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Title

Rev. Dr. Deborah Johnson Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

October 31, 2017

Extant

1 hour 32 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Rev. Dr. Deborah Johnson discusses her path to founding the Omnifaith outreach ministry, Inner Light, and her work as social justice activist, which has included AIDS and marriage equality activism.

Biographical

The Rev. Deborah L. Johnson was born in Los Angeles, California at 1956, toward the end of the “baby boom.” She came of age during the tumultuous 1960s and early ‘70s with urban riots, assassinations, burgeoning feminist and LGBT movements—a time of much seeking and searching. Deborah sensed a dissonance within herself as a child. Not aware of the notion of gay, she questioned if she was trans, - a boy in a girl’s body as she did not relate to “girly” things but rather wanted to be the hero who got the girl. As early as age 11, Deborah recalls talking with her parents about her gender dilemmas. She knew she didn’t want to be a boy or emulate masculine culture; what she sought was the power and privilege afforded to males simply for being male. She learned that she had her own inner power as a female.

Deborah grew up in one of the flagship churches of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC)—Emmanuel Church under the leadership of Bishop Samuel Crouch. Deborah was mentored there by a number of prominent and successful adults. Although he was a well-known leader in the world Pentecostal Movement, Crouch was calm and soft-spoken in his demeanor.

Deborah never experienced any condemnation from him. However, many of the guest preachers and speakers who came through Emmanuel to preached while he was touring regularly spewed “hell, fire and brimstone” against homosexuality, amongst other “deadly sins.”

Deborah's very Pentecostal mom taught remedial math at a school for at risk girls. Her more moderate Christian father was a pharmacist. In the 10th grade, Deborah's did her first term paper on homosexuality soon after the Stonewall Riots. As the only books on the subject at the time were reference books, Deborah had her mom to drive her around town to various libraries to research clueless that this was a big clue to her mom. This only raised the suspicion her mother already had about Deborah's relationship with a girlfriend that was "too close." During this period, Deborah's mom walks in on them necking and the battle was soon on to save Deborah's soul. The couple stayed together throughout Deborah's high school and college years.

As a 15-year old high school senior and president of the student body of her 3,200, Deborah was very politically active determined to become a civil rights lawyer. She received the call to ministry during an altar call at a Youth Convocation in NYC complete with the baptism of the Holy Spirit, including speaking in tongues which at the time Deborah disbelieved. Deborah's mom was president of the Women's Christian Council, a position she ultimately would hold for 45 years. Believing that God would also send her to hell for her child's homosexuality, Deborah's call to ministry was answered prayer and the sign that God would turn Deborah straight. Her mom's zeal to save them both from the ravages of hell in the afterlife created a living hell on earth with her homemade conversion therapies. Deborah's father, a pharmacist proposed a medical route. She finally consented to psychiatry with no meds or shock therapy, but eventually refused any more efforts to "cure" her.

Deborah graduated from high school in 1972 at age 16 and enrolled in USC, the family tradition.

Given the three-pronged assault on homosexuality of the day—abnormal under psychiatry, a felony crime under the law, satanic in her church doctrine—there were scant resources and no positive images for coming out. However, at the same time, there was a trinity of liberation, the release of two books and a play – *The Lord Is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay* by Rev Troy Perry the title suggesting that God could love gay people; *Lesbian Women* by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, her first evidence that a long term relationship between two women was possible; and Ntozake Shange's play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, "I found God in myself and I love her fiercely." This became the great awakening, the spiritual turning point for Deborah - God made her who she is, a relationship is possible, and God can be found within her as feminine not exclusively masculine..... OMG!!! This confirmed her deep-seeded belief in innate entitlement—she had the right not only to exist, but to have all that everyone else had. This began her journey to freedom.

As she started college, the new gay group on campus met at a religious center, technically "off-campus," but physically located in the center of campus. Given her background, it seemed heretical for a gay group to meet in a church. Ironically, in the early days of the movement, a number of gay groups found that the only place they could meet was in a church or religious center. Initially Deborah was fearful to even pick up a flyer for one of the meetings. Believing Rev MLK Jr "God would not saddle any group with a permanent yoke of inferiority," she maintained a fierce determination to manifest the prophecy she saw of being an equal citizen. She was prepared to change the entire world to make it so. The old-time Fanny Crosby hymn "Pass me not, O gentle Savior....do not pass me by," became a solace for her.

Her theology and social thinking changed significantly during these college years. However, she still lived her life in the closet. To protect her brother and cousin on campus at the same

time, Deborah would go out in public with a guy who knew she was gay even though she had a girlfriend.

Deborah earned a B.A. degree in economics from USC and an M.B.A. from UCLA. In her post-college years she began quickly moved into a life of activism.

She served on the board of the Los Angeles Community Services Center beginning in 1979.

The onset of HIV/AIDS dramatically changed the political and sociological landscape. Up to that point it was simply accepted that gays were outsiders in the Black Church. However, when the Black Church turned its back on so many men dying of AIDS, their family members began to push back on this inhospitality and injustice. AIDS also brought men and women together in the movement in ways they had not been previously. Every male member of the LA Center who originally served with Deborah and started the first AIDS organizations all died of the disease.

