Oral History Interview: Pamela Ayo Yetunde

Interviewee: Pamela Ayo Yetunde

Interviewer: Monique Moultrie

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Monique M: Here we go, okay. Don't know what I had done wrong, but we are working now. So I want to officially get on record. My name is Monique Moultrie. Today is November 24th. I am here with Dr. Pamela Ayo Yetunde. We are conducting an oral history for both the LGBT-RAN website and my project entitled "Hidden Histories: Faith as a Site of Black Lesbian Activism."

I generally, in the oral history, start early and then we'll skip around. For some people it's easier because they have more biographies done about them, so I can sort of get questions sequentially like right. For other people—and I had this difficulty a bit with you—there's some middle pieces that I'm not so sure about, so if I ask you a question that's actually later in life you can answer it then, or you can say well, actually, we're only at college, so let me tell you about what I did next so that the story will read in the way that you want it read.

The process that comes for me, that I always put on record, you will sign a consent form when we go back to the UPS center, because I didn't pick it up. It slipped my mind and so I'm just recording it. So we'll do that, or you can do it electronically because you have a 3:00. And that then

consents to upload the oral history and the transcript of it to LGBT-RAN, to their website, and for me to use it for my project, my book project. You get the first right of refusal, so once the transcript is done I will send it to you with the audio file attached so that you can go back.

I ask that people generally don't edit out their speech pattern—like oh, I say um a lot—because we want it to match as closely as possible the audio so that a future researcher can come back to minute 13:37 and get what you're saying, which will change the format if you take some of that out. But if there's a story that you told me that you're like yeah, I really shouldn't have said that, feel free, we can excise whatever you want, and then what you approve is what goes up on the LGBT-RAN site, and what you approve is then what I can use for the research.

Okay. So I have way more questions than I'll ever get through, which is always the case, because you never know how long people will talk, so it's better to have more questions than not enough. So I start, as I said, very early, for most people. And for most people I can find out like the basics of like where they grew up. I know you went to school in Indiana, but I don't know where you grew up. I couldn't find that anywhere. So can you talk to me a bit about your early life, where it was, what the neighborhood was like?

Pamela Y: I grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana, born in 1961. I remember probably around the age of four or five my parents moving us from one part of

Indianapolis to the other, and I presume that was so that I could go to kindergarten in a particular area within walking distance from our house.

Monique M: Oh, cool.

Pamela Y: And virtually all black neighborhood near the…it was in the end of white flight, so there were maybe one or two white families still in the neighborhood. And I went to Public School No. 71 about five blocks from our house.

Monique M: Okay. And class-wise what would you say your neighborhood was like?

Pamela Y: Yeah. It was described as lower middle class. Definitely working class. And…

Monique M: Did you have any siblings or extended family you were close to or hung out with?

Pamela Y: One brother three years younger than myself, and then my mother had one sister who lived in Indianapolis within about a three mile radius. She had two sons and we did grow up together. So they were either at our house or we were at their house—

Monique M: And what did you all do for fun as cousins?

Pamela Y: As cousins, I would, because I was the only girl and there were three boys, so we played basketball. And that's where—we fought and we played basketball.

Monique M: But you gave as much as you got, huh?

Pamela Y: Of course. Absolutely.

Monique M: And so early on what do you think some of the values were that your parents were trying to instill? What were life lessons they kept honing in with you?

Pamela Y: I would say that I grew up in church. So we went to church every week, United Methodist Church. So belief in God, belief in Jesus, salvation. I think about the early prayers that I was handed down. And praying on my knees, the childhood prayer. I'm not recalling all the words right now, but "lay me down before I sleep," and God, you know, if I don't wake up, you know, God take me to heaven, that kind of thing. The Lord's prayer.

Values of honesty and trust. And in particular not stealing. I remember stealing from my brother and getting a spanking for that. And I lied about it, too. So being honest. Not taking what's not yours.

And then I was a girl, right, so there were certain values that girls were supposed to embrace, like looking like a girl, you know, being clean, keeping your legs closed, being deferential, preparing for maybe two or three professions in your life, teaching and nursing, being a virgin, getting married, having children. Those things.

Monique M: Did you get a sense growing up that there were any overt or maybe even implicit social justice messages that were a part of your childhood?

Pamela Y: Yeah, but not from my parents. Well, my father died when I was eight and my mother was, I would say, largely apolitical. And she had a belief,

going back to values, there's certain things that you don't talk to other people about: their religious beliefs, their political beliefs and their money. So I grew up largely apolitical myself until we were bused to a virtually all white school. And that was probably 1972, '73, around there. And then I began to ask questions about why, you know, I was able to walk to school before, had been walking to school, and now suddenly I had to go to a bus, get on a bus and go to a school unknown to…studying with all white people. So that did bring up a lot of questions. And I don't remember receiving satisfactory answers, at least not answers that could help me understand what that was all about.

Monique M: Now were you going with your brother as well or…?

