

## Oral History Interview: Louis Mitchell

Interviewee: Louis Mitchell

Interviewer: Monique Moultrie

Date: October 31, 2017

Monique M. My name is Monique Moultrie. Today is October 31, 2017, and I'm here with Rev. Louis Mitchell. We are conducting an oral history to supplement the biographical statement that's on the LGBT-RAN site. We are going to begin wherever you want. It's your oral history. And so in the process, generally you are the narrator. As you see, I have tons of questions that I'm going to interject when needed, but really I'm going to let you talk and tell the story the way you want. So feel free, if I ask a question that you don't want to answer, do not do so. Feel free to go back and elaborate on something. If we're talking about high school and you want to talk about something yesterday, feel free to do that.

Our goal for the listener as well as the person who's going to read the transcript is to provide how you want your history recorded, what you would want the next generation to know about your life, told in your own words, narrated in your own way. So as I said, we can start wherever. For some folks I start in their early life and we progressively go through the decades. For others we start—

Louis M. Depending on how many decades you got, that could take a while.

Monique M. Yes. And so we have two hours, so...

Louis M. I don't have two hours. I've got a staff board meeting after this, but yeah, we're good.

Monique M. So we are going to move through wherever you want. So I start with that. So where do you want to start?

Louis M. That's a really hard question. You know, I guess in the beginning. I was born in 1960 in Los Angeles, right in the middle of Los Angeles, and born to a single mother who was raised in a very Christian home. The home was filled with my grandmother, the matriarch, Janie Mae Johnson, and her three youngest daughters. Of those three, my mommy was the baby, and the party girl, and the one that was gullible enough to find herself getting pregnant by a man who said that he was both sterile and single, and he was neither. I was born prematurely, and I was a little incubator baby, and fighting for life from the beginning, and so I think in some ways that set the stage for all the years that would follow.

Childhood was not super memorable in terms of like no extraordinary highs and no deep trauma. I think from very early on, like age three or four, I felt somehow not really aligned with how I was being identified, but I had no idea what that meant. And I meant that in all kinds of ways. I didn't necessarily feel like a little girl. I also certainly didn't feel black, either. I just felt like I was like some lost Kennedy child dropped in the Crenshaw district of Los Angeles, and I couldn't figure out who these

people were that were calling me family. But I also loved and admired them all, even with their wackiness, and their dysfunction and their drama.

And I remember it being a home that was filled with what I think I've come to know as not an atypical dynamic of faith talk, love, kindness, and a certain amount of posturing, respectability politics, in that weird kind of way that I experience as being part of U.S. blackness, which is that we were insular. Like what was going on in the white world didn't necessarily play a huge role in anything that we were doing, because they were just two different worlds. So yeah, that was that. I lived there till I was ten.

Then my family moved out to West Covina, one of the suburbs of Los Angeles, where I got to experience what it felt like to be one of the few chocolate chips in the cookie, so to speak, and got to experience kind of like—I mean, I hadn't seen that many white people except on television, so it was like wow, okay. And then I think I felt different for just long enough to practice some deep assimilation, because I just wanted to be like my peers. And so that was how that worked.

I was always a little bit of an overachiever, and especially in being bad. I started reading when I was really, really young, three or four, and I started kind of smoking and drinking and using when I was around ten. And for all practical purposes, it didn't seem to have any disabling effect that my family and the community knew, but it led to my getting sober when I was

23. And there's stories in between there that maybe shaped that, and some of them are more graphic than others.

I came out initially as being someone that liked girls when I was a young teenager, 14 or 15, and I had a whole bunch of fake IDs and was heading out to the bars in Hollywood with some frequency, and drinking and using was a part of it. It was also a time when it was pre-pandemic, and so a part of the kind of sexual revolution of the gay movement was to be very free around sex and sexuality, more so with gay men than with lesbians. And I think I identified with gay men more than I did with lesbians, partially because of my butchness and my affinity towards masculinity, but also because there was just a strange propriety around like kind of lesbian feminist women around sex, and bodies, and desire, and desire is bad, and you're objectifying people, and you know. And I think so having that thing of—it took me a long time to understand the concept of consensual objectification rather than objectification as a predatory instinct, but that's way, way down the road.

I got out of high school, went to college for about 95 seconds. And then my grandmother died in October of 1978. And my grandmother, in some ways, was kind of my one anchor to actually wanting to kind of be on the planet, and so after she died I just went on a tear, and I left home, and I hitchhiked to Texas, and I went to jail, and I got involved in all kinds of underground economies, and yadda-yadda, blah-blah-blah, until I came back home in 1981 and I tried to get sober, unsuccessfully.

And a couple years later, in 1983, I got sober, so my sobriety anniversary is November 23, 1983. And in some ways, that was kind of the beginning of one of my many major life changes. I was already out as a lesbian then because lesbian was the only thing that I knew that you called people that were in the body that I was in that liked women. It didn't necessarily fit, but I didn't have any other options. I knew what trans women were, but there was no such thing as a trans man. You just never heard of one. There was just, you know. And so I remember when I was a teenager and a young adult I would ask my girlfriends would you still like me if I was a boy, and they would look at me quizzically and say why are you asking, and I didn't really have an answer. I just, I thought it just seemed like a good question.

So I got back, I got sober, and as part of being sober I was encouraged to find the God of my understanding. I had left the church the moment I got out of my mama's house. Not because I hated the church or I felt any cruelty of the church that I was in, in the Baptist church, but I think because it was very clear to me that there was such a deep level of hypocrisy I didn't trust them not to be cruel to me. And for the most part, they encouraged me to believe either that God couldn't and wouldn't love someone like me, or that I needed to spend a lot of time pretending and having a certain level of behavior visibly, but then having this whole kind of subterranean life, which is what many of them were doing. And I

thought, well, I'm not trying to do that. That's just too many things. So I left the church.

And so I tried chanting, and all kinds of other things, and then I went to an MCC church in Los Angeles, and that was pretty awesome. And I think for me in that moment, what it felt like for me was I felt really accepted, but I didn't feel anything else. There was a certain level of emotional worship that was missing from their worship style that I craved and needed. And I had no notion that at any point in my life I would be able to find a place where those things would be combined.

