

Remembering Pauli Murray  
Sunday, February 25, 2024  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County  
Eustis, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

Back in September of 2021 I received this invitation in an email from PFLAG. “Amazon Studios is presenting two advance virtual screenings of My Name is Pauli Murray (PG-13) on Thursday, September 30, and PFLAGers are cordially invited to join!

“Pauli Murray, a Black and trans/nonbinary trailblazer, was one of the most influential figures in American 20th century history yet remains largely unknown. Both Pauli’s personal path and tireless advocacy foreshadowed some of the most politically consequential issues of our time. They influenced Martin Luther King, Jr., Ruth Bader Ginsberg, and Thurgood Marshall. Pauli’s remarkable life included being arrested for refusing to move to the back of a segregated bus 15 years before Rosa Parks, and an enduring and unlikely friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt.

“There are two screenings available--one at 7pm ET and one at 7pm PT, both on Thursday, September 30th. Each one is followed by a panel conversation following the film.” I signed up and watched the film and the panel discussion and was impressed. Why had I never heard of this person before?

For someone I had never heard of Pauli Murray is pretty well recognized. “In 2015, the National Trust for Historic Preservation designated the childhood home of Murray (on Carroll Street in Durham, North Carolina's West End neighborhood) as a National Treasure.

In April 2016, Yale University announced that it had selected Murray as the namesake of one of two new residential colleges (Pauli Murray College) to be completed in 2017...

In December 2016, the Pauli Murray Family Home was designated as a National Historic Landmark by the US Department of Interior

In 2018, Murray was chosen by the National Women's History Project as one of its honorees for Women's History Month in the United States.”

And this year 2024 she will be an honoree on an American women quarter. [Pauli Murray - Wikipedia](#).

Throughout her life Murray was denied opportunities because of her gender and her race. “Inspired to attend Columbia University by a favorite teacher, Murray was turned away from applying because the university did not admit women, and she did not have the funds to attend its women's coordinate college, Barnard College.” “Murray applied to (a) PhD program in sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in 1938, but was rejected because of her race.” “In 1941, she began attending Howard University law school. Murray was the only woman in her law school class, and she became aware of sexism at the school, which she labeled ‘Jane Crow’—alluding to Jim Crow, the system of racial discriminatory state laws oppressing

African Americans. On Murray's first day of class, one professor, William Robert Ming, remarked that he did not know why women went to law school. She was infuriated.” She graduated from Howard Law at the top of her class. “Traditionally, Howard's top graduate received a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship for graduate work at Harvard University, but Harvard Law did not accept women at that time. Murray was thus rejected, despite a letter of support from sitting President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Murray wrote in response, ‘I would gladly change my sex to meet your requirements, but since the way to such change has not been revealed to me, I have no recourse but to appeal to you to change your minds. Are you to tell me that one is as difficult as the other?’” “In 1963, she became one of the first to criticize the sexism of the civil rights movement, in her speech ‘The Negro Woman in the Quest for Equality’. In a letter to civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph, she criticized the fact that in the 1963 March on Washington no women were invited to make one of the major speeches or to be part of its delegation of leaders who went to the White House... She wrote:

‘I have been increasingly perturbed over the blatant disparity between the major role which Negro women have played and are playing in the crucial grassroots levels of our struggle and the minor role of leadership they have been assigned in the national policy-making decisions. It is indefensible to call a national march on Washington and send out a call which contains the name of not a single woman leader.’” [Pauli Murray - Wikipedia](#).

Murray’s comment in her letter to Harvard about gladly changing her sex was more literally true for Murray than those who received that letter might have expected. In a section on Murray’s sexuality and gender identity in the Wikipedia article on her it says, “Murray struggled with her sexual and gender identity through much of her life. Her marriage as a teenager ended almost immediately with the realization that ‘when men try to make love to me, something in me fights’. Although acknowledging the term ‘homosexual’ in describing others, Murray preferred to describe herself as having an ‘inverted sex instinct’ that caused her to behave as a man would when attracted to women. She wanted a ‘monogamous married life’, but one in which she was the man. The majority of her relationships were with women whom she described as ‘extremely feminine and heterosexual’. In her younger years, Murray often was devastated by the end of these relationships, to the extent that she was hospitalized for psychiatric treatment twice, in 1937 and in 1940.”

She would have been 27 and 30 in those years, a time in my life when I was focused on romance and marriage. I thought it was a hard enough time for a straight cisgender woman. I cannot imagine the turmoil of that stage of life if one is also figuring out one’s personal gender identity and sexuality. I wonder if the psychiatric treatment she received back then was helpful or not, and if today it would be better or not.

Wikipedia continues, “Murray wore her hair short and preferred pants to skirts; due to her slight build, there was a time in her life when she was often able to pass as a teenage boy. In her twenties, she shortened her name from Pauline to the more androgynous Pauli. At the time of her arrest for (a) bus segregation protest in 1940, she gave her name as ‘Oliver’ to the arresting officers. Murray pursued hormone treatments in the 1940s to correct what she saw as a personal imbalance and even requested abdominal surgery to test if she had ‘submerged’ male sex organs.