Pamela Y: Let's see, three years… No. Because only sixth graders at this time were being bused, so he was younger and he got to stay at his school. And then seventh and eighth grade we weren't bused, so I got to go back to my other school. So I had that one year at the virtually all white school.

Monique M: Okay. And so the sense of this doesn't seem right to get bused. Was there any articulation around the value of black education or what made the difference between being bused in for a year to an all white school and you feeling like this isn't quite right and then you going back to your home environment which again was predominantly black? Were there more values being placed on black education or black people educating each other?

Pamela Y: No. It was more like this is just how it is, so this is what we're gonna do. I saw differences. For example, since I grew up in a virtually black neighborhood and was bused to this all white school there was resistance. White parents were out there with their signs. So that was the first time I had encountered that kind of like mob rage, white mob rage, which didn't last long.

But also at the same time that year there was a white girl who befriended me, invited me to her house, and I saw that her parents had adopted black children. And that was news to me. I'd never known that before. So I had a…oh, I also had an encounter with a white boy, like just even at the age of 12, right? So I had experiences with white people that I'd never had before, both very negative and also positive. And I guess I took that back to the black school that I had had that year.

But there was never a…I don't recall there ever being a desire in me to go back to that school. I was very happy where I was. That's what I grew up with, happy with. I didn't feel like it was deficient. The only question I had was, the main question—I remember two things. One, why did we have to pay to be bused, and two, why weren't white children being bused into our neighborhood? And then of course later the school in our neighborhood closed as a result, and so…

Monique M: So then by the time you were in high school, were you back to a more white high school?

Pamela Y: Mm-hmm, right, yeah. And busing.

Monique M: So what was high school like? What classes were you interested in?

Pamela Y: I don't know. We took all… [*Laughs.*] It was public school. They don't ask you what you're interested in, you take what you're gonna take. You take what they give you. I will say that my year, sixth grade, somewhat prepared me for being in an all white high school. But there were more black children in the high school than there were in the middle school, so we were able to fit in racialized groups, let's put it that way. You know, white kids sat on one side, black kids sat on the other side. By the time I got there it was known that there had been race riots in high schools around the busing thing, so there was a police presence at the school to prevent race riots. But overall it was peaceful. I remember us working well together. I made friends.

Monique M: What about your social activities? Were you dating? Were you—

Pamela Y: Yeah.

Monique M: —having extracurricular activities with groups of friends?

Pamela Y: Yeah, I was very—I was popular, to be frank with you. I was one of the popular… I'm friendly. You know, so I played tennis. I was on the tennis team. So school government. I dated. Had a couple boyfriends.

Monique M: So what then motivated the decision to attend Ball State? Like out of all the Indiana schools?

Pamela Y: Two things. I had two cousins that were there.

Monique M: Okay.

Pamela Y: And I don't think I had enough support around opening my mind and broadening my horizons around what my options were.

Monique M: Okay. So what was your major once you got there?

Pamela Y: Journalism. Journalism, with an emphasis on advertising.

Monique M: Okay. And did you have any spiritual practices while you were in college when you were away?

Pamela Y: Oh, no. I was so happy to not have to go to church. I just let that not be. And I didn't even explore. Oh, until…until I had a falling out with my mother. So I had been an RA my second year, and then… RA my second year—no, third year, sorry, third year. RA that year was a very tense year. There were I think a couple of suicide attempts on the floor and just a lot of drama and things that I had to confront, you know, and loss of friends as a result of me doing my job, you know, busting people for drinking and that kind of stuff.

So I thought okay, I'm tired of school. I just want to graduate. And I felt like the way for me to get out in four years would be for me to move out of the dorm. And my mother said you're not ready to live on your own yet. Yeah, I kind of feel like I'm ready, and that's what I want to do. And so basically she cut me off. She said if you move out I'm not paying for it, I'm not paying for anything. So I said well, this is my education, thank you very much. I should pay for my own education. I will take it from

here. So I lived on my own that last year. Now I've forgotten what your question was.

Monique M: Around spiritual practices.

Pamela Y: Yeah, so…right. So I was feeling very lonely. My mother and I had been close, so her cutting me off was a very harsh thing. I wasn't even expecting that. So obviously that put a dent in our relationship and I was feeling very lonely. She refused to visit me and then she threatened, she said I will never visit you and this kind of thing, so I was very lonely. And also, you know, a year from graduation, and just kind of didn't know what I was gonna do or where my support would be.

So after three years of not going to [church] I said you know what? I know what to do. Open this Bible and I'm gonna read it for the first time in my life, from the first page to the last, because I'd never done that before, and all my answers will be revealed, right? So I began reading. And I think after about the third story of war and killing I said let me close this book.

But what the book represented was—to me at that moment—was I'm not on the right path. You have decided that you're going to into advertising in order to make a lot of money selling people things that either they don't need or already have, and oh how clever you are because you're a good copywriter. And so that book said to me, opening that book and believing that that book had the answers to my life meant I needed to not go into advertising.

