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2021 Conference on Community Writing Plenary Address, Adapted

Journeying To Purpose

Mary Brown and Phyllis Ryder

We write today about a journey to purpose. We write about how to keep going forward when the world is on fire. We write about holding onto the transformational power of expression and relationship. We see building connections and finding your unique point of agency as essential for creating systemic change.

The injustices from Treyvon Martin to George Floyd are all-too-frequent reminders that living in a Black body in the United States is precarious. The persistence and deadly consequences of racism can be almost overwhelming. Now we are in a geopolitical nightmare with the war in Ukraine. We saw the hatred and fear scaling the walls of the Capitol, plundering democracy. We see the right to vote more and more constrained. We see grandmothers and aunts, fathers and brothers taken by COVID. How do we keep going forward?

This is an essay about holding onto hope.

We strive to build a world of equity and shared humanity. Progressive scholars, community activists, and public intellectuals identify the barriers to equity and shared humanity as lying within white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal structures—historical legal and cultural forces that justify and maintain systems of power. When the goal of justice and shared humanity is framed as ending “systemic racism,” many assume that organizations who focus on inner reflection and personal connection are too naïve to make a difference. This is an essay about finding the power to dismantle oppression by beginning with the personal. Systemic structures are real but starting there takes you away from looking at you.

This is an essay about the process of sustainable social justice work: find your passion, pay attention to your pain, journey into your purpose.

1. Life Pieces to Masterpieces, an Introduction

The two of us are brought together through our love of Life Pieces to Masterpieces (LPTM), a DC nonprofit which Sister Mary co-founded and where she now serves as the Executive Director; Sister Phyllis serves as the Secretary of the Board. (At Life Pieces, we refer to each other with familial titles; so, for example. Mary Brown is Sister Mary; Phyllis Ryder is Sister Phyllis; and the boys and young men are given the title Brother. We carry that practice into this article.)

Life Pieces to Masterpieces is the first arts-based organization in the nation focused solely on meeting the needs of African American males from early childhood

to adulthood. LPTM has helped shape the lives of more than 1,500 young men from some of DC's most underserved neighborhoods. People living in the census track around the Charles Drew Elementary School where LPTM is headquartered have a life expectancy over seven years lower than the DC average, and fifteen years lower than the nearby counties in Maryland and Virginia where Phyllis and Mary live (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation). Disparities in food access, school resources, and opportunities for employment and more create generational barriers to equity. Though local and national parks and streams wind throughout these DC wards east of the Anacostia River, few venture into green spaces for fear of rising gun violence.

The challenges of living in under-resourced neighborhoods are real; they bring trauma and sometimes despair. What is happening in Wards 7 & 8 is a confluence of -isms whose impact is devastating, but the message of Life Pieces is not only for young Black men and boys or those struggling under systems of oppression. We understand that *everyone* confronts pain and suffering that can tear them up, and that if we don't examine that trauma, if we don't have a way to reflect, we all continue to suffer and lose our sense of connection and hope. So, the message of Life Pieces is a message about shared humanity; we offer tools that we all can use, a way to move through a world of isolation and suffering without losing track of who you are and who you can be.

At Life Pieces, we believe that "We all enter life as a blank canvas. With love, security, and expression, we can each become a masterpiece." This approach is explained more comprehensively in the LPTM's mission: to use "artistic expression to develop character and leadership, unlock potential, and prepare African American boys and young men to transform their lives and communities." LPTM programs and events are suffused with songs, painting, speeches, performances, and other forms of expression. (The painting, "Connect," on the cover of this journal is an example of LPTM's signature sewn-canvas painting style.)

The program works. In communities where just over 50% of youth graduate from high school, 100% of the boys who participate in LPTM through their senior year graduate successfully. Nearly all enroll in college or other post-secondary career training.

This year, two graduating seniors have received university Presidential scholarships from Virginia State University and Delaware State University. This year, one of our seniors was invited to address members of the White House, Congress, and Senate for Black History Month. He was introduced by the Vice President of the United States, shared remarks, and then introduced the President of the United States. A week later, LPTM received international recognition with the Citizen Diplomat Award from Global Ties US.

Our Apprentices (as we call the young men and boys who join LPTM) have grown into young men who cofacilitate justice, equity, and inclusion workshops in the form of our Color Me Community sessions. In just one year, LPTM Apprentices, supported by staff, shared Color Me Community with fifteen other organizations in the DC-Metro area, as well as groups of activists, artists, and educators representing thirty-five countries (LPTM, "Color Me Community").

Much of LPTM's everyday programming is wrapped in a philosophy called the Human Development System, "a concrete set of beliefs and strategies that addresses the challenges that our young people and their families face through artistic expression, increased self-awareness, and positive decision-making. It is a proven system that enables our Apprentices to build a positive sense of identity and to develop the tools needed to navigate through challenging circumstances, prepare for their own futures, and give back to their communities" (LPTM, "Human Development System").

