



Friends World Committee
for Consultation
SECTION OF THE AMERICAS

Comité Mundial de Consulta
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The Fellowship was founded in 1936 by Rufus M. Jones, a North American Quaker teacher, activist and mystic, as a way for like-minded people who were interested in Quaker beliefs and practices to stay in contact with the Religious Society of Friends, while maintaining their own religious affiliation, if any. Today, WQF Fellows live in over 90 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. Wider Quaker Fellowship depends on the financial support of its readers to provide this service.

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Standing in Uncomfortable *Places*

ALEXIE TORRES-FLEMING



The Wider Quaker Fellowship
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexie Torres-Fleming is the director of Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice in New York's South Bronx. This article is based on her presentation to "Heeding God's Call: A Gathering on Peace," held in January, 2009 at the Arch Street Meetinghouse in Philadelphia; it is reprinted with the permission of *Friends Journal*.

In prayer and silence, this small Scripture was impressed on my heart: “Whosoever holds on to their life will lose it. Whoever gives their life will save it.”

I was born Alexie Torres in the public housing projects in South Bronx, the poorest congressional district in the United States. I am the child of teenage immigrants from Puerto Rico. My daddy was homeless until he got a job as a dishwasher in a deli in the theater district of Manhattan. Daddy was eventually promoted to the head dishwasher to deli man to waiter. He met Mom at a church dance and she knew he was the one. In two years they will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary.

Daddy made a home for us in new public housing projects in the South Bronx and it was a wonderful time for me as a child. I loved home—the music, the sounds, and the culture—and as a child I had no clue about what was going on around me. In the '70s things really began to change. Something terrible happened in my community, which many of you know as the burning of the South Bronx. I remember as a little girl I would sit perched on my radiator and look out the ninth floor window and watch the smoke. My entire neighborhood, block after block after block, went up. I can remember the sound of fire engines that would interrupt conversations as they got louder and came closer, and I remember the acrid taste of smoke in my throat. I understood later that there would be a plan for urban renewal. There were thoughts of a policy called ‘planned shrinkage’ where they would close down police and fire stations and public services and ultimately residents would leave and they could just tear things down and rebuild. But the South Bronx is the home of this nation’s poorest of the poor, so when they closed down police and fire stations, things just got extremely horrible. People wanted to leave, so store, home, and land owners would burn down their own homes and properties,

many times with people inside, so they could collect the insurance money and leave.

This is the legacy that I saw in the late '70s, so it's not a surprise that I began to learn early on that the measure of my success as a poor brown girl would be how far I could get away from the ghetto, from poverty, and from poor people. I became an active, churchgoing young woman in our Catholic church. I began to understand that the world would not see me as a child of God full of goodness and potential, but a child who was "disadvantaged" and "at risk." I was a list of pathologies and problems that could happen to poor kids. Imagine what that feels like. I know that this is not necessarily done intentionally, but when those labels are assigned to you all the time it becomes a burden, and you internalize those thoughts and feelings. And so many of us still today teach poor young children that they can only succeed when they escape. Of course, that sounds logical. Don't we want our kids to come out of poverty? Don't we want them to be middle class and get good jobs?

But there is a little bit of a lie underlying that message. I left home after high school and really pursued this dream of taking care of number one, making sure that I had made it. I was supported by my family and church and made sure to become a success story and a shining star. But I found on that journey that I had left behind so much more that made me rich. And yet people like my father were considered not valuable or powerful. Daddy had been promoted to a city job as the maintenance man in our public housing projects, and one of his jobs was to wash the urine off the elevator walls and stairwells.

I was told that I had to leave my old world behind to make it, and I did for a while. I got a good job on Madison Avenue and had a nice apartment on 31st Street. I made a lot of money, traveled, and did all sorts of exciting things. But in the end, my soul was empty. I had everything to live with, but nothing to live for.

Q U E R I E S

Following are some queries about the text, which you may wish to use for reflection or study, individually or with others.

