie told it, my grandfather immigrated shortly thereafter to escape both the poverty and the absolute disregard for his life and the lives of all the other poor coal-mining families in his small village. When he came to this country, he brought with him a deep conviction that his life was to be lived so that no one should be faced with dehumanizing disregard.

For her part, my Grammie was the valedictorian of her sixth grade class in Inverness. But in her era, any schooling beyond sixth grade required tuition. So she went to work as a domestic. At twelve she was living in other peoples' homes and getting a few hours off of work on Sundays to visit her family. At fourteen her father died, leaving her the sole breadwinner in the family of six.

She took her role very seriously but she also bristled against the treatment she received. In one home, one of the children of the family was a girl about my Grammie's age. One day, the girl called Grammie into the bathroom where she was sitting on the toilet and told my Grammie to wipe her behind. Through

gritted teeth, my Grammie told her to wipe her own butt (only that's not the word she used). That was the end of that job.

My Grammie used to tell these stories, a lot of them with her characteristic sense of humor, as we spent time together. They weren't meant to be lessons, but they shaped my faith and my analysis of power.

It is as Mary Doyle MacKenzie Unwin's granddaughter that I come tonight to reflect on the first ten years of Room for All. This reflecting, this re-memorizing the beginnings of Room for All is a task, I believe, that requires of us both deep faith and an analysis of power—including our own.

Early on in my tenure as Faith Work Director for what is now called the National LGBTQ Task Force, I got a call from Harry Knox, Religion and Faith Director at HRC, inviting me to join a group he and Shari Brink were convening. I had just spent the previous two years as Interim National Coordinator of the UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns and I was asked to share some of my experiences with a group of folks from the Reformed Church in America. I flew to New York and made my way to Marble Collegiate church and into a large meeting room. Around the table sat about a dozen folks including Susan Russell from the Episcopal welcoming program, Integrity; Ruth Garwood, from the UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns, Mary, Norm and Ann Kansfield; Shari Brink and Rob Williams, Stacey Midge, Conrad Strauch, Karel Boersma, Ron Vande Bunte, Jack Branford and Ken Walsh, all founding board members of Room for All.

Over the course of that day, I had the incredible privilege of hearing about this group of faithful, exasperated, smart, angry, hurt, ready people. It had been almost six months since Norm Kansfield's trial with its guilty on all charges of "violating the peace, unity and purity of the church." They had a list of over 500 people who were "friends of Norm," which gave concrete evidence that they had already accomplished breaking silence on LGBTQ people and justice and put a significant chink in the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" environment within the RCA. They had queer people and straight people. They had some incredible leadership who happened to be between jobs. And they had also begun to unmask the depths of fear and hatred present within the RCA. With these resources and a sense that the Holy Spirit might be moving, they were looking to the rest of the Welcoming Church Movement to get some ideas about what they could do to leverage the

smart things that others had discovered and avoid some of the mistakes that others had made.

I have to tell you that I fell in love with you all that day in the early winter of 2006; and I've stayed in love with you ever since. After that first gathering, I got to come back and facilitate a board meeting. Among other things, I learned about Delftware, was introduced to Middle Collegiate's vision and got to help dream into being Room for All's first National Conference which happened in 2009. And then at that first National Conference in 2009, I got to hear from Rev. Shari Brink in her honest, humorous, pointed self; I got to have a drink with Rob Williams; I got to worship and sing and laugh with you all. And I got to share a bit about how we might use the wisdom of relational organizing to grow the numbers of Room for All congregations and the movement.

And then, since Room for All made the bold decision to hire a full-time Executive Director, I have had the profound honor and privilege to work with, and pray with, and hear the poetry of Marilyn Paarlberg as we've shared the Welcoming Church Program Leaders circle.

I love Room for All. I love the leadership you've empowered and attracted. I love the combination of deeply serious, theologically-grounded work with hilarious, outrageous humor. I love the care for beauty and the willingness to name and encounter pain.

It is out of this place of love that I want to share a few reflections with you tonight. I've entitled it a love letter from the movement. And I mean that in the senses I've outlined above about love. But I've also been troubled and challenged by James Baldwin's understanding of love. He says, "[t]he role of the artist is exactly the same as the role of the lover. If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don't see."<sup>1</sup>

So in all the senses of love and, in no particular order, here are some things that I see that are worth noting on this, your tenth birthday.

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<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin, "The Black Scholar Interviews James Baldwin," in *Conversations with James Baldwin*, ed. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 156.

1. You've chosen as your theme, From Sorrow to Celebration. It is an apt statement of the journey you've been on since the shock, pain and sorrow of Norm's trial and all the subsequent decisions that have further entrenched anti-LGBTQ policy on the denominational level. But I've recently been reflecting on Psalm 126 and two things from that text may nuance your theme a bit.