Life moves on. I got involved in city government. And I was still in Los Angeles then, so I worked in the film industry for a few years, because when you get sober in Los Angeles, apparently you're supposed to work in the film industry. It's like the 14<sup>th</sup> step or something. And at a certain point I realized that the ego stroking of saying I worked in the film industry wasn't sufficient, and I decided I wanted to go back to school yet again. I have spent my entire life going back to school and not finishing school. That's a reoccurring thing that is true up until today.

And so I was working at a Foley house in Los Angeles, and I went on a game show, and I won \$35,000, and I decided I was going to go back to school. So I was either going to go to UT Austin so I could study with Barbara Jordan or to San Francisco State so I could study with Angela Davis. Being in recovery, and having integrity being an important part of

my spiritual values, I decided on San Francisco State because I didn't want to have to lie about residency to go to UT Austin. I mean, that was really, there wasn't...

Monique M. Mm-hmm.

Louis M. So I went to San Francisco to study with Angela Davis, San Francisco State. And after meeting her, and our first class together—she had just started teaching at the jails, the San Francisco jail system, and I volunteered to be her teaching assistant. And she said, well, I didn't think about that, sure. And that was the beginning of a really extraordinary friendship that opened a great many doors in terms of my awarenesses and the people that I would get a chance to meet. And also, a deeper analysis of the ways in which, in spite of my own life, I had really allowed respectability and politics to shape whose lives I would value.

I learned a lot working at the jail. Not just working with her, but also working with our students there. They taught me so much about life. I left working at the jail and got a job at City Hall. And one of the most profound lessons that I learned was that the behaviors of the people who were inmates and the behaviors of the people who were elected and appointed officials were exactly the same, except the people in the jail actually knew they had a problem. That was a really eye-opening experience for me to learn, like huh, hm. I don't do a whole lot of judging,

but y'all are doing the same thing. You're just, you know. It's codified in different ways to allow you to get away with it.

So did all that. Worked in human services. Opened a program on the corner of Taylor and Turk at the site of the old Compton's Cafeteria. I had begun to identify as a trans man in the mid '90s. I finally met some men who transitioned, and upon meeting them my first feeling was really more fear and anger than joy, because now I had hard decisions to make. Now I had to figure out how I was going to tell my mom, you know what I mean? So it was like, wow, shoot. When it was just a fantasy, that was easy. There was no obligation to having the fantasy.

I had two epiphanies that allowed me to begin transition. The first actually happened at the San Francisco Dyke March, and I was one of the MCs. And as I stood on the stage with a microphone in my hand looking at the sea of women, I realized that my unwillingness to transition was actually taking an opportunity away from that other black butch person whose space I was taking and wouldn't get out of.

Monique M. Interesting.

Louis M. And it felt really unfair to me to steal from a community that I held in such high regard and that had loved me so well, and that I loved so deeply. The second epiphany was that on some level I was waiting for my mom to die so that I could live. And I didn't want, even on a cellular level of my being, to be wishing for her demise. And I thought if I lose the relationship

with her, that's one thing, but to be holding my breath for her to die so that I can live, I just couldn't live with that. And so I began my transition in 1999. My girlfriend at the time gave me my very first shot on my birthday in 1999, so that was the beginning of that.

Monique M. So I want to do some benchmarks for the historical record. So you mentioned your sobriety introducing you to a God of your choosing. So what was that God?

Louis M. Well, it was first an exploration. My sobriety said go find God as you understand God, and I was like I don't understand God, I don't want the one I grew up with, I don't know what I'm going to do. So I just explored around. And I'm going to backtrack a little bit to when I was working at City Hall there was a meeting. There was somebody in the Human Rights Commission, and it was a black pastor who had said some particularly homophobic things about gay and lesbian people being abominations, and there was a big community uproar that this person was on the Human Rights Commission, so we had a series of community meetings.

Well, at the community meetings, I am being my normal self, which has not changed all that much, and I am just cussing up a storm and venting and spewing all over the place. And there was this woman there who, in essence, said the same things that I said with not a word of profanity, and also with some kind of, oddly, this sense of love and care that I couldn't figure out how she did all that, and I thought I need to know who she is

and I need to drink from whatever she's drinking from, 'cause that was amazing. And that's how I met Yvette Flunder, who, the first time we met she said oh yeah, I'm Yvette Flunder, I have this church over here. And I said oh, I'm coming to your church. And of course I didn't. The next month we met and I said, oh my god, I'm going to come to your church, and then I didn't. And the next month we met and she said, baby, just don't even say anything. So of course that month I went.

And I remember my first time at City of Refuge. They were on Church Street in the Duboce Triangle of San Francisco. And as I was walking in the door, there was a woman—she has since passed on—Doris Robinson. She was this extraordinary, statuesque black trans woman who was an usher at the door. And I don't remember anything else that happened in that entire worship service. But what I remembered was that this church allowed a trans woman to be the first image that someone saw of their church. Like they didn't hide them in the back, or... This was the person that greeted you at the door. And I couldn't believe it. It was just like I was awed, and I thought this place is something different and special than I've ever experienced, and I started going.

So I became a member of City of Refuge United Church of Christ, and that's how I was reintroduced to Christian worship. It was also how I was introduced to the United Church of Christ. In this place that had the worship flavor that I really enjoyed, but a place where all of me could be, every kind of part and parcel of me could be. And that was how I got

reintroduced. At that time there was nothing in my life that indicated that a path of ministry was in front of me. Even now, when I run into old friends of mine that I knew from high school and whatnot, they're like oh, you became a man, that's interesting. You're in ministry? How the hell did that happen? I'm like I know, I know. I'm fairly certain God ran out of people and made a mistake, but you know.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Louis M. In the last couple of years I've come to accept, grudgingly, that sometimes, if the Bible is any testament, sometimes God works well with people that have been broken, and muddy, and bloody, and dirty, and know how to speak that language. So I'm that guy. I'm that guy that can be in the margins and not be afraid to say what I need to say and go where I need to go, and not have other people feel ashamed about the circumstances of their life or to feel that they're unlovable, because if I'm lovable, then surely they are.

Monique M. Were you ordained in the City of Refuge?