1. Do you see your place of worship as a place to hide and pray?
 2. Are you a fan of God or a follower of God?
 3. Where is the place of poverty and hunger closest to you? Have you been there?
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The last lesson is one I learned from my mom. Mommy had a dream around the new millennium when everyone thought the world was going to end. Mommy said she dreamed she was in church praying, and outside there was a crowd of people waiting for God to come. They were crying out, "Lord, when are you coming?" God didn't answer, so they continued to cry, "Lord, when are you coming?" until God finally said, "When are you coming?" My mom said, "You sit and wait for a miracle, for someone else to fix things. You, miha, are the greatest miracle of God's creation. Look at your hands. Look at your feet. Look at your mind. God wants to know when are you coming."

Someone once said that I was climbing the ladder of success, but it was up against the wrong wall.

I remembered a story from my childhood youth group about the rich young man that came to Jesus and asked, "How can I make it to the kingdom? What do I need to do to become a follower of you?" Jesus told him, "Give up everything you have and follow me." And the rich young man walked away sad because he had so much. I remembered that story and thought, "Wow, I have become that rich young man."

Many of us grow up in our culture as fans of the spiritual life and quoting Scripture. I remember my youth group would pray out loud and sing and dance, and we were all big fans of Jesus, big fans of God. But in that moment, I asked myself: "Are you a fan of God, or are you a follower of God?"

Things began to work in my heart. I believe I had a destiny. I believe we all do. Whoever you are, wherever you are, wherever you sit in life or this world, we are called to this sometimes dark place called Earth with a mission and a purpose, and I believe I had sold mine for a bowl of soup. And I prayed, "God, show me who am I supposed to be. I don't want to know what other people think I'm supposed to be or where I should be or what I should look like. I want to know who am I called to be. Where is my place? Was I born in the poorest congressional district in the United States by accident of fate?"

Many things happened at that time. I believe deeply in grace and surrender: you give God permission and things begin to evolve and change. I remember coming back home because I thought maybe charity work at church, giving back, and helping out with the food drive and soup kitchen would make me feel better. But it wasn't enough. So I began to go back to church in my old neighborhood. I grew up in a Franciscan Parish that was deeply rooted in a liberation theology that, as I like to say, doesn't concern itself with making it to heaven without addressing the hell here on

Earth. My beautiful little church was a sanctuary in the middle of hell, but my pastor, Father Mike Tyson, often would say, “Don’t come in here and hide. God’s kingdom isn’t here.”

The church had begun organizing a march against drugs. After the burning of the South Bronx, the crack epidemic hit us very hard in the ’70s and early ’80s. Crack houses had begun to spring up all around the community, and children and families started to get lost in the violence and the addiction. So the church organized a march against crack, and about 300 of us went to seven known crack houses and prayed and sang. I didn’t know what it meant to be an activist or an organizer, only that it felt good and right.

In my office two weeks later, I saw on the news that my church had been torched that night in retaliation from the drug dealers. And I had one of those moments where I had a combination of thoughts. One was “What on Earth did I get myself into? They were all wrong. I shouldn’t have come back.” And another was, “What are you doing sitting here? This is your moment.” So I went back home. The sanctuary was burnt and the windows and statues were broken, including a beautiful statue of the blessed mother, and there were people weeping and crying. Then a little voice came up inside of me and said, “Why are you crying about this building? I don’t live here. Every day, my real church is desecrated a block from here. When will you cry about that?” It was so clear.

There were media and camera crews everywhere. There was an article in the newspaper the next day and there was a picture of the people crying over the statue. And I said, “That will not be the last image of who we are as a people of God—us crying over a broken statue.” When they came up to us and asked, “What are you going to do now?” I told them, “We are going to march again.” It was quiet. I didn’t ask the pastor’s or anyone’s permission, I just said it, “This is not who we are.” And so we planned to march again. I used a press list I had. When the news got out, the death threats came. There were threats that the pastor and the church would be

at night and have deep peace knowing that I am the person I am supposed to be, in the place where I am supposed to be.