### Psalm 126

#### A Harvest of Joy

1 When our God restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.

2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
'The Divine has done great things for them.'

3 The Holy One has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.

4 Restore our fortunes, O God,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

5 May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.

6 Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.

The word for rejoicing is actually about the noise that is made by the people – as in a shout. But it is the same word for shouts of joy or of grief (rinnah). In other words, there is a very conscious connection between the dual realities of joy and grief in this text in a way that we moderns or post-moderns don't either understand or like. And that leads to the second point from this text and much of the Biblical witness. The ability to experience joy is rooted in a posture of gratitude and thanksgiving to God. It is our gratitude and thanksgiving to God that allows us to claim joy in the midst of grief. It is our rootedness in God that nudges us to claim

celebration in the here and now, even as there is still work to be done.<sup>2</sup> So, in other words, perhaps the theme for this conference might be “Celebration in the Midst of Sorrow because God is good. All the time. God is good.” Or, perhaps the theme might be “How Can I Keep from Singing.” Because God’s love and justice and power are here with us, even in the midst of oppression and injustice.

2. And there is plenty of injustice, for sure. I would hope that you *re-member*, as in call to mind, give body and form to, re-member your beginnings. The Reformed Church in America called its first ever, in the history of the denomination, trial. And what was the occasion for this trial? Was it because someone in leadership had perpetrated abuse against a child or a vulnerable adult? Had someone killed or wounded another? Had they used the Scripture to preach hatred and violence against God’s children? No, the leadership of the Reformed Church in America chose to call the first-ever trial because one in its leadership, a public theologian, chose to bear witness to and bless the love, fidelity and commitment of two people who wanted to form a covenant before God and their family. In response to this act of faith, the denomination offered outrage, venom and condemnation.

It is critically important that you not forget this context in which you are doing your work and ministry. There are power structures aligned and fortified against you, to be sure.

3. But into the reality of injustice and the power structures in which you operate, I want to tell you a story by Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman who was a mentor and teacher of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He writes:

*On one of our visits to Daytona Beach, I was eager to show my daughters some of my old haunts. We sauntered down the long street from the church to the riverfront. This had been the path of the procession to the baptismal ceremony in the Halifax River, which I had often described to them. We stopped here and there as I noted the changes that had taken place since that far-off time. At length, we passed the playground of the white public schools. As soon as Olive and Anne saw*

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Ashley Harness made these helpful exegetical observations in her sermon at Lyndale United Church of Christ in Minneapolis, MN on Sunday, October 18, 2015.

*the swings, they jumped for joy. “Look, Daddy, let’s go over and swing!” This was the inescapable moment of truth that every black parent in America must face soon or late. What do you say to your child at the critical moment of primary encounter?*

*“You can’t swing on those swings.”*

*“Why?”*

*“When we get home and have some cold lemonade I will tell you.”*

*When we were home again, and had had our lemonade, Anne pressed for the answer. “We are home now, Daddy. Tell us.” I said, “It is against the law for us to use those swings, even though it is a public school. At present, only white children can play there. But it takes the state legislature, the courts, the sheriffs and the policemen, the white churches, the mayors, the banks and businesses, and the majority of the white people in the State of Florida—it takes all these to keep two little black girls from swinging in those swings. That is how important you are! Never forget, the estimate of your own importance and self-worth can be judged by how many weapons and how much power people are willing to use to control you and keep you in the place they have assigned to you. You are two very important little girls. Your presence can threaten the entire state of Florida.”<sup>3</sup>*

My friends, our experiences of justice and injustice are different. The struggle for LGBTQ justice is not the same as that for Civil Rights. Racism and homo-, bi- and trans-phobia live and act in different ways. I don’t want to pretend to co-opt Dr. Thurman’s experience. But his wisdom of how we are called to live in relationship with policies and systems that seek to make us teach our children that we and they are less than our fellow church members is a powerful lesson.

4. This leads me to my fourth point. I believe you are called to be lovers of the Reformed Church in America. But lovers in the broadest sense and with James Baldwin’s insights. Any church that would call a first-ever trial to condemn and punish a witness to love and faithfulness has lost its way. Any church that punishes those who speak the truth about their incarnational response to God’s Incarnation (and that’s what coming out is really all

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman in his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*.

about), any church like that needs your prophetic work to call it home to itself. You are evangelists for the radical core of the gospel. Truly, the soul of the church is at stake.

5. It is not enough, however, to root ourselves in God's radical hope, to vocalize joy in the midst of sorrow. It is not enough to name the systems of power which oppress and marginalize. It is not enough to claim our worth amidst those systems of power, nor embrace the mantle of prophetic evangelism. This is a love letter from the movement as shared by Mary Doyle MacKenzie Unwin's grand-daughter. And movements know that deep faithfulness and power-analysis require wise strategy in order to embody that which we dream. So we also have to have a sound theory of change.