Louis M. I was not ordained at the City of Refuge. I am still in the ordination process in my conference. And again, as I mentioned, my issues with academic completion, this year my church has decided to ordain me by the marks of ministry rather than academic accomplishment, and they're still trying to figure out how to do that. So probably sometime within the next few months my ordination will be complete.

So I got out of high school, and went to college, and I've probably gone to ten colleges, undergraduate, over the years, just a class here, a class there. Then I get busy doing stuff. Let me back up a second. I started at San Francisco State and I was majoring in political science. Then I was working on someone's campaign. Then I got a chance to be a legislative analyst, and I thought, well, mm. So I talked to my instructor and my instructor said it makes more sense to do it than to study it. So I dropped out of school and went and did it. And that has pretty much been the course of my life. I start out studying what I'm doing and then I end up doing what I'm doing and not studying it.

And so I'm pretty well read and I enjoy the course of study, but I'm challenged by—and I've been particularly challenged in seminary to find relevance with my ministry and centuries of dead German theologians. I'm not able to make that connection. And the instructors are usually detached enough from real life that they can't make the connection for me. Anyway, so I did that thing. I dropped out of school.

When I started working at the jails, I got an adult teaching ed credential, even though I didn't have a college degree, so then I was a credentialed teacher for several years. Short version, I don't think I've ever had a job that I'm qualified for on paper. It just is what it is.

So then I moved to New England in 2000. I fell in love with my then girlfriend, who grew up in the Brookline area of Massachusetts and went

to Mount Holyoke College and got offered a position there. So the next thing I knew we were driving across country with our pets, with me going I never want to live anyplace where they use the words “wind chill factor.” Why am I moving to New England in December? But love makes you do strange things, so there I go. And so we’d been there for a while, and I bounced around and did jobs, because we moved there for her job.

And New England is, particularly the five college area in Pioneer Valley, is very kind of academically centered, so you can have all the experience in the world, but if you don’t have the paper, it’s hard to find work.

Additionally, as a trans man, my entire work history of working primarily with women in recovery settings I wasn’t allowed to do because they would only hire women, which is a whole other complaint that I have about that system not really preparing those women to actually have healthy relationships with men when they get out of treatment. But that’s a whole other story.

And so I ended up applying for—well, no. One of those weird things that doesn’t make any sense. I got a brochure from Andover Newton Theological School in the mail, which is odd because I had never heard of Andover Newton Theological School, so I don’t know how I ended up on their mailing list. And so I went and I thought, okay, well I don’t have a degree, they’re not going to accept me. There’s no way I’m going to get financial aid to do this. And then she was my wife—my wife is never going to let me go live on campus for a year and do this thing.

And I got accepted without an undergraduate degree, which I just thought that they did that for everybody. I didn't find out till years later that that was an uncommon thing. I just thought maybe they need more black people. Which may be true, but anyway. And so I started there. And I think I probably started there in 2005, and I still haven't finished. Because, you know, at the end of the day, I'm more invested in ministering to the people who count on me than I am about studying ministry.

Chris Paige and I began Transfaith about six years ago. And even in that interim time, I haven't been like so deeply kind of dogmatically religious that people identify me as being religious more than spiritual, but I have been someone that mostly black trans folk felt like they could have a real conversation with about their wrestlings with God, and church, and belief, and their grandmama's god and, you know, all this stuff. And also someone that is open enough that if you decided the Christian church doesn't work for you, I'm not going to vote you off the island. I'm curious about what does work for you rather than trying to shame you into believing whatever. And so I've been kind of one of the unofficial pastors of kind of black transness around the country for over a decade, which, I'm honored by and awed by the trust that people put in my willingness to be present with them.

I've grown in my love for the United Church of Christ both in the Mass Conference and nationally. And I also really press them to be more of what they say they are. And so we have that love-hate tension from top to

bottom. It's fascinating. My church is—I can't even imagine how I ended up at this church. The demographic of my church is old, as in 70 years or older, white, cisgender straight people. How the hell? What? I was like, really? Of all the places in the world, why would I end up there? But they are in fact some of the most loving and open people I've ever known.

And so when I started working there, they asked me to do a Trans 101 with them because they said, you know, trans people might follow you and we don't want to accidentally be unwelcoming. I mean, they're just... We started having a gospel drag show there about three years ago. I had to explain to half of them what a drag show was. And now they're just like where do we sign up? We want to volunteer to do it every year. Make sure they have it here every year. They really, they stretch. They stretch.

And there's one story in particular that still moves my heart. One of my old ladies there, Josephine, who's 94—92. She's 92, Jenny's 94, because they fight about who's the youngest all the time. Josephine's beau, her man friend, Ed, Ed Disco, was a World War II vet, probably voted Republican his whole life, just really, you know, a little grinchy white guy, was curious about me because he had just started coming to church with her. And she found an old article I'd written and shared it with him, and he came up to me and he said, you know, I'm very proud of you. You're one of the most courageous men I've ever known. I'm glad you're here. And I just like wept. I mean, it was just like... The notion that presence and

relationship can just bridge so much difference, it just moved my heart.  
And it was also a testament to the kind of church that we have there.

Ed has since passed on. And I hold that memory dearly. And I loved him,  
and he loved me. And we couldn't have been more different, just like, you  
know. But we just really grew to care and respect each other in a great  
way. Anyway, blah-blah-blah. Carry on. More questions?

Monique M. I have a list of question.

Louis M. Okay.

Monique M. But let me ask what time is your board meeting?

Louis M. I don't know. What time is it? I may try to avoid it.

Monique M. Well, I can help you avoid it.

Louis M. My board meeting is at 3:15, but I think there's something else that I'm  
supposed to do at 2:45, so let me double check.

Monique M. I can get you out by either of those times.

Louis M. I really just want to go to my room and go back to bed.

Monique M. Me, too.

Louis M. 3:15 is the board meeting and then 4:00 is something else, so I'm good  
until about 2:45, and then I'm going to go get more coffee and have a

delicious cigarette and then try to pretend like I care about my board meeting.

Monique M. So I'm going to walk us back some, because I want to do some markers.

Louis M. Sure. I can't understand how you manage to just do all these things all at once. First of all, I'd never be able to read my own writing at the end of the day.