Next: making more people middle class is not the answer. This thought usually makes people uncomfortable. Recently I saw a report on PBS about the economic boom in India. In what was Calcutta, the area of the poorest of the poor that Mother Teresa served, they have become the new consumer class. There were pictures of all these malls, and people buying machines and microwaves from these malls full of lights, and they were all so excited. I don’t romanticize poverty at all, but I saw that and I thought, “I wonder if this is what Mother Teresa really wanted.”

Have we entered another type of poverty? Mother Teresa used to say she would rather work with the poorest of the poor in Calcutta than in the United States because in the United States people suffer from a spiritual poverty. Although I talk about those privileged in this country and those not, many people from other countries say that even the poorest in the United States are privileged. Many times, people assume that if you put on the coverings and symbols of the middle class, and you can buy and do more, that’s the answer. I think we need to be cautious of that, because I think sometimes the answer is that maybe some of us could become a little poorer. A little poorer. That’s a deep one I still work with.

I’m not a theologian, but I learned about the theology of the incarnation. One of the beautiful things I read is that you cannot redeem what you will not assume. It says to me experience of God among us was God among the poorest of the poor—colonized, marginalized, suffering, oppressed people. If I want to redeem that, I have to be willing to assume that, to become one with that. Going back home was a frightening thing. But what gives me courage is that model of “I cannot redeem what I am not at some level willing to assume or become like.” We sit in uncomfortable places when we heed God’s call.

and do it. We tackle housing reform issues, environmental justice issues, and police reform issues. Amadou Diallo, the African man who was shot 40 times by police officers in 1999, was killed five blocks away. That is the reality that children live with every single day. This is our work, and I am here to talk about what it taught me, and what I hope it will teach all of us.

My first lesson is this: Whatever you have that you do not need does not belong to you.

My second lesson is that you don't have to go far to find hunger and poverty. Many times I have been tempted to go elsewhere. I say this with deep respect for those who do community work all over the world, but sometimes we're afraid to do mission work in our own backyard. Sometimes it's romantic to think of saving someone somewhere else because poor people there don't look like poor people here. Sometimes it's easier to love the hungry child with the swollen belly and outstretched arms because we don't want to love the hungry child with his pants down, his bottom out, and cap sideways who is looking at you really hard and making you feel afraid. But you don't have to get on a plane to find that. It's right here. God's broken people are here and in need of us.

Next: be generous with your life. It's one thing to give sometimes, on the sidelines, on the weekends, or when you have time; but it's another to be generous with your life. The people who taught me the most about generosity are the poorest of the poor. St. Augustine said, "The virtue of power is generosity." And haven't I learned that. I think that sometimes, it's just so bad and things are hard. But if you have \$1.35 in your pocket, you are richer than most people in this world. The virtue of poverty is generosity, and so if I sat with that and lived with that, it would help me to grow.

I am not a savior. I was 27 or 29 when all this started happening in my life, and I thought, "I'm gonna save those people, I'm gonna fix 'em up." I don't save anyone, and I don't say this to sound sweet, but in the end, they have saved me. I can go to bed

shot at, and, if anyone dared to march, the crowd would get shot into. But the pastor got a bulletproof vest and we continued to plan. The young people had the most courage. Mayor Dinkins' office said, "This is going to be an embarrassment. No one is going to come. This is a waste of resources," because they had swat teams on the rooftops to ensure the crowd wasn't shot at. But we said, "We are going to do this."

It was a beautiful autumn day, November 20, 1991, and I had spent the night weeping out of fear that no one was going to come. I walked out to 1,200 people waiting to march. And the most powerful thing was that I saw young girls with swollen, pregnant bellies; single moms pushing strollers; immigrant men and women; people I recognized from street corners; and the people I had been taught to think were the most powerless. There they were. I saw my Daddy, and he stood there with me. No one I worked with, none of the powerful people, were there. Not one. But busloads of the poorest of the poor, the people at the margins, were there. And we marched on that beautiful day.

