

FEARLESS™ DIALOGUES

A New Movement for Justice

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Contents

Foreword by Parker J. Palmer	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
1. Fear+Less Dialogues Introduced	1
2. Conversations with Country Dark: Beyond the Fear of the Unknown	15
3. The Welcome Table of Radical Hospitality: Beyond the Fear of Strangers	35
4. When Pupils See: Beyond the Fear of Plopping	65
5. Listening for the Love Below: Beyond the Fear of Appearing Ignorant	85
6. To Die a Good Death: Beyond the Fear of Oppressive Systems	119
Notes	153
Index	165

Fear+Less Dialogues Introduced

No dogs nip at my heels as I outstretch the three-foot measuring tape overhead, but I feel the ancestral presence of freedom fighters hoisting picket signs. With fists clenched on each side of the measuring tape, I sense a kinship with young activists who throw up their arms in protest and bow their knee to die-in. Unchoked by tear gas, my legs stand firm. But my unclouded eyes still water as I recall the faces of a hundred hues.

For a solitary moment, I gaze silently into the eyes of remembered faces standing before me. They too hold three-foot measuring tapes above their heads. Through my watery eyes, I see them clearly. There is the former gang leader in New Orleans with the garish knife wound chiseled around his neck from ear to ear. To his left, the Spanish-speaking New York pastor and the wheelchair activist from Georgia. My eyes continue to rove the room and I peep the quizzical grin of the aging white male business tycoon. Next to him, I behold the prophetic vision of the brown-faced girl from Ferguson, who saw a flash of heaven in her community where others saw only hell. I look around the room and recall the faces of thousands of unlikely partners drawn together by Fearless Dialogues for hard heartfelt conversations. . . . Then I see Monique Rivarde.

Twelve months before Fearless Dialogues entered public discourse, I met Monique in a crowded courtroom. A cloud cover of rage hovered over the sentencing, and teardrops showered down this mother's cheeks. Nevertheless, undeterred by fear, Monique looked squarely into

the eyes of the murderers of her eighteen-year-old son and challenged them to commit to become better men. Not once did Monique raise her voice, but when she spoke, people leaned in closer to hear. Months later in a Fearless Dialogues community conversation about police brutality, Monique sat amid a cloud of witnesses numbering nearly two hundred and offered another challenge: See and hear the pains of the unacknowledged all around us. Her words reverberated through every soul in the room. Again, she spoke barely above a thunderous whisper.

Rivarde represents a form of resistance that is quiet and forceful. According to Kevin Quashie, “resistance” that is solely described as a deafening outcry “is too clunky, vague and imprecise to be a catch-all for a whole range of human behaviors and ambitions.”¹ When quiet resistance is overlooked in history, it is possible to uplift the strides of televised protests and stamp out the acts of day-to-day resistance of the millions, like Monique, who will never make the headlines. Fearless Dialogues equips communities to see the invisible, to hear the muted, and to create change through quiet resistance and fearless speech.

THE BIRTH OF FEARLESS DIALOGUES

Seeking Truth through Troth

It was a sweltering afternoon in May 2013, yet colleague after colleague filed into the conference room. The summer seminar doubled as a think tank, and all in attendance were primed for conversation and eager to bring to life theories from my first book, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men*. Twelve in total, we encircled the conference table. Before speaking I scanned the room and took notice of these unlikely partners. Around the table were a power-plant engineer, a marketing executive, a graphic designer, a community organizer, a drug dealer turned artist, an IT specialist, a freelance journalist, a professional singer, a pastor, a fashion designer, and a corporate attorney. Once the room settled, I quietly searched the eyes of every individual in the circle. Behind every cornea, I saw a story. Beyond every iris, there lay a gift. In the silence that followed, I could sense the ancestors and archangels blessing the work before us and the unborn unbridling our tongues. Breaking through with quiet resistance, I uttered seven simple words of invocation, “It is good to finally see you.”

For the next hour, full-hearted introductions flowed freely in the space; it was evident that this gathering of gifted persons possessed great potential for catalyzing change. Yet between introductions, a discomforting silence lingered near. A closer look revealed that subtle smiles and uneasy laughter masked a nervous energy. Person after person recounted grim tales of similar gatherings of impassioned leaders. Each of these narratives echoed a tragic cycle:

- Impassioned leaders gather.
- The perils of paternalism, territorialism, and fear stifle conversation.
- With no framework for dialogue, the leaders retreat to familiar theories, practices, and dogmas.
- Creativity, collaboration, and change dissipate.
- Frustrated leaders depart.
- Seeking to chart a course that would avoid dialogical derailment, we declared a troth.