Monique M. I know. Well, I take notes for myself of things that I'm charting, so sort of my own map of what I've heard so I'm not crossing questions up. But you talked about your openness in exploration, and then we talked about your finding City of Refuge. Then we talked about the church that you're currently at. So we skipped a step where you heard a call to ministry.

Louis M. Yeah, it's, I wouldn't...I don't even call my call a calling. I call it more of a dragging.

Monique M. *[Laughs.]*

Louis M. If there was a call, so to speak, it probably happened at City of Refuge. But my call—I don't even know if I call it ministry. I've just been so hesitant to use that language. I'm trying to get in the habit of doing it. It just always feels weird.

Monique M. No, be authentic. What does it feel to you?

Louis M. No, I mean, that's it. I don't know. I mean, it comes more out of my 12 step inclination to be of service, you know, to be of service, to build

relationship, to clean house and help others. The way that I do church is more like recovery than church. And I feel—

Monique M. Say more about what that's like.

Louis M. Well, churches tend to be all kind of hierarchical and doctrinal and shit. I don't care about any of that shit. I think it's all just made up crap that allows people to kind of create little clubhouses for themselves. I don't think that God, or the all, or the divine really gives a hoot one way or the other. However, I think that we all have, for lack of a better phrasing, we all have an orientation. My orientation is met in relationship with Christ. Therefore, those people that call themselves Christians are my kin. Allegedly. In terms of this whole body thing.

So my call to ministry was really a call to serve in a place where there was blackness and there was cis L and G ness, but there certainly wasn't a lot of awareness around trans identity. And much of the LGBT movement was seen as decidedly secular. And so being in that intersection, being a holy hybrid, if you will, which is one of my self-identifiers, felt like my call. It wasn't like a, you know... I would not identify it as a ministerial call because that felt too terrifying. And still in my ragged negotiations with God, I'm like God, really? Like I'm not going to stop smoking, I am not going to stop cussing, I'm not going to stop telling the truth, as inconvenient as it can be. Are you sure? 'Cause I'm not sure I'm cut out to

be this whole minister thing, 'cause they got to act right, and I don't do none of that shit. I'm not doing it.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Louis M. I'm not going to pretend to be something I'm not and I'm not going to pretend to not be something I am, so I'm not sure this whole church thing is where I need to be. And an answer of sorts, you know, I didn't get like a recording from the divine, but the answer I got is you're not alone, and you will make people uncomfortable, but you will also give other people an opportunity to see that they can tell the truth and live. And that's really just been my entire journey and challenge, is to say, you know, we don't have to get it right. We just have to love God and serve others. And if you've actually read the Bible, they were all a hot mess. None of them were—you know, we've made them all holy now, but if you actually read the thing, those were some sketchy folks up in there. They were doing all kinds of crazy shit, and bloody, and messy, and dishonest.

And if there's a lesson in all of it, it is that A, God has a wicked sense of humor, and B, that God loves us both in spite of and because of our depth and our breadth and our diversity, and our capacity to learn and to try harder is one of our endearing qualities. So all that to say my call to ministry has been a dragging that I have finally—I mean, really it's been literally maybe two years, two and a half years where I have said okay, all right, fine. Fine. *Fine*. Leave me alone, stop. And I've been running as

much as I could, and all it does is tire me out. I'm like, fine, I surrender. I surrender yet again. If you think that I should be Rev. Louis, or Pastor Louis, or whatever title goes with this junk, if that's what you think I should be to serve you better, then I'm willing to do it.

And that's really been it. It really has not been like a deep theological yearning to... I just, I want to be... I guess the way I'll say it is the whole process of my willingness to be ordained is not because I think ordination is a really huge deal. I feel ordained by God. The best that any denomination can do is put that on paper somewhere. But I also recognize that it is deeply important to those that I serve that I am at least as credentialed as that pastor that's telling them they're going to hell.

Monique M. Yes.

Louis M. So it is in service to those who I desire to serve, to be present for, more than it is some accolade that I want for myself. Because really, quite frankly, I don't really care one way or the other. But if it's something that's standing in the way of my usefulness, then I don't want it to.

Monique M. So how do you go from that to pastoring for much longer than the two years?

Louis M. Well, yeah. Okay, there's a place in here, back in—I don't remember what year it was. Maybe it was 2008, somewhere in there. Another seminarian and I, Charla Kouadio, who I met at Andover Newton, said we need to start a church in Springfield. And I was like we who? Do I know you?

Anyway, so we had a gathering in my living room of mostly, not exclusively, but mostly black and Latinx LGBTQ folk and their families about beginning a worship together. And so we began Recovering the Promise Ministries. And then I was installed as one of the co-pastors of that thing, so some people call me Pastor Louis. I just let them do what they want to do.

And then Charla and I got into a challenging time where Charla was advised that a church has one leader and then that was her. And I said okay. Because I'm not really a title-y person, like you do your thing, just go, you know. And so I kind of removed myself from it, supportively, but I'm like go. Because I was never like really all geeked up to be the pastor, but we were co-pastors, and now you're the pastor, and do your thing. And so I began that process. I learned a lot from it. And I'm not quite answering your question, but I'm going to try to get to it.

From that time—okay. When we moved to New England, we went to Old First Congregational Church under Pastor Tom Gough, who is an extraordinary guy. Really down to earth, really chill, really awesome. Learned a lot from him. Started Recovering the Promise with Charla. Left to go open a program in Philadelphia. My wife got pregnant. I moved back home and began working at South Congregational Church under two interims and then our current settled pastor. So you've got all these pastoral influences, not including Bishop Flunder, and also I did some work with Bishop Tonyia Rawls at the Freedom Center for Social Justice.

And I met Archbishop Carl Bean back in L.A. when he was starting Unity Fellowship, and I was there to witness the starting of Unity Fellowship. So I've had all of these really amazing influences along the way, for which I'm deeply grateful.