There is much to be said about a sound theory of change but let me mention two pieces that feel particularly important at this moment in Room for All's history. They have to do with posture and focus.

Part of the brilliance of Celebration in the midst of Sorrow is that it claims the dignity and worth that Rev. Dr. Thurman suggests. And it claims a *power* that no system of injustice can squelch. One of the outgrowths of this dignity, worth and power is that we can act in ways that recognize the humanity in those who would oppress, demonize and marginalize us. In the Welcoming Church Movement, we've referred to this as "graceful engagement." It is a kind of relational organizing that seeks to call forth the humanity, compassion and solidarity of those who would be our opponents. It is at the core of the Building an Inclusive Church training that many in Room for All have trained. Graceful engagement, then, is the posture for all we are and do.

The question of focus is critically important to pair with our posture. In looking back at the notes from that meeting in January of 2006 (pulled from Shari Brink's files!), I noted that part of the conversation that day centered on the need to build out a Welcoming Church component of Room for All. We talked about it then, and we still need to talk about it now, because change occurs when work happens from a number of angles. The work to

change denominational policy is critically important and organizing around General Synods is key. But, particularly when denominational policy continues to dig in, it is important to build up Room for All congregations.

Carol Wise of the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests describes it this way. At first, her organization focused its work on changing the official policies of the national denomination. But the denomination had constructed a kind of wall of negation and oppression. And her organization found themselves primarily in supplication and begging from those who wouldn't recognize their humanity. But then they realized their power and humanity came from God alone and then chose to turn their attention away from the wall and toward one another. They joined in circle and song to dance and sing. They celebrated one another and worshiped together. They called this their "dancing at the wall" time.

As you celebrate in the midst of sorrow, I believe you are in a "dancing at the wall" time, too. And by that I mean, while it is important to continue to engage with national denominational policy, I believe your strategy of focusing on the local level and growing the numbers of Room for All congregations and campus settings is where the present celebration and future joy lie. It is in these settings that graceful engagement can transform individual lives and create circles of healing and justice. It is also the building of a critical mass of these congregations and settings that will provide the sacred energy for shifting the denomination.

6. And that leads me to my sixth point (and don't worry, there is only one more point after six!) Never underestimate the transformative power of a Room for All congregation and campus groups—particularly in more conservative parts of the country. Not only are you literally a life-saving oasis, you are a critical leaven in the wider communities in which you live and minister. I have been here in Western Michigan several times in the last number of years doing pro-LGBTQ organizing and each time I am honestly deeply moved by the role that Hope Church in Holland has played in this area. And the presence of Jane Dickie at Hope College.... My first time at this National Conference, there were 30 Hope College students.



When I was at a progressive organizing conference at Grand Valley State University, everyone referred to Hope Church and its sacred witness. Room for All congregations and settings matter... to save individual lives, to witness to the larger denomination and to transform communities.

7. But, my friends, I can't be with you (and this is my seventh point) without saying one last piece. To practice deep faithfulness and utilize good power analysis, we have to be real about the reality that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not only about LGBTQ people. I know I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. Our struggles for justice are intertwined. They inspire and require of one another.

I know this in my own life because in 1987, I was part of a delegation that spent a week in El Salvador. While I was there, I met a Co-madre, a mother of the disappeared. She had literally just come from a protest at the Presidential palace where she had been tear-gassed and others had been shot. My eighteen year old self raised my hand and asked her how it was that she was able to protest the government and not be terrified. In response, she said to me.

"I have lost five of my children to this civil war. One of them, my oldest son, I witnessed being tortured to death.

"I have been able to survive because I know that in Jesus Christ, God knows in His body what it means to be tortured to death. So my son did not die alone, but being held in God's arms. And in the resurrection, God has said, once and for all, that life and love are stronger than death. So, it doesn't matter what they try to do to me. Even if they kill me, I know that God will resurrect me. And that makes me powerful."

Now, I am a double—PK (both of my folks are pastors), and I have heard a lot of sermons over the course of my life. Many of them have been brilliant. But no one has spoken more powerfully about the meaning of what God has done in Jesus Christ than that fearless, powerful Salvadoran woman. And to her, I owe the debt of my faith.

I also owe the debt of my desire to act for justice in the world. It was her witness in El Salvador to the power of the gospel to transform the world that gave me the ability to follow in my grandfather's footsteps.

My friends, our justice movements are not separate. LGBTQ justice is deeply intertwined with racial justice; is woven with economic justice; requires of us work on disability justice.

My prayer is that our time together here may help us celebrate amidst the sorrow because God is good, all the time, God is good. And may it help us work so that all of God's beloved children may "come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves."

Amen.