So then I had another issue called now what? I thought this was gonna give me the answer of what to do, but now I don't know what to do. So I was sleeping in class and one of my professors said, you know… He came up to me while I was sleeping in class and said you're not gonna sleep in my class anymore, this is it, and I want you to come see me afterwards. That led to me going to Zimbabwe that summer.

And then I had what I would consider to be a revelation, but the revelation was God is not what I've been taught God to be because this kind of strife—and I visited a refugee camp—this kind of strife—and I'd been taught that God protects, you know, people and so on so forth, you know, right? So that's when I started thinking more and more about what is God, and what beliefs have I been given, and what is my role in the world and so on and so forth.

But then that led to a year later being a volunteer with an organization called Church of the Brethren Volunteer Service, where I was introduced to Anabaptist concepts of simplicity and liberal politics and sort of renunciation from the ways we contribute to war, living collectively and so on. And so that's really probably what kicked off getting back into a spiritual life. Long answer, but…

Monique M: No, that's really helpful. So journalism professor sort of gives you a new path.

Pamela Y: Actually, history professor.

Monique M: History professor.

Pamela Y: Mm-hmm. Black history.

Monique M: And you're about to graduate, so what do you do?

Pamela Y: After I graduate I go to Zimbabwe with Operation Crossroads Africa, spend six weeks there with a group of Americans, all about the same age. We engage in a work project in a small town outside of [Harare] called Matepatepa. I come back to the United States saying oh my god, I don't know what my life is gonna [be about], right? There's this big world out there that I know nothing about. I've been so sheltered. I've got to see more of the world. I've got to be in it.

So applied for the Peace Corps. They wanted to send—and I wanted to go back to the African continent, but they wanted to send—I didn't have the technical skills they were looking for. But they wanted to send me to Guatemala or Honduras. Now by this time I was growing in political consciousness, so I decided I did not want to represent the United States in Guatemala or Honduras. And this was the mid 1980s. And I thought there must be other volunteer organizations out there.

Found the Church of the Brethren, the Brethren Volunteer Service. Went to the Netherlands for two years and worked there with journalists on issues like nuclear disarmament, East-West dialogue, human rights, things like that. So that was my most immediate post college life.

Monique M: So how do you go from the continent to Netherlands? That's a stark—

Pamela Y: I needed to get out of Indy—I needed to get out of the cocoon of my life. And at a certain point it didn't even matter. The fact was I felt like oh, I'm prepared for that position. I just got a degree in journalism. I can work as a journalist. It doesn't matter that it's the Netherlands. Just get me out of here.

Monique M: Okay. And so the social justice concepts you were writing about, were those given to you or those were your interests sort of coming to the forefront?

Pamela Y: I would say that those were given to me, yeah.

Monique M: So then you decide to go to law school?

Pamela Y: Mm-hmm.

Monique M: What sent that? Back in Indiana.

Pamela Y: Yeah, I know, right? So…okay, so with the Church of the Brethren Volunteer Service I worked on those issues for two years, came back and then enrolled in another half year where I was placed as an intern at the ACLU. And so at the ACLU, surrounded by lawyers, right, and I'm so impressed. It's like wow, the things that they know, their ability to articulate, especially around issues related to the Constitution. And I had already decided I wanted to be a more effective activist. And I said they have something that will be very beneficial to me as an activist. They went through law school.

So still looking for something to do in my life I figured if I went to law school at least I could meet my goal of being a better political activist. And, on a practical level, at least I would have this degree and I could practice law if I wanted to. So that's what led to law school. And the reason why I went back to Indiana University, because I had been at ACLU in D.C., is because they would still consider me a resident of Indiana.

Monique M: Ah. So you just said something that we haven't talked yet about, having a sense of wanting to be a more effective activist. When were you feeling urges to work and act for activist causes or some political or personal or social cause?

Pamela Y: It had to have been when I visited the refugee camp in Zimbabwe. So what I remember being told was that—you know, to go there, first of all, I was so sheltered, I don't believe I'd ever seen a homeless person before, okay? So then, at the refugee camp, populated by Mozambican people who had walked hundreds of miles, right, scores of people—I don't think I could see the end of the camp from where I was.

And it just blew my mind that as naïve as I was I didn't know there was such a thing as refugees. This is what I'm telling you. Refugee? Black people at war with each other? I mean, just totally blew my mind. So it must have been at that point where I thought this world is not as safe as I once thought it was and I want to be able to speak to this world being a better world, a safer place for people, just in terms of dignity.

Monique M: Okay.

Pamela Y: Yeah, that was the first inkling. And then, of course, that grew into the two years that I was in the Netherlands working on those issues.

Monique M: So you get to law school. People have first year, second year internships. What type of lawyer did you think you were preparing yourself to be?

