

## Oral History Interview: Kentina Washington Leapheart (part 2)

Interviewer: Monique Moultrie

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Monique Moultrie: Gosh. Okay, so I'm going to keep us to time so I can get you back to your life, your weekend.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yes.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, so I had four more questions that you can take in any order you can address all of them or none of them so that we can be done say in the next 20 minutes.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Okay.

Monique Moultrie: Because I think that's about how much time we had left before we had to move again. So I had a question about your ordination and what led you to get ordained given you're... now seeing yourself sort of pastoring and ordination is usually a step in that. I had a question, because you and Naomi are actually the youngest people that I've interviewed and I found I wanted to interview both of you because I was really inspired by the level of your activism at such young ages and I wanted to know what sustains you, what motivates you because that isn't the norm. Most of the activists that I've interviewed have sort of had a life and then they came into sort of work around LGBT issues or work around poverty reform, work around something after they did the having the children raising a family, et cetera. I have a question about identities which speak to you and which do you claim for yourself and then I have a question about sustainability. What do you do, what care practices to keep you on the journey?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Okay, cool. Let's see. Ordination. I think that ordination for me are, are you recording? Sorry.

Monique Moultrie: No, no, no, go ahead.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Okay. It didn't, I did not do it or pursue it because of... interest in pastoring, I think there was some practicality to it. One, because if I was going to continue in full time ministry in particular, if I was going to go back into chaplaincy or something like that, to have the affirmation and endorsement of a religious body would be necessary. I think I had that in kind of quasi or sort of informal ways, but I did not have that in a formal way because I had not pursued it through any of the kind of mainline Protestant pathways for lots of reasons. And TFAM felt and feels like a place where I can, you know, be the pieces and parts of my most authentic self. And so having their affirmation or formal affirmation of who I am and my gifts and for this work felt good and right and really necessary. And so that's why I pursued it that way.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I'm trying to think of...

Monique Moultrie: Is the ordination through TFAM also through UCC? Except the...

Kentina Washington Leapheart: No. So I have not... they do have a... TFAM does have a reciprocal relationship, but you can have dual standing. You can go for dual standing. But I have not pursued reclamation in the UCC. I have the, I was a member of the UCC church through my first year of seminary. I took the UCC politics class. I've done CPEs. So in many respects I do have most of the requirements for One Nation UCC, but I have not been formally connected to a UCC congregation in any sort of length of time. Like you would have recently. So in each association with the UCC is different in terms of what they require. And so even though I had been a member, for example, of Trinity for five years or six years or something at the point that I went to seminary, that doesn't necessarily transfer over for me being here in Philly.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I haven't found a church here, UCC church here any way that kind of fits me. So I'm not a person that feels that compulsory church attendance or membership is how I legitimize like... my call. I know that there's lots of different schools of thought about that. I have never been one that has attended church in a compulsory fashion. I wanted it to be cause I wanted to go. So yeah. So until I find that kind of space or place... In Chicago, I did, but that was Episcopal congregation. That's the congregation that I was a member of right before I moved to Philly. And so that, I still do call that my church home and tithe there and all that.

Monique Moultrie: Okay. The next set of questions was around what motivates your witness? Where do you find courage? What sustains you?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I think I'm motivated by, I think when I think about chaplaincy for example, and I think about kind of why I started in that role and what it felt like to be an advocate or an activist. Like I've used the word advocate or any kind of activist interchangeably. For me it was because I feel compelled to act as a voice or to help to amplify voices that get drowned out by the deluge of injustice in this world. and so whether that's injustice on a small scale, you go to a hospital and the doctor doesn't believe you when you say that you're in pain, or a large scale, you can't access abortion or live in an unsafe community where your kids are worried about how they're getting back to school every day... or you're living in Chicago and the teachers are on strike right now because they need to be, you know? The voices of people who nobody wants to listen to get drowned out.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And so perhaps if I could do some small part to number one even hear those voices, to put my ear to them, and number two to amplify them and use whatever privileges that I might have by virtue of my education and by virtue of my class status by virtue of my experiences, I would like to do that. I have a daughter and so I think that much of the work that I do around issues related to women are not only because I'm a woman and I'm committed to women's health and women's equality, but also because I'm trying to, sometimes kicking and screaming, raise a teenager who will be proud of who she is in all of her identities. As soon as she comes to know all of those and grows up and will live in a world where she's not in danger or punished because of her identities as a black person, as a woman, et cetera, et cetera.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And I know that's in a perfect world, right? But she will be an adult woman making adult woman decisions one day. And I would hope that she has all the information and that we've done best as we can to give her all that she needs and to try to create an environment for her to be able to do that from the depths of her own convictions. So yeah, I think that is a huge motivator. I think... Yeah.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I just think thinking about it, particularly when I think about women's health, my own health and challenges that I've had, challenges that my spouse has had and having to advocate for her, challenges that Sophia has had advocating for her. Like those are... My own family unit at minimum is what motivates me. And I know that, like I said, we live in relative privilege where, you know, when I show up in a hospital space or a healthcare space, folks don't expect me, and I'm like, this is my job, to advocate, right. And to be educated about this. And I know that, that everybody doesn't have that.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So figuring out ways that I can participate in lessening that gap.