What I learned in all of that is that my notion of what it means to do ministry, what it means to be a pastor, has been deeply shaped by these images of these hierarchical or corporate models of church that I don't actually have to do any of. I get to just be me and be relational. It doesn't mean that a church or an organization is without systems, but they can be more relational than hierarchical. They don't have to be all those things that I was taught church was supposed to look like. And I learned that from both what I would judge as effective and ineffective models of doing it. And each of these individuals has been a combination of both. And I can't say I would have done it better, I'm just saying I've observed it from my safe distance as an observer.

And so I've had more of a willingness to say okay, God, I can do this and I have less fear of screwing it up now. Because my hesitancy was not about not doing it, my hesitancy is about screwing it up. You know, there's so many people that have such deep church burn and deep church trauma, I didn't want to contribute to that in any way because I felt stupid, or lazy, or inept, or greedy, or whatever my story was. I just didn't want to create more trauma for people. And what I realized is that one of the things I learned in recovery, more than church, is that it is really okay to

say oops, and I'm sorry, and you're right. And as a pastor, as a minister, to be able to model those things is damn near groundbreaking.

Monique M. Yeah. So I'm going to segue us to the secular.

Louis M. I actually find them deeply interwoven, so knock your socks off.

Monique M. So this is what's interesting about this interview. So typically people talk to me about their secular activism and how that at some point wasn't enough, and so then they go to these religious spaces which sort of complete the circle.

Louis M. Right, right.

Monique M. And we've done this interview completely in a religious spectrum, but I know about all of your activism for LGBT causes, specifically trans causes.

Louis M. I started before the trans causes, though, actually. I was a little lesbian firebrand. And part of that is not because I was so brilliant. Part of that is because I was a hot young stud—and I'm going to be so impolitic here. This is just wrong. But, you know, all these little white lady lesbian therapists wanted to get their little erotic groove on with a little black butch that was on their board. Well, that was a whole other set of hot messiness that I had to learn from. The crush—

Monique M. Cut it down?

Louis M. No, that's fine, 'cause then I'll get too comfortable. I'll be snoring in a minute.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Louis M. The crushing blow of having my idealism crashing into reality almost on a daily basis in my early 20s when I worked at the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Community Services Center was just heart wrenching, because it was this place that I thought, you know, oh, you're my people. And to run into the racism, and the sexism, and the ableism, and the classism, and just the sheer disregard for the lives of people just broke my heart. It just broke my heart.

And fortunately, it didn't break my spirit, but it taught me some things. And one of the things it taught me is that the notion of community is a longstanding myth. It's a meta-narrative that erases truth so frequently. And I guess, you know, so for me the spiritual and the secular are not really separate. In my own language I call it a sacred braid. I think they're two sides of the same coin. I think the hardship that we create as people of faith is trying to make them two different things. And then we spend a lot of time lying to ourselves and others.

Monique M. So let's walk through some of the first organizations.

Louis M. Oh, god, I can't remember.

Monique M. Well, I've got some key markers.

Louis M. Okay. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. So I can walk you through those. But before we get to these organizations, you mentioned being a lesbian firebrand. What made you interested in agitating for change? Why not just be a peacemaker—

Louis M. I have no idea. I didn't know I could. I mean, really, I don't know if it was my personality or what. I didn't know how to not do that. And again, it may be... No, I think it really is sober recovery-based. So I got sober in 1983, and that's probably around the same time as my activism. And I think I probably started because I needed something to do that wasn't centered in a bar. I needed some community activity that wasn't centered in a bar. So I got involved in shit that wasn't centered in bars. And so, you know.

And I found that there was work to be done, and there were people below the sight line that got kind of dragged along in these movements. Like they were the people that the funding was based on, but they just never...but the experience of their lives and what their actual needs are never kind of bubbled up to the top. I don't know how I managed to elevate out. I really don't think I was that spectacular. I think perhaps being well read and somewhat well spoken allowed me to appear much brighter than I actually was, probably. But I got to be in those rooms and I tried to make good use of that.

But really, at the end of the day, the people who I've always cared the most about were the people in the margins of the margins of the margins of the margins, like the people who would spend so much time and energy trying to work their way up from no self-esteem to low self-esteem, those who had been disparaged at home and kicked out of church, and then also told that they were too dirty and unworthy to actually be part of this LGBT community that was preparing itself for the deep respectability politics of the Ellen and Neil Patrick Harris era. And so those people are still, those are still my folks, the people I most identify with, and the people who I most stretch to share love with.

Monique M. Thank you. Let's go to your work with the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force.

Louis M. That was very short-lived, thank you, God.

Monique M. What led you there?

Louis M. I don't know what led me there. I mean, again, I was involved... I suppose on some level I was on the fast track in San Francisco Democratic politics. I was the aide for Supervisor Tom Ammiano. I had run for office there and I was doing that whole thing. I was one of the founding members of LGADDA, Lesbians and Gays of African Descent for Democratic Action. And so I had somewhat of a profile, so I was invited, probably mostly because the Task Force always needs to try to diversify their extraordinarily white selves. And my being on the board—so no, that

preceded my working for Tom because I left there when I started working for Tom.

I got invited to do that. I was very honored. I thought wow, this is really intense. Oohy, I'm on this national board. And you know, largely I felt like their hearts were in the right place, but they were also, again, so incredibly removed from the lives that seemed to mean the most to me that it was just really...I don't want to say it was garbage, because that's... In retrospect, it still wasn't garbage. They meant well. But like most people at a certain organizational level, they're just removed from the people in the most need. I think they did a really good job of trying to help people kind of in the median range of trying to get over the hump, but people underneath that, those who chose not to assimilate, those for whom the respectability politics would never apply, they needed to not see them in order to feel good about themselves. I wasn't willing to do that.

Which doesn't mean I was leaving the board for that reason. I worked for Tom Ammiano's campaign, and when he got elected he offered me the position, and I felt like I couldn't do both, so I stepped down from the board. And I was also very happy to step down from the board because they were vexing my damn nerves.

Monique M. So I had a question regarding your activism with largely white communities, and being at the same time a very public advocate for black trans-ness. So can you talk about those experiences overall?

Louis M. Yeah. I mean, you know, so the organizations and entities that have the most clout, access and money are typically largely white, cis L and G organizations. And I think almost all of us that have been around for a while have done our time. And then you just burn out and you just have to leave because at that point you're just like I hate you all, and if I'm going to keep doing this at all, I need to get away from you now.