Pamela Y: Not a lawyer at all, an activist. Yeah, never felt I was preparing myself to be a lawyer. And that became most evident during my clerkship. So I did a clerkship with a law firm. It was a civil rights law firm in North Carolina. And I didn't know what I was doing. I really was not prepared even to be a clerk. I didn't understand the laws enough. I didn't understand the legal process, the legal reasoning enough. There were things that I knew, but I really didn't know it. So I thought okay, yeah, I wasn't prepared to do this anyway, so okay.

I found that I excelled mostly in legal history classes, civil rights class, constitutional law, international human rights law. The things that I was most interested in were the things that I did well in, and everything else, like legal procedure, *pshhh*. Ugh, no. Property, no. Not interested. Couldn't get a grip. The amount of reading is so intense in law school that I really felt like I was overwhelmed most of the time.

Monique M: Okay. So you finished.

Pamela Y: Yeah, amazingly I graduated.

Monique M: Got a J.D.

Pamela Y: Mm-hmm.

Monique M: And then what was the plan? What did you do next?

Pamela Y: Well, I did have a law related job which in some ways was just perfect. I worked for the Immigration & Naturalization Service as an asylum officer, political asylum officer. So in that position we adjudicated claims for political asylum, which meant that we had to interview the applicant. Sometimes that meant working with an interpreter. We had to do research on the country of origin to determine whether what the applicant said was true or factual and if going back would pose a present danger for them, whether their fear was credible [under] all the standards, and then do the research on the law, and then make a decision. So that brought a lot of things together for me, because I had that sensitivity now from being in Zimbabwe about human rights, and refugees, and asylum. I had the legal education. So I was able to bring all that together. But it was a temporary position.

Monique M: Okay, so what do you do next? When does your interest in counseling come?

Pamela Y: If you take this method, Monique, this will be a very long interview, ‘cause it took me forever to figure out what to do in my life. Let’s go back to law school. And the things that become apparent to me, you know, I don’t act on it right away. So, for example, my last year of law school, knowing I grew up in a Christian family, and clearly my takeaway from that was different from some of my relatives.

So the last year of law school my mother called and said that my cousin [Roderick] was ill. And I said oh, does he have AIDS? And she said yes, how do you know? I said well—I told her I didn't know, but when I last saw Roderick it was…let's see, I was 30 at the time that the call came. I probably hadn't seen Roderick in 15, 16, 17 years. We were kids the last time. In essence we were kids the last time we saw each other. But I knew that there was something different about Roderick, right? And so…and later I learned that meant gay, right? So that's where that came from. And I figured the fact that we hadn't seen him meant that he was not wanting to be seen.

So she said yes, he has AIDS, he's dying, and he wants the family to come visit. And so I went through well, who's gonna visit, right? And then when she told me that no one was going to visit him, and the reasons why, I just was flabbergasted. I couldn't believe that my Christian family would refuse to see him. So I decided to see him. Not because we were close, because I hadn't seen the man, right?

But I think that was the start of me thinking okay, being present with dying people is important. It's without question when they make that request, like it's just what you do. It's the Christian thing to do. And I'm able to do it. But when I learned that he—and so I spent four days with him. He died in hospice later. And that was the first time I'd heard of hospice. But when I heard about hospice I thought wow, you know, I would love to be the kind of person who could do that for strangers.

Monique M: Wow.

Pamela Y: Yeah. But I'm not that person. And I knew that. So I could show up for Roderick, especially as nobody else in the family did, but for strangers I'm not that kind of person. But I'd like to be. And it was only ten years after that that I got involved in hospice work.

Monique M: Okay. So walk me through when you segue from trying to understand who God is to finding Buddhism. Was that through study? Because I know at some point you do an M.A. in spirituality and culture and arts. Or was that through friend networks or…?

Pamela Y: So also during my last year of law school I learned that I was gonna work for the Immigration & Naturalization Service. So I had friends at Indiana University who were professors, a lesbian couple, and they said oh, you go to San Francisco, you must go to Glide Memorial Church. Like why? You just, you got to go, it's incredible. And I'm like okay. So go to Glide. Cecil Williams, [Jan Mirikitani] leading the congregation. Are you familiar with it?

Monique M: Mm-hmm.

Pamela Y: Okay. And it was. I mean, I grew up in the United Methodist Church, right? So this is a United Methodist Church, but it's not like any United Methodist Church I'd ever attended. And I was just amazed at how vibrant it was, how passionate Rev. Williams was about liberation. I never…the churches that I attended were not liberation churches. Their ministries for

people in the Tenderloin. I lived in the Tenderloin, so to have a community church about liberation that was vibrant and interracial, multicultural, pro gay.

And sometimes Rev. Williams would talk about the reasons—and this happened before I got there—the reasons why he removed the cross because the cross represented just the opposite of liberation to him. That he did that, that's amazing. So I would say that going back to Glide was…it just put me back on the path of being open to being in spiritual community. Then I moved out of the Tenderloin and stopped going to Glide. Because I could walk to Glide. But when I moved, it would have been cumbersome to go there.

