

A Review of
Living in the Tension: The Quest for Spiritualized Racial Justice
Shelly Tochluk

Reviewed by Lucky Altman Lynch

As a woman raised and very active in the Roman Catholic Community until the 90's and currently attending and active at the Ventura Center for Spiritual Living, I appreciate the inclusion of religion and spiritual grounding in the conversation about working for social justice. In my work at the National Conference for Community and Justice for over 20 years and my continued work with the Kaleidoscope Institute, I feel the personal angst of living in the multiple tensions described by Shelly. For adherents to mainline Christian traditions, the metaphysical conversations and references to "spirituality" in the challenges presented, includes the basic Judeo-Christian belief that "we are all created equal in the eyes of God." A belief that is both important and limiting when working against all systems of oppression.

The descriptions of how white people, grounded and socialized in the cultural construct of "individualism," approach any reconciliation and healing process are the most helpful here. It is a constant and daily struggle to remove this particular orientation and open our hearts and minds to the myriad of ways that those who are perceived to be different but have endured centuries of oppression. We are tempted to retain the old axiom of "pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps". When facilitators and trainers in racial justice workshops speak of "white privilege", the reaction can be, "my family was poor", "I didn't get a free education" or "we never relied on the government for help", minds and hearts close to any further input. This reaction comes from hearing privilege as "economic privilege" without considering the ways that being white is "normal" in US society.

As the tensions are described I value that they are considered "both/and". The binary approach to the conversations on race and the either/or, win/ lose, right/wrong have derailed any helpful and complete conversation on the topics.

The chapter on belonging and appropriation was drawn from Shelly's extensive experiences with Native American rituals is instructive. It bears some resemblance to my experience of white American Christian communities taking on traditions rooted in the African experience and incorporating them into white religious services. When I have been a part of these rituals, I am left examining how white Christians feel when our traditional liturgical experiences don't meet our spiritual and emotional needs. From the African American perspective, our participation can be interpreted as appropriation.

This book should be recommended as a "text" for extended dialogues in which the tensions are examined both individually and collectively to suggest ways to bridge the current binary conversations. Each chapter invites us to move deeper into the conversation about social justice. These conversations, when carefully designed and facilitated, can help us to move from the tendency of the dominant culture to operate out of guilt, blame or shame. Each community has its own tough work to do in order to bring about equity and justice. Our tasks are different but without deep reflection and dialogue the either/or mindset will become the norm.

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