We had speakers from all sorts of communities, Jewish and Christian and Muslim speakers, and our message was, "Crucify drugs, not people." We didn't believe the answer was to put more people in jail. And so we marched that day and there was the same voice inside of me. I knew it was God speaking to me, and God said, "This, Alexie, is what real power is. My children using their own voice and their own power, struggling and working for their own dignity and their own lives."

That day fundamentally changed my life, because when it was all over, people asked, "What are we going to do now?" And that question burned inside my heart. "Do you go back? How do you go back? What do you do?" I was stubborn and I really wasn't sure what I was supposed to do. Then I had a dream that was so vivid it woke me up weeping, full of sorrow and desolation. I dreamed of my community that I had left behind covered in darkness, and

there were these dark forces covering it from the rooftops. Then suddenly a light came through the darkness and pointed to a little patch of grass. And there I saw the cross and I felt that I was being prayed for. I could hear a voice praying that I would have the courage to heed the call. It was clear then what I needed to do, but I was so stubborn, so afraid, so unsure. Could I give up everything and come back home?

As I sat there I began to weep with fear and sorrow, and I thought, “Where is this all coming from?” I had seen so much utter violence, destruction, sadness, and brokenness that I had become callous and unfeeling, but at that moment I felt every single bit of pain, and it was the only time in my life I wished I would not live. I said, “God, take me. My body can’t hold this brokenness and sadness,” and then that voice said, “Remember when you asked for my heart?” And I was brought back to a time when I was 15 years old and someone had been invited to speak at church. I remember at one point he asked, “Whoever wants to know God’s heart, stand up.” And I thought to myself, “That sounds good, I want to know what God’s heart is like,” and so I stood up. Now, 12 years later, God told me, “Well here it is. This is just a tiny, tiny piece of my heart, of my brokenness and sadness for my people who suffer. I give you this tiny taste because if you had any more, truly you would die because your body could not contain the brokenness.”

I felt peace after that. Two months later I quit my job, to the utter dismay of my family and friends. I moved back home, found a small apartment, and lived off savings and unemployment. And Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, the youth ministry that I founded 15 years ago, was born. For 15 years I have done this work. I live and work among the poorest and the most vulnerable, not to save them, but to be saved by them. To walk in their presence is to know fully the heart of God. To show young people that faith is more than just making it to another place, to show them that churches and mosques and synagogues are not just places

to hide, and to hope for a better day. We serve an active God who seeks us out to partner with God to repair this world. My mother always said to me, “The Kingdom of God is not going to fall out of the sky, miha. You’re it. We’re it.”

Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice has worked with thousands of residents, and we work with them, we don’t just serve them. Church people, we love to serve. We love giving charity, clothes, food, and writing checks, and there’s nothing wrong with that, but that’s the easier part. The harder part is giving and being generous with your life and walking with and learning from the poorest of the poor. Seeking not just to ameliorate pain, but to find the root cause of pain. A speaker could say, “There have been X number of people shot in Philadelphia; let’s go over and do some triage.” But it’s insanity to not ask the questions, “Where did the guns come from and how can you stop them?” That’s the root cause. It’s wonderful when we give food and charity, but if you do not ask about the systems and structures that create the conditions where, in the richest country in the world, 30 million people live below the poverty level and are hungry, then in the end we get nowhere. And if you do not have the courage to both love and attack those systems, we get nowhere. And so this is the formation we do, because we believe we are all called to be prophetic voices, to speak truth to power, to have the courage to walk with our brothers and sisters, and to engage in work that is less comfortable.

I grew up in a “peace at all cost” family. I have never heard my parents raise their voices at each other. I do not know what it is to fight. I have never hit anybody or fought and I’m not an arguer. Yet I sit with young people and elected officials and am put in a position not to be violent, but to take action and be uncomfortable. God says to us, “Do you love enough to be uncomfortable for me, to sit in a smelly stinking rotten jail, to have a taste of what it feels like to be poor and vulnerable in this country?” And so we train young people in this and we go out