Monique Moultrie: So what sustains you in the midst of this never ending work?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Well, in terms of how I care for myself, I'm a big believer of separation of church and state. And when I say that, I mean boundaries are huge and I know that people kind of throw that terminology around, but I am not a workaholic. I have never been in any job that I've ever had, whether it was straight or otherwise. And so, Toni Morrison, when that article that she wrote the New Yorker about work or that essay, that story, it got kind of re-circulated right before she died. And people were like, wow, I really... That really resonated with me because I really feel that whatever work that I do, meaning work that I'm getting paid for or work that is secondary to the work that I'm trying to do to... create an environment in my household and in my family situation that is healthy and whole. And because I can't pour myself out into all of these other spaces that is not right at home and nothing is perfect. Right? But that is my most important work and I know that.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And I don't mean that in a way of saying that for people who... that I'm somehow more evolved or whatever. And on saying that, realizing that that's my most important work or that I'm my most important work when I say that it helps me to be able to have a balance because I don't, I have real fears about my child. For example, growing up and being like my mom was, all of these things and all of these places, but our household was a mess, And I've had lots of friends who grew up with high achieving ministry parents who were in ministry and were activists and were terrible parents or were terrible spouses.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: My spouse and I talked about all the time, what good is it if we're out doing justice in the world, whatever that looks like, and we're not doing that in our own relationship. I don't think it has to be that you are a brilliant activist and a terrible spouse or a brilliant activist and a terrible parent, or a prolific pastor and a terrible... I think that there has to be some intentionality. I think that institutions, whether it's a church or a nonprofit or a university will own you or treat you like they own you unless you decide to say that that's not going to happen. And I don't say that to make it seem like it's easy, but I refuse to be owned.

Monique Moultrie: No, that's for real.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So I, what I am sustained by is having some clear boundaries. So I don't talk about work 24 hours a day. I tell my spouse I don't want to talk about work 24 hours a day,

Monique Moultrie: She's very appreciative. She mentioned that in her interview.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And that, cause sometimes...

Monique Moultrie: She said that sometimes you will look at her like are you emailing?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: When you're married to someone who is wired that way, who is a workaholic, and I don't say that in a negative way. It's just who she is, and you're not. You have to figure out kind of a balance. Right? Because it will be a situation where the constant necessity to work and the constant for us in particular, when we were both working in movement spaces, the constant having to be angry and outraged about the latest thing, like getting paid to do that. Right? And I'm like, I can't, I can't.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And it doesn't mean that there isn't something to be mad about every day, there is. But at some point you got to be like, I'm about to watch something on Netflix and eat this chicken wing and I'm not, I can't do this right now. And so I do, I turn off because not because, and that's a privilege space. Like I know that I have some privilege and being able to be like, I'm not doing this today. But I think that the social justice industrial complex requires you to constantly be outraged. And I know that for me or whatever my next move is in terms of my vocation, that's not something that I'm able to do for my own sense of mental health and wellbeing, as well as so that I can show up in a particular kind of way for my spouse or for my child and for my friends.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So I get sleep. Sleep is nonnegotiable for me. That's a sustaining thing. I think that not getting good sleep will kill you, or will contribute to that. I try to make sure that I'm making sure that I'm getting the rest and sometimes it takes a little negotiation when you're married to a night owl like I am, but people work it out, you know, trying to manage my stress.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I don't think I'm an extreme empath, but I do think that I have some qualities of that. And so I have to figure out ways to not absorb other people's stress as well as my own stress and cope with it just because stress will kill you. I just posted an article about that yesterday. So, those are the kinds of things... eating well. And when I say eating well, I don't mean like some crazy fad diet. I mean I eat what I want to eat and enjoying food, enjoying the process of cooking food or going to a nice restaurant eating food or whatever. Just the pleasure that comes from eating something that you really enjoy, that that brings me a lot. I volunteer with causes that matter to me. I get paid for it, but it's my way of giving back.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And then I talked about how my grandparents, grandmother on my father's side, you had me thinking how she planted a seed in me about the arts. And so

we spent a lot of time going to plays and going to concerts and documentary films and different things like that. We love that kind of stuff. And that helps to keep us having fun outside of the work that we have to do on a day to day basis. So that is a relaxation, you know, I can relax. Sometimes it's hard for people.

Monique Moultrie: I was going to say, that's a skill!

Kentina Washington Leapheart: It's a skill! I like to vacation and relax when we can. So yeah, being outside in nature, walking, those are the way, those are the things that I do so that I can show up. But really it is about having a balance. And I think if I learned nothing else by working in a nonprofit movement space is that you have to have that balance. And I think that we were... my job in ways that a lot of other jobs aren't like this, I worked for someone who was very committed to balance. So she wasn't a person that had us working 24 hours a day or expect that of us. And so it was easier I think to turn off and on then is always possible, so that's how I sustain.

Monique Moultrie: For the record. What identities are important to you?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Well, I've been thinking about ever since Toni Morrison died, that line, be your best thing. I think that that is like, as I journey through my 40th year here, what does it mean to be my best thing? I think that I realized in the last several years that so many of my identities have shifted and changed and some have even been projected onto me that aren't mine. I got married and I'm married to someone who was very public facing and I wasn't so much right before that. And so I've learned what that means and that identity shift, as we were talking about with your coming up for you. And so I've been doing a lot of work around like... who am I now as I shift and change? So right now I think I am my best thing. So that's an identity. I am a mother of a teenager, which is a particular, of a black girl teenager. I am a wife. I am a minister who is in between calls.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I'm a black woman and these are in no particular order. So I'm a black woman. I'm a womanist. I'm queer. I am compelled, a person who is compelled by the Jesus narrative and project is our colleague. I'm not self identifying as a Christian these days, even though I'm compelled by a Christ. But I feel like the Christian moniker has just been so bastardized by evangelicals. But yeah, I am on a journey. I know that sounds cliché, but I really feel like that. Okay. And activists, like I was saying before... I don't know if I feel like I'm an activist, but I definitely feel like I'm trying to be an advocate. And I think in all of the ministry placements that I have found myself in over the last 10 years, nine years, I'd like to think that I was an advocate.

Monique Moultrie: Perfect. We are done.