But it's really important for me to say that at Glide I learned how to speak from my heart. So it was like Pride Sunday. I had joined the LGBT group there. Pride Sunday. My mother had written me this horrible letter about how horrible it was that I had come out. And so I was encouraged, actually, to read that letter in church. And I thought, yeah, I can't do that. Anyway, so they convinced me to do it. I had the microphone.

At Glide, they say usually about 500 people go through Glide. I don't know how many. It was a full church. And even though I had graduated from law school, I was still terrified of public speaking. But there I was, had my letter. I thought I can read this letter. I can read that. I'm not speaking from my heart. Read the letter. I've got my microphone. And my

hand was shaking so much that you could hear the paper rustling throughout the entire church.

And so Rev. Williams very gently came over and took the letter out of my hand and said to speak from the heart. And I did that. And I don't remember what I said, but the people just, you know Glide, they just leapt up and it's like so happy, so appreciative, and cheering, and I just thought, wow. I never thought…I never imagined anything like this in church could happen. So that changed how I viewed what church can be about for LGBTQ people.

You asked me about Buddhism, though. I don't think there's so much a connection for me between my experience at Glide, which I think I went there for about four or five years, and Buddhism. I'll have to think about that. But between Glide and Buddhism was Oprah Winfrey. This was the year…I'm gonna say it's about the year 2000. I was watching Oprah and she had a boy on her show named Mattie Stepanek who was ill. He had spina bifida. But he talked about on his good days visiting other children in the hospital where he had lived most of his life in pain, in the hospital.

And I just started crying. This little boy is so sweet. He wrote little poems. And I thought if he can do that, what's wrong with me? What is wrong with me? How come I can't do what I thought ten years ago to do? So that day I resolved, that day, I'm gonna pick up the phone book—back when we had phone books—and I called all the hospice organizations in the Bay Area and asked them about their training programs.

Zen Hospice Project was the only one at the time that had a year long training program, so that caught my attention. I didn't know anything about Zen. Didn't know anything about Buddhism. Wasn't looking for Zen or Buddhism, but was looking to be able to be present for dying people. So interviewed with Zen Hospice Project, they accepted me, and that was part of my introduction to Buddhism and Zen.

The other part, right around the same time, was a gift that was given to me by a friend for my 40th birthday called "Touching Peace" by Thich Nhat Hanh. And the combination of receiving that book and being accepted into the Zen Hospice Project were my introductions to Zen and Buddhism.

Monique M: Okay.

Pamela Y: And pastoral counseling all at the same time.

Monique M: Wow. So how long was the program to train?

Pamela Y: One year.

Monique M: And at that point were you certified to then start your own, to work for them?

Pamela Y: Oh, no, no. It was just a volunteer training program. But then that led to me saying oh yeah, this is what I should be doing. The teachings, the Zen teachings, the Buddhist teachings largely made sense to me. I had some questions about some things, but largely made sense to me. I found comfort and peace of mind in meditation. And then questions about my own incompetency around oh, what are these questions that people ask

me, what are these concerns as they're dying. You know, I don't even know how to answer some of these questions. So then that led to me saying okay, I need to get some more education.

So Zen Hospice then led to a year long training program called the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies introduction to chaplaincy. Did that for a year. While there I learned about clinical pastoral education. So then I did clinical pastoral education at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Berkeley. Then I said oh, boy, it looks like I really need to go back to school. So got my Master of Arts in Culture and Spirituality at Holy Names University, which is a Catholic university in Oakland. And then, gosh, it was 2007. Then four years later enrolled in a doctorate program in pastoral counseling.

Monique M: So you are, I think, the first chaplain, person who has a chaplaincy background that I have interviewed. I've interviewed a diversity of religious leaders, what I'm considering religious leaders or lay leaders, everything from like when I interviewed Emilie [Townes], who is an administrator, to Sylvia Rhue, who is the assistant to Bishop Flunder. So I have a much more expansive, I think, understanding of social justice work and leadership within social justice work being more than just you're the person who brings people to a centering moment.

So in your conversation, can you talk a bit about the shift for you for chaplaincy, for counseling, and for [mirroring] Buddhism into that? And

I'm not imagining you saw many models of people who looked like you doing that, so what made it feasible, possible, imaginable for you?

Pamela Y: Mm-hmm. Mmm… Well, I guess I want to begin by saying it all kind of came together at the same time. I was looking for—oh, and I think it's also important to say—so I received this book, "Touching Peace," and the invitation to be in the hospice project not long after the bombing of the World Trade Center, and so I was desiring a way to cope with this crisis that we were in. I happened to be in an airport at the time of the bombing, so—

Monique M: Me too. I was in the Boston one.

Pamela Y: Uh-huh, okay. It was a very tense time.

Monique M: Yeah.