Centuries ago, individuals and communities inscribed sacred bonds with each other by declaring a troth. The Old English word “troth” is an ancient vow where persons or communities entered a covenant to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship. These solemn promises forged relationships of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks.² Our troth was simple. We covenanted to train our eyes to see individuals and communities hidden in plain view. We vowed to attune our ears to hear the muted who scream from the shadows. During our training and attunement, we pledged to remain in community and to address any rising discord in our group with courage and humility. This troth would illumine our way and guide our interactions.

For weeks we read, ate, and shared together. We were far from an ordinary class; the city was our laboratory. So together we walked urban streets, learning from community organizers and local pastors, swapping stories with griot-like grandmothers and down-to-earth drug dealers. In time, we recognized small yet noticeable shifts in the world around us. We were seeing differently. We were hearing differently. We were changing internally.

But just as our vision was clarifying, blind rage circulated on social media. Though we were hearing more deeply, we could not ignore the fever pitch of discord scouring national news:

George Zimmerman Found Not Guilty and Goes Free³

Twitter Erupts After Ex-Neighborhood Watchman Walks on . . .
Murder Charge⁴

Ivy League Professor Calls “God a Racist” after Zimmerman
Verdict

Verdict Doesn’t End Debate in Trayvon Martin Death

‘No Justice’: Thousands March for Trayvon Martin⁵

After Zimmerman Verdict, Trayvon Martin Isn’t Only Victim⁶

President Obama: Trayvon Martin Could Have Been Me⁷

White Churches Uncommonly Quiet after Zimmerman Verdict⁸

In the days following the July 13, 2013, verdict that found George Zimmerman not guilty for the murder of Trayvon Martin, constructive conversations seized. At dinner tables and lunch counters, dialogues were wedged between screams for justice and silent sorrow. Thousands jammed onto city streets and civic squares in protest, while even more sat at home in moral conflict, questioning their complicity or justifying their silence in fear of being labeled a bigot. A space was needed for hard heartfelt conversations that could transform a powder keg of emotion into a creative medium for change.

The time had come for Fearless Dialogues to move from theory to practice. So the twelve who gathered around that conference table in May sent out a call to action on social media, public radio, and print media: “We will have a community conversation about the Zimmerman verdict on July 20, 2013. All are welcome!”

Heaven on Earth: A Movement Unfolds

Rain pelted the summer-scorched concrete and steam rose like a numinous fog. Despite the traffic jams that gripped Atlanta, three hundred people bypassed bottlenecks and navigated side streets to find their way to Emory University. Each was unsatisfied with age-old options of writing their congressperson or toting placards on the capitol steps. Some needed a place to be seen and chose to no longer scream from the shadows. Others sought a space to hear the opinions of real people, not just thoughts of political pundits. Sifting through the fog, they searched for change . . . and we welcomed them with Radical Hospitality in the parking lot. Each person received the same introduction:

“It is good to finally see you. Welcome to Fearless Dialogues. Are you ready for change?”

As they entered the building, live music colored the air. Standing at a registration table adjacent to the door, a Fearless Dialogues team member greeted each person again with the same three prompts: “It is good to finally see you. Welcome to Fearless Dialogues. Are you ready for change?”

At this table, the dialogue continued as the community leaders gathering for conversation selected name tags that uniquely described the gifts of their soul. A judge chose a name tag that read “healer.” Emory’s assistant provost picked a name tag reading “artist.” A single mother placed an “educator” name tag on her dress, while a factory worker selected a name tag labeled “neighbor.” Once self-identified by their gifts, community leaders were invited upstairs by another Fearless Dialogues team member, who offered our signature salutation once more: “It is good to finally see you. Welcome to Fearless Dialogues. Are you ready for change?”