I don't regret those times because I learned some things. And again, much like going from working in the jail to working in City Hall, what I learned is that many of these people in those organizations don't know nearly as much as they think they do, and many of the people that are not in those organizations are much smarter than they think they are. And being able to share both of those truths with those populations has been good. I try really hard not to say no, but to also say on my terms, but these are my priorities. So in terms of the largely white organizations, the Task Force being kind of the largest of them, I did my time. We had some beef. We worked it out or didn't. I still maintain affinity and relationship with various Task Force staff and board members and whatnot. And they don't know me from a can of paint, but I remember all of them when they were interns before they were executive directors and had big pants and big shoes, and I'm like oh, that's just so sweet.

And again, I don't think they yuck their yum, but I don't take them as seriously as they take themselves, mostly because I don't see the reach. If I saw—I'll give you an example. I'll use Creating Change as an example.

Creating Change moves around the country. One of my ongoing laments, two of my ongoing laments about Creating Change is they never create any change, they just talk about creating change, every year, in a different location. The other one of my laments is the valet at the hotel makes more money from them than any local organization in the town they're in. Until and unless they actually make that stretch, I'm not going to take them seriously, and I'm not willing to invest any energy into supporting that, because you show up...

For example, if you show up in St. Louis and the valet is making bank because you got a million people, whatever, but there's some little tiny trans organization or LGBT organization in St. Louis and they don't get a dime from you, then you're just doing this shit to make yourself feel good. You're not really doing any stretching for the organic community in which you're living. And so listen, everybody can show up and have a great time and do the chat and chew at Creating Change, but it's not going to be where I spend my energy.

I am certainly going to spend my energy at Black Trans Advocacy Conference every year because I watch what they do. I watch the ways in which BTWI, Black Trans Women, Inc., and BTMI, Black Trans Men's, Inc., and the anchors, which are the partners of trans folk, and then the newest incarnation, BTXI, for non-binary people, I watch the ways in which we say what do you need and how can we respond, the ways in which we provide food for people so they don't have to worry about what

they're going to eat if they can manage to make their way there. I get to see how it works from everyone from Dr. So-and-so who's there to the person who just came off the ho' stroll to come to the conference and we all get to be there together and have our needs met. That's where I'm really invested. Would I show up at an HRC meeting to say hey, give money to BTAC? Yeah, I'll be that ho'. But not because I love HRC, but because they have the resources, and I do love BTAC, and somebody's got to stand and like...

Monique M. Yeah. So talk a bit about your experiences organizing in black trans community.

Louis M. I don't even know that I've felt like I'm really a deep organizer. I don't know that I'm an organizer. Well, maybe I am. Maybe I don't give myself enough credit. I show up with presence and availability and I try my best to respond to the need. My longstanding story is that I don't know much, but I know who does. And so I spend a lot more time connecting the dots than I do actually kind of necessarily generating new material. But I know enough people around the country and have enough relationship with people around the country to say hey, person A, person B needs these things that you know how to do; can you talk to them? And because we have a relationship with one another they will. And that's what I do.

I mean, I don't even feel like that's organizing. I just...I answer the phone. I mean, really, seriously. I mean, there are people that won't... You can't

just call Laverne Cox. You just can't dial up Janet Mock and they'll call you back. But I'm always going to call you back. And if I'm traveling through and we're Facebook friends, I'm going to let you know and see if we can have a cup of coffee while I'm in town so I can actually sit across from you and build relationship with you. That's what I do. That's what gives me joy. Which doesn't make me a great organizer or any other thing. I just like people. And if I can let people know that you can have some visibility and still not be some aloof, untouchable, unreal person, then they can aspire to that and they can be a little bit less afraid that they're going to lose themselves if they actually get bigger. Does that make sense?

Monique M. Mm-hmm.

Louis M. I mean, I think a lot of times we play small because we can't do the kind of Euro-centric version of greatness or because we're afraid that we'll lose our humility. But it doesn't have to be that way. It doesn't have to be. If you don't see it, then make it. And if you don't know how to make it, well, ask me. I might know six people that made it and I can connect you. I don't know how to make it, but I know some people that made it. I will tell you upfront they didn't make it well, but they made it. So learn from what they did and then build on that. I'll tell you where all the bodies are buried and then you make your own damn decision.

But if I can connect you up and you can feel somewhat supported—and that's the same thing we do with Transfaith—we don't know everything

there is to know about every spiritual practice. But we make it our business to know someone who does know. And so if you're Buddhist and you're trans and you're in Omaha, I've never even—I couldn't find Omaha on a map. But I know a trans Buddhist somewhere in the vicinity that I can connect you to, and maybe between the two of y'all you can start a something in the middle, or at least have an email exchange to support each other, and you get to not feel isolated for just one or two days. And that might get you over the hump to what's next for you. So much of this is just really triage, you know, how can we get you over the hump until you can find your own fullness. I don't find fullness for anybody. But I do help people tread water until they can find it for themselves. That's my superpower. That's what I love to do.

Monique M. That's a cool superpower.

Louis M. That's what I love to do.

Monique M. Talk to me about some of the trans oriented activism that is religiously based. So Transfaith or Interfaith Working Group or—

Louis M. Transfaith and Interfaith Working Group, the same thing. They're the same thing, the same entity. Yeah, ooh. Muddy. What's the question again?

Monique M. So when I was going through your bio I saw the Office for Religious Affairs and I saw all—

Louis M. Oh, yeah. I don't know what I did with them. What the hell did I do with them? You know, part of my problem is that I don't even have a C.V., because once I do something I immediately forget it and I go on to the next thing, so when people say what have you done, I'm like I don't know. This week? Let me get my calendar, because I don't know. I just do the next thing I'm asked to do and then I keep going, which is a really bad habit.

Monique M. Well, I was going to ask, though, if your helper skill set, and your being a bridge and helping people stay afloat is useful in these various capacities, do you feel that this comes from a deeper sense of spirituality that people are drawing from, or they just know you're good at it and thus you're the go-to black person who talks about faith and is very welcoming?