Pamela Y: Very tense time. And so for me it wasn't about… I think at that time it was, for me personally, I had gotten past needing to see other people like myself doing what I wanted to do. Maybe it was because I had already done so many things—[*laughs*]—and still trying to figure out what is it that I'm supposed to do that I wasn't concerned about whether other people are doing it, and what they looked like, and whether I had permission to do it, you know? Like I had already experienced my family's letdown of Roderick.

In between that and other things I was doing I came out and experienced my family's rejection. And the beauty of that, as painful as it was, is that I

no longer needed permission from people I loved to do anything I wanted to do because they weren't—they had lost interest in anything I was doing, largely. I shouldn't say that about everybody, but collectively, when you're trying to figure out, you know, what is appropriate here, collectively I experienced my family as shutting me out, so I could do whatever I wanted to do. Most of my family had no idea that I practiced Buddhism.

So yeah, I think it was irrelevant to me what other people thought. And I couldn't separate one from the other, so the introduction to Buddhism, how it landed on me, spiritual care, pastoral care, it just all came together. I couldn't separate it. And maybe that's why it was so powerful coming together. Did that answer your question?

Monique M: Yes. I'm going to ask a follow-up to it, to talk a bit about then the building of a way of doing things. It makes sense to you and now I'm going to do this for others on a larger scale. So the consultancy practice, the idea of teaching this to others, publishing about it as a modality, a way of being with those in need, can you talk about that?

Pamela Y: Yeah, okay. Sometimes I think I've lived such an accidental life, professionally accidental. Like I'm a professor now, you know, a relatively new professor—new professor at teaching full-time, two and a half years. I'm 58 years old. So…

Some time ago I decided that I liked writing. Not that I think I'm a great writer, but I like it. It does something for me. Helps me clarify thoughts,

helps me let go of things that I'm holding onto. And then when I learned it's a way of connecting, I thought wow, there's a lot you can do with writing. I learned this not in my advertising programs, but when I was a financial advisor. I know this is the part we haven't talked about.

So after law school and after working for the Immigration & Naturalization Service, a one year position, then the question was what next, right? I didn't want to practice law, but I wanted to stay in the Bay Area because this is an [interesting] place to live. So did a lot of soul searching, had a couple other jobs, but in the soul searching I learned that lawyers tend to do well in financial planning. I never thought about financial planning, never talked to a financial planner, didn't know anything about investing, had never invested. So did some more research and ended up doing that kind of work. So again, real accidental kind of thing.

My supervisor said, you know, it usually takes—oh, and by the way, it's 100% commission. That's how I started. So I entered into a profession in expensive San Francisco, no experience, 100% commission, and my supervisor says it usually takes about five years before you begin to see the fruits of your labor. And I thought to myself at my age, in this place, San Francisco, I don't have five years. I've got to make it hum right now, right?

So then I thought what is the one thing that I can do to advance my career and put myself out there so that I don't have to do this for five years, cold

calls, you know, crazy. So I said the one thing that tends to distinguish one from another in any profession is publications, for right or for wrong. Most people don't do it. I'm going to do it. So I write a book about African American women and personal finance. And boom, I go from—within months I go from being a cold caller to people calling me. So I knew the power of writing and publishing from that industry.

Fast forward to the spiritual care. I've written a few—I had started writing a few things, but not to get clients. That's not the issue in spiritual care, getting clients. It was more because I care. I'm passionate about this work. I'm passionate about people being treated well, being treated with respect and dignity, having their human rights respected. And I'm passionate about people treating themselves well. I learned the beauty of meditation and wanted to share that.

And this is not necessarily in any kind of chronological order, but after I wrote my dissertation I was invited to write something for a magazine called "Lion's Roar" that used to be "Shambhala Sun." It was about Black Lives Matter and Buddhism. And then I think since then I've written a few things about being black and being Buddhist. And some consider me to be a black Buddhist writer, if you will. So for me writing is about connecting with other people.

And then teaching came as a result of me being—of that article being seen by Barbara Holmes, who's an African American woman who was president of United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. The dean

who served with her, Sharon Tan, who is a [Malaysian] Chinese American woman, and they just said based on how you wrote this we think you would be a good fit for United, would you please consider applying. I did and was invited to teach. And that's how I got here.

And so now there are only a few—back to who else like me is doing this—there are, as far as I know, there may be two more. There is one other African American lesbian Buddhist scholar and that's Cheryl Giles at Harvard Divinity School. There are African American—as you probably know there are African American women who are writing about Buddhist practices in the academy, but I don't know if they're Buddhist or not. But that's not really relevant to my point. But my point is that there are really, as far as I know, two, maybe three of us who consider ourselves Buddhist practitioners writing about Buddhism.

And since that is the case, and there are many, many more African American people entering into Buddhist lifestyles, philosophy, practices, and so on, I have been the one—and Cheryl and I both have been sort of like the recipients of the benefits of being in this community. And we are writing even more and more about being black and Buddhist. There seems to be an interest in reading it.