Overwrought by seven days of sensationalized media slander, schism, and debate over Zimmerman’s not-guilty verdict, these three hundred people proudly, even if tentatively, wore their soul-gifts on display. Many came seeking to understand and to be understood. Some sought a shoulder to cry on, while others yearned for a venue to vent. Jam-packed in the room, we anticipated hard conversation, but we could not pinpoint exactly what might happen that evening. After preliminary introductions and an explanation of the Fearless Dialogues philosophy, groups were divided based on the name tags chosen during registration. Not only did neighbors sit around tables with artists, healers, and educators. These groups also brought foundation executives, small-nonprofit leaders, factory workers, students, and drug dealers face-to-face.

Before the community conversation began, we introduced the Fearless Dialogues “animators” in the room. Unlike workshop facilitators, who call out participants raising their hands or waiting their turn to speak, Fearless Dialogues animators are uniquely trained to bring conversations to life. These animators give inspiration, encouragement, and renewed vigor to unlikely partners in dialogue.

After the animators laid out the ground rules for dialogue, they guided these small groups into conversation. On that first day, we had not yet developed our signature-theory based experiments, but the twelve of us who sat around that conference table and walked the city streets together noticed an uptick of hope as the exchanges between the three hundred deepened. Lifted by the energy of connecting with

unlikely partners in hard heartfelt conversation, the three hundred ended their time together by hoisting three-foot measuring tapes in the air and accepting a simple challenge.

Nearly an hour after taking the three-foot challenge, the band had played their last note, but the steady hum of conversation continued. Dozens of unlikely partners clung to the moment and remained deeply engaged in dialogue. We underestimated the impact of Radical Hospitality. We underappreciated the value of crafting space for unlikely partners to see the invisible and hear the muted. Then I had an unforgettable encounter as I exited the building.

Nearly out the door, one young man who sold drugs pulled me to the side and looked deeply into my eyes. Little did I know that his words would catalyze our movement. The words fell from his lips with a thick southern twang: “This felt like heaven. I haven’t been in many places where I can share my story and how I feel without being judged.”

Two days later, the twelve regathered around the conference table. Over a meal we recounted the moments on that Saturday afternoon when the dean saw the gifts in the drug dealer, the factory worker heard the vulnerabilities of the foundation executive, and the graduate student and the grieving mother envisioned communal change. On that rainy afternoon, we received a glimpse of heaven on earth. On July 20, 2013, human action collided with divine intervention, and Fearless Dialogues was born.

FEAR+LESS DIALOGUES

Fearless Dialogues is a grassroots nonprofit initiative committed to creating unique spaces for unlikely partners to engage in hard heartfelt conversations that see gifts in others, hear value in stories, and work for change and positive transformation in self and other. Thinking critically about the words “fear” and “less” individually, and then as a compound word, is central to the work of Fearless Dialogues. I invite you to consider these three words now.

Fear, noun \fi(ə)r\

an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat.

Like thin air leaking out of an airtight room, fear stifles, closes in, and isolates. Hounding us by day and harrowing by night, fear “lurks ready

to spring into action as soon as one is alone, or as soon as the lights go out, or as soon as one's social defenses are temporarily removed."¹⁰ This pervasive fear expects conflict and roots itself in the "heart of relationships between the weak and the strong, between the controllers of the environment and those who are controlled by it."¹¹ Often fear appears one-sided, as the weak are seemingly intimidated by the strong. However, an undiscussed and undisclosed fear also lingers in the hearts of many strong persons in power. They fear the possibility of being forcefully knocked from their pedestal. One debilitating result of fear is the inability to see beyond the facade of power or the visage of weakness and to glimpse the power that lies within. For meaningful connections to be forged, individuals and communities must face fear head on.

Less, det. & pronoun \les\
a smaller amount of, not as much

An antidote to fear, "lessness" is a posture of humility, perceptiveness, and intention not to lord power over others. This posture resists the temptations of possessing all the answers, and yields to the mysterious journey of raising questions. Lessness is not a diminishment of control. To the contrary, this posture requires attunement and discipline to listen first and not battle for the last word, to see a gift where others see only problems. In a dialogical landscape where news pundits shout down adversaries in their fear of losing ground or being wrong, Fearless Dialogues models another way to engage. Less is more.