Louis M. I don't even know. I don't even know that I'm especially good at it. What I know is that I'm available and I'm willing. That's all I know. I answer the phone, I answer the emails. I'm not afraid to reach back to somebody. That doesn't mean I'm really good at this. I mean, it really doesn't. I mean, oftentimes just that little tiny bit of willingness is world-changing for some of—

Monique M. You started the conversation with saying you're at an age where you can say no to shit you don't want to do.

Louis M. Yeah, but this is the shit I live to do.

Monique M. Oh.

Louis M. The shit I don't want to do is go to Creating Change. That I can say no to. Oh, what are you going to do? Are you going to be at Creating Change this year? No, I'm going to spend the week with my mama. I'm not going nowhere near Creating Change this year. That I don't want to do. Answering the phone for like one of my newly—I adopt sons all over the country, mostly black trans men that don't have family relationships with their fathers.

That availability, that presence and willingness to be available to people to just, again, I can't even say it any differently, if I can get you—whatever gets you through the night. And I go back to that whole one day at a time thing that I've learned in my recovery. If I can help you get through to tomorrow, I don't have to have every answer. I just got to get you through till the sun comes up. Then all of the answers and all of the wisdom of the world is in hands bigger than mine. We don't have to have the same spiritual practice. But I believe in divine intervention. I'll believe that enough for both of us. So if I can get you through to the morning, I'm going to be praying that divinity gives me answers I don't have, gives you answers you don't have, has somebody else call that has the answers you don't even know you need yet. I'm counting on all of that. I just want to get through...I want to tread water with you until we can find a shore to look at.

Monique M. Okay.

Louis M. And I don't know that it feels... Is that a spiritual practice? I suppose after a fact it is. But in the moment it just feels like being present in my own gratitude and my desire to show love. I don't know... That is the only...that's a lot. That and my daughter are actually the only things in the world that I think are worth living for.

Monique M. Talk to me about your wife.

Louis M. My ex-wife.

Monique M. Ex-wife.

Louis M. Yes.

Monique M. Well, we need to update your common bio. Let the world know you're on the market.

Louis M. I'm on the market and looking. And Lord Jesus, I'm a bad single person. Help me, Jesus. Ooh, Lord be praised.

Monique M. So talk to me about the relationship, because it led to your daughter.

Louis M. Oh, well, long story. So when Kryisia and I got married in 2001—did we? 2002. I always get it wrong. And she'll not forgive me. We were in an open marriage the entire marriage because neither of us are particularly monogamous as an orientation. And, you know, whatever. We did not separate because of being in an open marriage. I think first of all, I think we both grew in really different directions from one another. Also, she is not really called to be the wife of someone in ministry, and she knows that

and has said like I'm not doing that. And I didn't know that's where I was going when we got married, so she gets a get out of jail free card.

Monique M. Absolutely.

Louis M. I'm like baby, look, I get it, peace be unto you. I mean, we are best friends. We still talk every day. And we love each other very deeply and intimately. We are not sexually or romantically compatible. And so that's actually—she and her boyfriend just celebrated a year not too long ago. He's a relatively nice guy. He's a nice guy. I'm just, you know, being snarky. And I am still...I am still looking. Oh, heaven help me. I don't know.

Monique M. So talk about your daughter.

Louis M. My daughter. Kahlo is five. We named her after Frida Kahlo, because Frida Kahlo is a kick ass human being.

Monique M. Absolutely.

Louis M. And we want our child to be a kick ass human being, and so far so good. She just started elementary school, and...

Monique M. What does she want to be for Halloween?

Louis M. She is a spider fairy.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*] Lovely.

Louis M. She is a spider fairy, my little spider fairy. She's just the very best. She is brilliant, and beautiful, and amazing, and articulate, and outspoken, and funny, and manipulative, and all of those things that, you know—

Monique M. That's a lot, yeah.

Louis M. And she just...she makes my heart so happy. And I miss her so much. And Krysia is—that's my—well, we're still legally married, but my ex-wife. She is an extraordinary mother. Well, she's an extraordinary human being. She's an extraordinary human being, a great woman, and a phenomenal, just...I don't know that any of us, Kahlo or I, could have gotten more fortunate. She is just an extraordinary mother. There is my little spider fairy.

Monique M. Oh, that is precious.

Louis M. Yes. That's my little spider fairy. She looks just like her mama. A little carbon copy. She's so much fun, and playful, and creative, and she just cracks me up. She makes me laugh so much. *[section deleted]*...Because we had tried to get pregnant before then. We ran out of money because sperm is not cheap. And what I realized is that there are only like, what, three African American donors nationwide. Like there are Haitian donors, there's Jamaican donors, but there's like three African American donors. I mean, seriously, like no exaggeration. Because they don't do outreach at like Howard and...

Monique M. Yeah.

Louis M. But, you know, so anyway, that's a whole other set of racist bullshit. But we tried and we tried. We did this medication, and this intervention, and this kind of thing, and she couldn't get pregnant. So when she was in Peru and she had this fling [*section deleted*] ... And so when she came back I said, so am I going to be Dad, or godfather, or uncle? Where are we going to go with this thing? Because we were estranged at the time. And she said I've always imagined you as being the father to our child. And I said then I'm there. And so my name is on the birth certificate and I was there when Kahlo was born. And that was an experience unlike any other. Just no words for that. Krysia was... she was almost 40, having her first child. No anesthesia or anything else. And she was singing to keep her breathing regulated. And in that moment, witnessing the strength of her was just so deeply moving. She's a strong, amazing woman. She just really is. And it was a beautiful experience. I'm so very grateful to have been there, to be a part of it, to cut the umbilical cord and to be present at the birth of our child, and to witness her growing up.

I mean, there's nothing in life that terrifies me more than the loss of her, because when you're a parent you always think about, like, my kid, you know, is my kid safe. And there's nothing in life that thrills me more than the joy of her. I mean, there is nothing better in the world than to have her visit and going over to visit her, and hearing her upstairs going oh, it's Daddy. When I was a little kid, I dreamt of being someone's father, and it was an impossible dream. It was literally impossible. And to be able to

live that reality, I can never not believe in the impossible. I'm living it.  
And I'm so grateful.

Monique M. That's awesome. So—

Louis M. I'm all weepy and stuff.