Monique M: Yeah. I'm going to sidetrack us maybe.

Pamela Y: I may have sidetracked us.

Monique M: No-no-no. We've got a little under 20 minutes, so I'm…

Pamela Y: Let me know if I'm…

Monique M: No. This is telling what you want told, so I'm absolutely happy to receive. I want to ask a question about what seemingly might be a random thing, the Religious Diversity Leadership workshop that you did. I saw it on your Linked In page and I thought what does that prepare one to do? And the my grad student sent me an article from someone else who had taken it with you who interviewed you about you starting up DharmaCare. And so I thought let me ask about that because I'm writing a book on leaders and leadership and religious diversity in a bit. So let me ask you why that was appealing. Did you see yourself as a leader? Were you trying to get skills for leadership?

Pamela Y: If I recall correctly, this is the summer intensive that I took at Hartford Seminary. And also that same summer I did another intensive with an orthodox Jewish group, interreligious exchange group. And did I see myself as a leader? Not necessarily. I realize that in chaplaincy, in pluralistic settings, it's really important that you have some kind of competency to deal with people, be with people, attend to the ritual needs, if possible, of people from a variety of backgrounds. So I looked at it as an opportunity to gain interreligious and inter competency skills.

I think at that time I had not…I don't know remember, actually, if I had gone through the Community Dharma Leadership program out of Spirit Rock which we call CDL. So I did a two year program, CDL, dharma leadership. I have ambivalence around being considered a Buddhist leader

because of the projections that one can receive when one puts one's self out as a religious leader. So I have some ambivalence about that. But I have been trained as a Buddhist leader, Buddhist lay leader.

In chaplaincy settings we are called to be leaders for the community. And interestingly, when it comes to doing leadership things I don't have a problem with that. I'm happy to do those things. I think it's the projections that I'm most uncomfortable with. But yeah, I have been trained to be a leader. I was also a Girl Scout, so leadership is something that—and I've gone through other leadership trainings, too, so yeah.

Monique M: Lean into that for a second for me. Talk to me about what projections you hear or are having in the back of your thought bubble around this.

Pamela Y: Yeah. More like, you know, when you're a religious leader then I think there's the expectation that you look a certain way, right? I don't know what they think that means. And then also there's the being held to a higher standard. And all of this is things that people are thinking but not necessarily saying, so you're not really a participant in negotiating what those things are. And then when you don't live up to that—for example, there's a teaching in Buddhism that, in essence it's anti Buddhist, if you will, to criticize a Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, the three gems, right? You're not supposed to do that.

But I'm critical when I'm critical, right? So yeah, is that not being a good leader? So I don't teach people to not criticize Buddhism or Buddhists. But the teachings say you don't do that. So maybe I'm not a good leader

for some people if I'm criticizing aspects of Buddhism while also being a Buddhist leader.

Monique M: That's really helpful. My random aside is I taught my class about ethical leadership on Tuesday. And so I've been teaching this whole woman as ethical leadership class all semester, but I waited until now to do a lecture on leadership purposely because part of what the leadership studies field is all about is setting up heterosexual white men as a model leader. And I didn't want them reading each week with that in mind, even in the back of the thought bubble, reading against that more. While certainly the breadth of the class is not doing that at all. It's saying that all of these women are leaders in their variety of ways, let's look at a more expansive understanding of leadership. So I had students sort of at the end of class Tuesday have the same like well, there's squishiness around leadership.

And there's a book "Black Womanist Leadership" that I'm assigning to them for our next class, and part of what the intro does is talks about the reasons why black women don't claim leadership. And a bit of those projections are about gender and racial assumptions, like men are to be leaders, so I can't claim that, even though I'm doing all these leadership things. Or I have a sense leaders are masculine, they have masculine traits, and they're aggressive, they're these things, and I want to be feminine and I don't want to come off this way. And so there was this list of like obstacles of why black women don't claim the title.

And it’s never been a problem for me. And so I literally was reading through bullet point by bullet point and sort of explaining their argument, but in my head I was like I don’t understand. So that’s really why I wanted you to respond to me a bit about what you heard, because it isn’t what’s coming to mind for me from my own subjectivity.

Pamela Y: Okay.

Monique M: So thank you for that.

Pamela Y: You’re welcome.

Monique M: My random aside.

Pamela Y: Right. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M: Let’s get on record some categories. So you’re on the womanist steering committee. Do you define yourself as womanist?

Pamela Y: Not anymore I’m not. Hm-mmm, I’m not. I got off of that some time ago.

Monique M: At the time were you a womanist as an identify form?

Pamela Y: Forming. Let’s say forming a womanist identity, yes. And I still feel that way even though I didn’t feel like I could commit to the work.

Monique M: What about blackness, queerness, femaleness? Any of these categories fit for you? Do you prefer lesbian, same gender loving?

Pamela Y: I’m good with all of them. And from the Buddhist perspective, one of the things that I appreciate from Buddhist philosophy is recognizing these labels as constructs, as, we would say from a Buddhist perspective, empty.