Fear -less, adj \fi(ə)r\ + \les\
lacking fear

I have intentionally struck through the most common definition of "fearless" because this definition rings untrue for the work of Fearless Dialogues. In its most common usage, "fearless" is the composition of a root and a suffix ("fear" and "-less"). Here, the suffix "less" means "without." This construction connotes that hard heartfelt conversations can exist without the presence of fear. However, seldom is it the case that unlikely partners, whether self-identified by their soul-gifts or not, can engage in hard heartfelt conversation with absolutely no fear.

Fear + less, adj \fi(ə)r\ + \les\
compound word addressing the reality of fear and the possibility of "less-ness" to free unlikely partners to have hard heartfelt conversations.

A preferred structure for the work of convening unlikely partners is to define the word “fearless” by viewing the term as a compound word (“fear” + “less”). With a compound structure in mind, “less” means “to a smaller extent,” suggesting that when fears are named, they have less of a stranglehold on hard conversations. Further, “less” evokes images of a disciplined posture of lessness between conversation partners. Thus, as a compound word, “fear+less” dialogues offers greater possibilities for unlikely partners to engage challenging subjects together.

UNLIKELY PARTNERS TOO NUMEROUS TO COUNT

Fearless Dialogues is unique in scope because of its value of bringing unlikely partners into common spaces for dialogue. In the first Fearless Dialogues community conversation, faculty, students, staff, and administrators from Emory University found common ground with judges, foundation executives, factory workers, elected officials, drug dealers, and physicians. Since that summer afternoon in 2013, Fearless Dialogues has gathered more than 15,000 unlikely partners for community conversations in college classrooms, corporate boardrooms, church sanctuaries, and community centers. Whether working with incarcerated youth, community organizers, education professionals, or trustee boards, Fearless Dialogues emphasizes that even those who share common space with us daily may still occupy the role of Familiar Strangers. Therefore, we create conditions for unlikely partners like the judge and the felon, the rich and the poor, the old and the young to see and hear each other in new and enriching ways.

This book outlines the methodology of Fearless Dialogues by simulating a community conversation between unlikely partners. Within these pages you will notice theoretical voices from pastoral theology, Quaker philosophy, African American history, and twentieth-century mysticism, alongside the ancestral wisdom from the Black literary tradition. You will overhear formative moments from my youth, behold the timeless wisdom of my grandparents, and listen to transformative encounters from Fearless Dialogues gatherings. Just as hard heartfelt conversations between corporate executives and artists or gang members and stay-at-home moms are critical for the “work” of Fearless Dialogues, so also is the cacophony of dialogue partners within these pages vital to our learning. For the Fearless Dialogues method to remain

authentic, its methodology must not justify the ends but rather practice them.

As author, I accept the honor of “animating” the dialogue in this book. During Fearless Dialogues conversations, animators utilize an unconventional combination of interactive exercises, small- and large-group reflection, and high-impact theory-based lectures, all wrapped in the posture of “lessness” and in the arms of Radical Hospitality. In this role, I am privileged to guide you through theory and practices that have made the work of Fearless Dialogues meaningful for countless unlikely partners.

My freewheeling style of writing—from poetry and prose to cultural criticism and historical snapshots—mirrors my approach to teaching and counseling, which maintains that animators must capture the audience’s imagination in seconds, lest these animators find themselves tuned out and invisible. The poetry, prose, and creative writing are intended to stimulate the imagination of the artists. Attention to the mystical tradition and practices to foster individual and collective wholeness may resonate with the healers. The close examination of theoretical sources and attention to multisensory learning styles may refresh the minds and hearts of educators. The neighbors are invited to feel connection in the varied experiments formed in the laboratory of discovery. Activists might use this text as a barometer to measure their sensitivity to seeing, hearing, and standing alongside those who remain unacknowledged and marginalized. Finally, the connectors may engage in a meta-analysis of how Fearless Dialogues animators bring conversations to life while carefully balancing strong personalities and unstable power dynamics.

Finally, since this work is not a Fearless Monologue, you will be invited into the conversation as well. Throughout the book, as I move between theory, practice, and narrative, I pose italicized questions directly to you, Beloved Reader. As these questions bear deep philosophical and vocational weight, you may choose to respond with your voice by scribbling thoughts and feelings directly into the margin or in a nearby journal. While this is not a workbook, the pages following are written to evoke conversation with others and provoke a deep and interrogating conversation with self. Since some of the moments of this book are especially tense, be aware of times when I invite you to breathe, stretch, or observe silence. Please accept my invitation to you, Beloved Reader, to join Fearless Dialogues as our latest unlikely

partner. “It is good to finally see you. Welcome to Fearless Dialogues. Are you ready for change?”