“Writing about Murray's understanding of her sex, Rosalind Rosenberg, author of *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray*, categorized Murray as a transgender man. When asked about her understanding of Murray's gender in a 2017 interview with the African American Intellectual History Society, Rosenberg states: ‘[During Pauli's life,] the term transgender did not exist and

there was no social movement to support or help make sense of the trans experience. Murray's papers helped me to understand how her struggle with gender identity shaped her life as a civil rights pioneer, legal scholar, and feminist.' In an interview with *HuffPost Queer Voices*, Brittney Cooper agreed on the matter: 'Murray preferred androgynous dress, had a short hairstyle and may have identified as a transgender male today, but she lacked the language to do so at the time,'" [Pauli Murray - Wikipedia](#).

If all I could say about Pauli Murray is that they faced discrimination and that they struggled with their sexuality and gender identity their childhood home would not be a national landmark, they would not have their face on a quarter and they would not be the topic for a worship service today.

What Murray said, wrote and did made a difference. Her work made life better for people and for the nation.

Thurgood Marshall, then the NAACP's chief counsel, called Murray's 1950 examination of States' Laws on Race and Color the "bible" of the civil rights movement. Her work provided a guide for change.

"Regarding Murray's work for women's rights the Wikipedia article states that, "In 1964, Murray wrote an influential legal memorandum in support of the National Women's Party's successful effort (led by Alice Paul) to add 'sex' as a protected category in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In 1965, Murray published her landmark article (coauthored by Mary Eastwood), 'Jane Crow and the Law: Sex Discrimination and Title VII', in the *George Washington Law Review*. The article discussed Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as it applied to women and drew comparisons between discriminatory laws against women and Jim Crow laws. The memo was shared with every member of Congress and Lady Bird Johnson, then First Lady, who brought it to President Lyndon B. Johnson's attention.

"In 1966, she was a cofounder of the National Organization for Women (NOW), which she hoped could act as an NAACP for women's rights. In March of that year, Murray wrote to Commissioner Richard Alton Graham that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was not fulfilling its duty in upholding the gendered portion of its mission, leaving only half the black population protected. Later in 1966, she and Dorothy Kenyon of the ACLU successfully argued *White v. Crook*, a case in which a three-judge court of the United States District Court for the Middle District of Alabama ruled that women have an equal right to serve on juries. When future Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, then with the ACLU, wrote her brief for *Reed v. Reed*, the 1971 Supreme Court case that extended the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause to women for the first time, she added Murray and Kenyon as coauthors in recognition of her debt to their work," [Pauli Murray - Wikipedia](#).

I wonder what Murray would have to say about the rights of people who identify as transgender, gender queer or gender non-conforming if she were writing today.

This week after the death of an Oklahoma gender expansive teen Nex Benedict the Human Rights Campaign called out the actions and policies put in place by Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters. I can imagine a 21<sup>st</sup> century Pauli Murray finding a way to claim her own gender identity and being an advocate for others.

Murray did much for civil rights and women's rights as a lawyer, but she had a second career as well. In her sixties she went to theological school. She became the first African American woman to be ordained an Episcopal priest. Her thesis for her Master of Divinity degree was "Black Theology and Feminist Theology: A Comparative Review." Sounds to me like an interesting work to read. Murray worked in a parish in Washington, DC focusing her work primarily on ministry to the sick. "In 2018, Murray was made a permanent part of the Episcopal Church's calendar of saints (she is commemorated on July 1 (her death date)," [Pauli Murray - Wikipedia](#).

In addition to her legal writings Murray wrote two autobiographical works and a collection of poetry. I end with her poem, "Words" and a verse of her poem "Dark Testament."

"Words"

"We are spendthrifts with words,  
We squander them,  
Toss them like pennies in the air—  
Arrogant words,  
Angry words,  
Cruel words,  
Comradely words,  
Shy words tiptoeing from mouth to ear.

"But the slowly wrought words of love  
and the thunderous words of heartbreak—  
Those we hoard." [Words | Poetry Out Loud](#)

From "Dark Testament"

"Hope is a crushed stalk  
Between clenched fingers  
Hope is a bird's wing  
Broken by a stone.  
Hope is a word in a tuneless ditty —  
A word whispered with the wind,  
A dream of forty acres and a mule,  
A cabin of one's own and a moment to rest,  
A name and place for one's children  
And children's children at last . . .  
Hope is a song in a weary throat.  
Give me a song of hope  
And a world where I can sing it.  
Give me a song of faith  
And a people to believe in it.  
Give me a song of kindness  
And a country where I can live it.  
Give me a song of hope and love  
And a brown girl's heart to hear it." [Journey with Jesus - Dark Testament Verse 8](#)  
May we be inspired by Murray's words, their life, and their work.