So they serve a relative reality. They help us connect with each other and so on, but they are empty of material substance, so not to hold them too tightly.

Monique M: Yeah. You are now taking on a more administrative role at [your campus] according to Linked In. So again with my questions about where we find ourselves in various spaces of leadership, speak to some of the intellectual shifts that then take place when you are in leadership among the business world, sort of the colleague, peer negotiation.

Pamela Y: Well, I will come from and I do come from a, I guess you could say, psychotherapeutic vantage point, and so what I think about are things like how does a school that's been around since 1962, which most people even in the Twin Cities, most people I've met have never heard of it. They've heard of the other school, but haven't heard of ours. And I think about that from a psychotherapeutic point of view and ask myself why is it that our faculty, if this is true, why is it that our faculty is not acting in a way to let our communities know we exist? Is it introversion? Do they think that's the marketing department's job solely? Is it that they feel comfortable and confident that what they're doing is enough?

And then even after all of that, I still have to sit down and ask them about it. And I have enjoyed doing that. Tell me who do you write for, who do you teach for? Where might we find these people? Would you be willing to meet them outside of your classroom? Are you willing to be interviewed? Are you willing to go through something like [Auburn]

Seminary's training so that you are more effective with the press? What are the things that are going to help us be known so that we don't have to struggle with the culture of obscurity and anxiety?

So yeah, from a psychotherapeutic point of view. Then I think about what is my role then in forming a relationship with my colleagues that will help them feel comfortable in taking that next step towards greater visibility for us as a teaching community.

Monique M: Cool. It's rare when a job title actually fits with what the vision is.

Pamela Y: I recommended the job title.

Monique M: Because that is not what the levels of administration often mean to us. I have five vice provosts of something, advancement and…just at the end I just don't know whom I'm supposed to send an email to. Still don't.

Pamela Y: Well, basically I modeled it after this is what I do for myself. And I realized that many of my colleagues aren't doing that for themselves. And I've had some success in it so let me see if it's something I can do for you. I mean, you've got to do your part, but this is the part I can do, right?

Monique M: So I always ask people to end the interview with a discussion on what sustains them in social justice work, in working for the people, whoever your people are, whoever the people are for you, and what keeps you joyful in the process.

Pamela Y: I have a routine. Not foolproof, but I usually engage in it. So what sustains me is a good night's sleep, meditation, working out, and eating right.

Those are the basics. What I have learned over the years is that nothing that I do in terms of social change, social action, what have you, I will do by myself. So it's got to be done in community, and a supportive community that is willing to share the risks, the burdens, the responsibilities, the joys. I've learned if there's no community behind it, it's not going to get done, and it won't be done.

Knowing who to work with is important. Knowing your place in the system is important. Knowing what you can contribute to the system is important. Knowing what power you have in the system is important. And just recognizing that you are in a system is key.

Monique M: Sure.

Pamela Y: Yeah. So these are things that I learned, when I think about it, with every system I'm a part of, but the place that I'm in is not the same with every system. Really valuing my wellbeing is key. So when my body says I'm tired, you're tired. Or when your body says rest, rest. Or you need to have some fun, go have some fun. I learned, when I was in my postdoc I learned that my body right now feels complete and satisfied with about six hours of work four days a week, so I have tried very hard to keep to that. I can't. I haven't yet.

But it does tell me okay—because I've been burned out before. Okay, at the end of the day when you feel like okay, you've accomplished something, ask yourself this question: if you don't do that extra thing that you could do today, will the world fall apart? Will your career fall apart?

Will your household fall apart? Usually the answer to all of that is no. Okay, then you can do that tomorrow. Just say it's done for the day. So doing that then allows me to have time to imagine, and that's really important to me. To envision and imagine what's next.

And also I'm big on celebrating. So, I mean, I could celebrate almost any little thing. Let's go celebrate. Let's go out. Because what we accomplished was good. When I teach I have fun in the classroom. We laugh. I bring in funny videos. We'll do role plays for a humorous part of it. And I think laughter is really big.

Also the other thing is the recognition that there's certain things that's not going to change, that I can't change, or it's not my work to do. That's really key. Other people are doing that work, other people are better at that work. I will do what I think that I can do with the people I can do it with. I can't take it all on.

I think in this administration, this presidential administration, with so many things under attack, it has left a lot of us just wondering what the hell am I supposed to do, right? Like just…that one thing that you were passionate about before, I'm pretty sure it's under attack. Keep doing that, right?

Monique M: Sure.

Pamela Y: Yeah.

Monique M: Well, I think that's a perfect place, with the words of wisdom, to stop. And let me pause on record and say thank you for sharing with me and for being a part of whatever will unfold, and for letting your story be a part of the LGBT-TRAN story that it's telling for the next generations. Thank you. I'm going to stop our recorders.

1:10:52 [*End of recording.*]