THE JOURNEY AHEAD

In Fearless Dialogues’ work with thousands of unlikely partners and dozens of communities around the globe, my colleagues and I have noticed five primary fears that stifle conversation: the fear of the unknown, the fear of strangers, the fear of plopping, the fear of appearing ignorant, and the fear of oppressive systems. Each of the five remaining chapters examines how Fearless Dialogues utilizes theories and practices to overcome these fears that impede meaningful exchange.

Creating unique spaces for hard heartfelt conversation is the niche of Fearless Dialogues and our response to the perilous fear of the unknown. In a conversation with country dark, chapter 2 moves us into the luminous darkness. Surrounded by the magic of country dark, I share with you how Fearless Dialogues creates spaces that embrace failure, stimulate the senses, and identify pockets of freedom. I am certain that my Grandma’s wisdom and Barbara Brown Taylor’s sacramental vision will make altars of the spaces in which you move.

At my maternal grandmother’s welcome table, we learned to lessen our fears of strangers. Chapter 3 introduces Fearless Dialogues’ unique approaches to Radical Hospitality. Guided by soul-stirring narratives and conversations with diverse theorists like mystic and educator Parker J. Palmer, pastoral theologian Robert C. Dykstra, social psychologist Stanley Milgram, and my gun-toting Granma, you will feast at the welcome table with Public Strangers, Familiar Strangers, Intimate Strangers, and the Stranger Within.

Have you ever shared your truth in a classroom, a boardroom, or your family dinner table, only to have your cherished words crash to the floor with no response? Master educator Jane Vella calls this painful experience of not being valued as a speaker “plopping.” In chapter 4, to examine the fear of plopping, I recount my own educational journey from an inner-city high school in Atlanta to the hallowed halls of Princeton’s Ivy Green. Lessons from these institutions of higher learning and theories from psychologist William James and social psychologist Kipling Williams inform how Fearless Dialogues helps unlikely partners to see the unacknowledged all around us.

“I am unfit. I feel unequipped. I feel unprepared.” These three insecurities mask a fear of appearing ignorant. In chapter 5, I share Fearless Dialogues’ threefold approach to peeling away these masking insecurities. As you learn to increase proximity, listen empathically, and inquire humbly, I introduce you to the works of sociologist James A. Vela-McConnell, pastoral theologian Karen Scheib, and the Carmelite monk William McNamara. Perhaps more compelling is my invitation for you to descend with me into the belly of the beast, where we will take A Long Loving Look at the Real and face life’s Five Hardest Questions.

“I am not an activist because I don’t . . .” Far too many change agents are immobilized by oppressive systems that predetermine the acceptable parameters of activism. To face the fear of oppressive systems and move beyond vocations of negation, chapter 6 asks the bone-chilling question “What must I do to die a good death?” Guided by the adolescent lives of Martin Luther, Howard Thurman, Jesus Christ, and my childhood hero, together we will be galvanized to change the three feet around us.

THREE FEET, THREE WORDS, THREE PILLARS

Whether standing in an auditorium in Nassau, a classroom in Sao Paulo, a concert hall in Atlanta, or a church in Memphis, I issue the same challenge to the remembered faces holding a three-foot measuring tape overhead. As we look eye to eye, I share the Fearless Dialogues rallying cry, a life-changing story from my childhood:

This may come as no surprise to you, but I was a strange child who asked big questions. After all, I was reared in the home of activists, and I walked the hills of Atlanta in the shadows of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center. In all her wisdom, my Aunt Dotty was unalarmed when I, at eight years old, asked how I could change the world. Honoring my boyish justice impulse, she responded, “Baby, I don’t know how to change the world, but I can change the three feet around me.”

Over three decades since that porcheside chat with Aunt Dotty, the Fearless Dialogues team has challenged more than 15,000 people worldwide to see the lives and hear the stories of three people who cross within their three feet. The three-foot challenge anchors this new movement for justice.