Lesbians began to emerge in more positions of leadership. A "Blood Sisters" group was launched to donate blood. The onslaught of AIDS led to a deeper sense of spiritual community among gay and lesbian networks as we cared for the sick and dying.

Deborah continued to provide leadership in moving both church and society to being more open and inclusive to LGBT persons. She served on the Board of The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force 1991-1996, including as Co-Chair. She served as the co-plaintiff in the landmark 1984 court decision that set the precedence for the inclusion of sexual orientation in the California Civil Rights Bill. Later in 2007 she was a the successful co-defendant with Gray Davis in defending the state's Domestic Partnership Act.

An important collaborator and mentor in Deborah's life has been Michael Bernard Beckwith, well-known practitioner of New Global Thought and founder and leader of the Agape International Spiritual Center in southern California. Deborah and Michael were raised in the same neighborhood and were friends from adolescence and she is a founding member of Agape. Their spiritual journeys ebbed and flowed alongside each other with Michael often serving as a spiritual guide for Deborah. After Michael went to ministerial school and founded his own religious center, Agape International, Deborah did likewise, getting a ministerial degree from the same alma mater Holmes Institute for Consciousness Studies, the Religious Science seminary. In 2014, his seminary awarded her with an honorary Doctorate of Divinity.

Having experienced a call to ministry at age 15, Rev. Johnson remained constant over the years in her understanding of the interweavings of the civil/secular and the religious/sacred. She continually espoused the understanding that they cannot be separated, but they must inform each other.

Beginning in 1995 she discovered her own prophetic voice. In a moment of darkness she heard the Voice of the Divine, whispering complete letters to her. She published some of these letters in a series Letters From the Infinite, currently with two volumes, The Sacred Yes and Your Deepest Intent.

Preparing the letters for publication became an intense spiritual journey of affirmation for Deborah, having to dig deep into her own consciousness in order to become an oracle.

In January 1997, Rev. Deborah started Inner Light Ministries with twice-monthly religious services at the Veterans Hall in downtown Santa Cruz. Inner Light Ministries is an Omnifaith outreach ministry dedicated to teaching the practical application of Universal Spiritual Principles to all of life's circumstances. Johnson espouses a vision of Oneness, beyond creed and

doctrine, and feels particularly called to heal the sense of separation between those adhering to conservative and progressive ideologies.

Johnson also founded The Motivational Institute, an organizational development consulting firm specializing in cultural diversity serving the public, private, and non-profit sectors. Her clients have ranged from Fortune 500 companies to community based organizations. She is recognized as a dynamic public speaker, known for her ability to bring clarity to complex and emotionally charged issues.

Rev. Deborah was inducted into the Board of Preachers of the Martin Luther King Jr. Chapel at Morehouse College which honors clergy for their lifetime work in social justice. She has been a leadership development trainer for the Network of Spiritual Progressives, founded by Rabbi Michael Lerner and the Tikkun Community, Cornel West, and Sister Joan Chittister. As an advocate for continual and lifelong learning, Rev. Deborah has been a faculty member at several institutes of higher learning: UCLA's Anderson Graduate School of Business Executive Leadership LGBT Diversity Training Institute; Pacific School of Religion; Holmes Institute of Consciousness Studies; and the Agape University of Transformational Studies and Leadership. She has been also an Advisory Council member in the Association of Global New Thought and the Women's Studies Department at Brandeis University. Her groundbreaking work has been featured in numerous books, magazines, radio, and television programs including Conversations with Neale (Neale Donald Walsch) radio show, Shambhala Sun magazine, Showtime TV's Black Filmmaker Showcase production Jumpin' the Broom, the film God and Gays: Bridging the Gap, and ABC Nightline.

As a sign of God's redemption and divine humor, Inner Light Ministries purchased and moved into a former Assemblies of God Church in Santa Cruz in 2003. That pulpit was instrumental in the founding of Exodus International. One of the former pastors, Rev Darlene Vogel, was a leader in the ex-gay movement. For Rev. Deborah this transformation portrays one of the major themes in her life—to go back to the places where there has been hurt, pain and discrimination and bring an inclusive message of love.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Rev. Dr. Deborah Johnson discusses her path to founding Inner Light, an Omnifaith outreach ministry, and her work as social justice activist. Forced into conversion therapy by her Pentecostal mother as a teen, she was able to follow a call to activism after college. She served on the board of the L.A. Community Services Center during the AIDS crisis, and was co-litigant in two successful cases establishing gay rights in the state of California.

This interview was conducted by Dr. Monique Moultrie, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Georgia State University, and author of *Hidden Histories: Faith and Black Lesbian Leadership*. She conducted this interview as a consultant of LGBTQ-RAN as part of the oral histories project.

Access

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/deborah-johnson>

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Languages

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Johnson, Deborah

Clergy Activist

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EXHIBIT Rolling the Stone Away

National Gay & Lesbian Task Force