Monique M. That's why we have tissue.

Louis M. Oh, no. I carry my own 'cause I'm a weepy monster. Anyway.

Monique M. It's too far down on the table now.

Louis M. Oh, my.

Monique M. No, that is beautiful. I am touched. I am trying to come back to my questions now.

Louis M. I'm a believer in the impossible because I've lived it too much not to.

Monique M. So to get us back to the record, typically when people talk about their spouses, that is their source of emotional support.

Louis M. She has been that.

Monique M. I'm always concerned for activists where they are getting support to sustain them.

Louis M. Ooh! You about to go in a very deep territory, tell you what.

Monique M. So that's my question. Talk about those spaces that support you in the journey.

Louis M. No.

Monique M. Because you're the bridge for other people.

Louis M. So let me just say, as far as if there were a grading system, I get an F in self-care.

Monique M. *[Laughs.]*

Louis M. Maybe a D minus. Maybe a D. Maybe I'm up to a D. I'm horrible at self-care. I eat like shit, I'm a raging insomniac, I dream work when I do sleep, and I am—this is going to sound so incredibly friggin' pathetic—but I am often crippled by my loneliness and wondering if there will ever be someone with whom I will be well yoked. I'm at that age now—I'm 57 years old—I'm an old, fat, bald black guy who doesn't drink or use, who's in ministry, who is non-monogamous as an orientation, although that does not mean I'm opposed to negotiating exclusivity. But I'm not an off the rack guy. And so I'm really hard pressed to find, like, that person.

I'm queer enough that the gender of that person is not all that pressing to me, although I do have a preference for women of whatever origin. I don't differentiate between trans women and cis women. But there is a way in which finding that person who is strong enough to hold me when the world kicks my ass, and soft enough to let me hold them because I need to feel heroic in relationship, I need to feel—I'm a Leo, you know—I need to feel like king of my—I don't have to be the only king, but I need to be one of the royalty in the house. And to understand that on the very best day

they're going to come in third because my ministry and my child will always come in one and two. That's not a great offer for someone, but that's what I've got. I can be truthful about it. So to find someone for whom maybe I'm their bronze medalist, too. I'm okay with that.

And so I really suck at self-care. What do I do to take care of myself? Nothing. I lounge at home with my cat. I read. I listen to Nina Simone. I cry. I isolate. I'm a borderline recluse with a very outgoing affect. It's true. I just really—when people say oh, Louis, what do you do? Nothing. I sit in my room and I listen to Nina Simone and play solitaire. I watch the same movies over and over again and I read. That's what I do. What else? I sleep when I can. I take long, hot baths. That's it. I drive back and forth to Philadelphia. I don't even know what I do for fun. Someone asked me what I do for fun. I was like, I don't know. Fun? I don't know. No, that's work. That's not fun. No, wait. So, I mean, you know, I don't know what I do for fun.

I'm 57 years old, and I know that. I believe everyone deserves companionship. And then I stretch to believe that I'm part of everyone. I believe that everyone deserves love and joy and peace and care, and then I have to stretch to believe that I'm part of everyone. And so part of my challenge and part of my growing pains right now is to do a better job of modeling that which I say to others. And so I stretch for that.

Monique M. I read somewhere, an interview that was done with you that identified you as a black pansexual transgender man.

Louis M. That's true.

Monique M. When I read the category—because I'm teaching right now an intro course in world religions, and that's the second lecture. We go through various orientations because we've got to get a language, a common lexicon.

Louis M. That's changed now, by the way. I've crystallized that.

Monique M. So talk to me about what categories house you.

Louis M. So current, 'cause everything has an asterisk, 'cause change is constant. I am a pansexual hetero-emotional black man of trans experience. I prefer to call myself an intentional man, that I became a man on purpose. And I did that extra thing because sexually I can be attracted to anyone that I'm attracted to. But thus far I can only imagine myself really being in a romantic relationship with someone who identifies as a woman. That's stretching and growing, but that's still my primary orientation.

I dated a guy for a brief period of time, another trans man, and it's just like yeah, I don't know. And we talked about our own internalized homophobia as black trans men, and like yeah, I don't know. I don't know. First of all, I don't do closet, so if I'm seeing you, I'm seeing you. We're just going to be out, just boom, you know. And I'm like yeah, I

don't know, though, see, 'cause shit, I just, I don't... So I'm wrestling with that. I'm wrestling with the tension of that.

I'm also wrestling with the tension of having—my best friend calls it—God, what does she say? She's so brilliant, and she makes me feel pedestrian, she's so brilliant. She identifies herself as a body agnostic. And by that she means that she's queer. I also use the term queer as a shorthand sometimes. But if she loves you and feels an affinity towards you, whatever parts and pieces you have, we're all going to figure out what you're going to do with that. Like there's no particular constellation of things that she finds that's off the list. And so I am attempting to learn to be body agnostic in that however you identify in your gender and whatever parts and pieces you have, we'll figure out what feels right about all of those things. That isn't the end all and be all of who you are.

At this point in my life, those other components of kindness, and tenderness, and thoughtfulness, and the right amount of closeness, and the right amount of space, and having a spiritual practice, and having an understanding of my love for my child, maybe having love for your own children, or however that works for you, that is far more important to me than your gender, your presentation, or parts and—all that other, we can work with that. These core values, this is where it gets hard.

Monique M. So the final question that I ask all the interviewees.

Louis M. Okay. Shew, we made it.

Monique M. I told you we would, and enough time. You've answered the second part because I always ask where people find joy. But closing thought, what are you most proud of?

Louis M. That's hard. I don't know that I'm especially proud of anything. Proud almost doesn't seem like the right word. What I'm most grateful for. I'm most grateful for being a person who in spite of all the snarly, snarky, shitty interactions that religion and politics can throw at you can still manage to show up with a genuine love and a little bit of room to try to figure out if we can do something together. That just seems like extraordinary growth to me. And if anything else, I think the thing that keeps me going, at the end of the day, is that—and this is my kind of tag line—that every day I aspire to be more grateful than grumpy.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Louis M. And that's it. That's my core spiritual principle.

Monique M. I love it. I love it. That is a perfect place to stop.

[*End of recording.*]