It may sound unconventional to hear that Fearless Dialogues measures both local and global change in thirty-six-inch increments. Built on the cornerstone of my personal mantra, “Once you see, you cannot not see,” at base level Fearless Dialogues encourages community leaders to become fully aware of the people and resources existent within their three-feet orbit. Equipped with heightened awareness of the potential gifts and valued assets within arm’s reach, community leaders come to experience an altered vision that changes how they move in the world. For instance, once you truly come to see a maître d’, a drug dealer, a homeless person, or a traumatized teenager as someone made in the image of God, with a potential and perhaps undiscovered gift that can change the course of a community, you can no longer disregard that human being. You can no longer overlook them, bypass them, or step over them, because you have seen them cross within your three feet . . . and once you see, you cannot not see.

The Fearless Dialogues three-feet challenge stands firmly on three feet, or shall I say, three pillars: See. Hear. Change. In my years of research on marginalization, muteness, and invisibility, I have come to believe that purposeful engagement and sustainable change are not possible while community partners remain unseen and unheard.¹² For this reason, Fearless Dialogues places primacy on seeing and hearing as gateways to change. More specifically, we believe that when unlikely partners come to see individuals around them as innately gifted human beings, then they can hear the stories of people from seemingly different backgrounds as valuable. With the capacity to see gifts and hear wisdom within unfamiliar stories, the pump is primed for unlikely partners to pursue change. These three pillars—See, Hear, Change—are indelibly infused into the theory and practice of Fearless Dialogues.

As is illustrated throughout this book, to *see* is much more than to behold with the eye, because “vision is one of the laziest senses.”¹³ The full sensory nature of seeing became clear to me years ago when I had the pleasure of visiting the New York art studio of the internationally renowned Japanese American artist Makoto “Mako” Fujimura. Upon my entering the lofted space, an aromatic admixture of metal dust, saturated paper, and acrylic paints traveled through my nostrils and settled in my throat. The smell and taste of the space immediately transformed my preconceived notion of an art studio into an alchemist lab. As I touched the fine-ground gold dust that layers Mako’s paintings, I came to see his works with greater texture and meaning. Akin to Fujimura’s alchemist-like art studio, Fearless Dialogues creates unique spaces that

heighten sensory awareness. Utilizing visual art, music, and interactive exercises, this hypersensory environment, known as the Laboratory of Discovery, aids community partners in “seeing” the gifts in themselves and in those around them.

The art of *hearing* is also multitextured. One must train the ear, intensify the imagination, and expand levels of empathy to hear value in the stories of others who are seemingly different. Laden in the theory and practice of Fearless Dialogues one finds the benefits of carefully listening both to piercing rage and quiet courage. Consistent with the musical symbolism throughout this book, my piano teacher, Simon, once told me, “When life is hard, music makes it easier to breathe.” Likewise, in the heat of hard heartfelt conversations, an ear attuned to hope can provide a pocket of air for unlikely partners suffocated by problems that seem asphyxiating.

The great cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Embracing Mead’s aspiration, Fearless Dialogues maintains that global *change* embraces the paradoxical tensions of narrative, space, and time. As is reiterated throughout this book, small, seemingly insignificant practices can precipitate lasting change. When ordinary individuals fearlessly commit to changing the three feet around them, the tectonic plates of a community shift. Finally, Fearless Dialogues creates crucible moments for time-bending transformation that emerge when human interaction collides with divine intervention. In these rare moments, the past is reframed, future possibilities appear attainable, the present is energized with hope, and the kingdom of God descends to earth. For Fearless Dialogues, change is both local and global; it transforms individuals and multiple generations; it collapses time to clarify vision; and it energizes the heads and hearts of unlikely partners.

THE QUIET COURAGE TO SPEAK AND TO BE

In a national climate where political pundits spar on television, and social media debates end in stalemate, there are few models that demonstrate conversation across lines of difference. Yet families, churches, schools, and corporations desire pathways to engage in meaningful conversations and face difficult subjects. Perhaps this is why you have chosen this book. In the pages that follow, I will share with you how

Fearless Dialogues creates unique spaces for unlikely partners to overcome fears and engage in hard heartfelt conversation. Together, we will embark on a journey of self-examination and explore how social change is spurred by deep engagement with the variety of people who cross within our three feet. As you muster the quiet courage to speak and to be, I extend this invitation to you, Beloved Reader: Welcome to Fearless Dialogues! It is good to finally see you. Are you ready for change? Let's get to work!