In this essay, we focus especially on one phrase that infuses LPTM programming. It derives from Buddhist philosophy: "Your thoughts, your words, and your actions determine your destiny."

When Sister Phyllis first began partnering with LPTM, she viewed these words with some skepticism. They seemed to reinforce an individualist approach to social change, one that ignored the broader structures that affect the destiny of Black lives in the US. What does it mean to "determine your destiny" when so many policies, laws, and cultural systems have built a structure that maintains white supremacy?

It took years of observing and listening to understand that this focus on personal choice is not about ignoring the -isms and other structures of inequity. Rather, it is about finding a way to claim your agency *despite* that system, *because* of that system. It's about acting and not only reacting. It's about taking the long view and finding a path forward that is fulfilling and sustainable. From that starting point, you have a much better chance of building coalitions and creating change. To show how this all works, we offer a process for finding a sense of purpose, which we illustrate by telling Sister Mary's story.

2. Using the Life Pieces to Masterpieces Human Development System to find Purpose

"When we are awakened to a sense of purpose, our power is limitless"

Buddhist philosopher, Daisaku Ikeda

The human process of becoming aware of why you are here on this planet is a shared one—a process for all humanity, regardless of anyone's race or identity.

Sister Mary has found her purpose with LPTM: "If you gave me a billion dollars, I would not be doing anything else," she says. "It gives me joy to see these three-year-olds who grow to talk about world peace and equity." Sister Mary's purpose is to create space for other people to find their purpose.

Your purpose lies somewhere in your gifts and your pain. First, you find your uniqueness, your innate creative ability. Then you pay attention to the source of your own personal pain. Finally, you ask: How can I use this thing that I do so well to address this pain? It's a long journey. But in the end, you arrive at a purpose. It gives you a toolkit for how to start the next thing.

We don't discover our gifts alone, and we didn't arrive at this understanding of the process to purpose alone. Sister Mary has been developing this approach since the

start of LPTM 26 years ago, and the philosophy has incubated in this creative space. In particular, Shawn Hardnett (Brother Shawn), Founder and CEO of Statesman College Preparatory Academy for Boys, and William Pitts (Elder Bill), LPTM's Family Engagement Consultant, offered key insights and connections over the years.

2a. Discovering Gifts

Finding your innate creative ability is the first step on your journey to purpose. What is that thing you do so well that you know it? This is a gift that no one can question you about. This is a gift that everyone knows you have.

Sister Mary discovered one of her innate creative abilities early in life. At her graduation from daycare in New Orleans, she performed MLK's "I Have a Dream" speech. From then on, she knew she had a strength in public speaking. By freshman year at Xavier Prep, her teacher Sister Eileen saw her talent and coached her. Xavier was a top-rated debate school, and Mary excelled. She won tournaments hand over fist. There were trophies everywhere in her house. She competed in English and in French and was often the only Black girl in the competition. In 1980, Sister Eileen brought Mary to Boston for the National Catholic Forensic League tournament, and Mary won in three categories: Oratory, Duo Interpretation and Dramatic Interpretation. She was extraordinarily good.

The second gift Mary discovered was bringing people together. In Elementary School at St. Raphael, Mary was confident and connected with her classmates.

I was one of very few Black kids in my 6th grade class. There was someone from Cuba. I was the darkest one. In photos, I'm usually standing near the nun because I was the teacher's pet. The nuns called me Little Mary Sunshine because of my personality. Even though my parents made me aware of my history and struggle, I was the butterfly. I always saw the glass half full.

Mary took it upon herself to organize her classmates. She wrote the scripts and planned the sets for Christmas Plays and told her classmates what to do—"You should say that line a little louder." She saw people's potential, even back then. This continued in high school, where she followed her sister's footsteps and joined choir and theater. She was on the Student Council. These positive experiences in school allowed her to grow her innate, creative ability of seeing possibilities.

My gift lies in seeing the unseen. I can see the potential in people. I can see the potential of folks coming together. I have a vision for seeing what can happen if this person does this and that person does that.

You have to dig deep to discover your gift. Do the hard work: what do you do well?

How do you know when you've discovered your gift? It feels right. It's not very scientific, but you know it because you don't feel depleted. You don't feel overworked. It's something that fits how you identify yourself. You don't go around trying to fit into something that is not you. When you've found your gift, the work gives you joy. Even if you see a painful situation, it gives you joy that you have something to do to begin to address that situation. Your gift shows you the way into the new challenges.

2b. *The Pain*

The second step in finding purpose is to get in touch with your pain. As we talked about this step in Mary's process toward purpose, she at first emphasized how idyllic her childhood was: a beloved youngest child in a family of three brothers and three sisters, feeling confident and safe. Even when she described a rough transition from the predominantly white St. Raphael to a predominantly Black elementary school, Sister Mary felt strong in who she was. The experience, while unpleasant, didn't rattle her:

I would get in fights because people would call me an Oreo—you are white on the inside and burned on the outside. Or fights with lighter skinned Blacks. I was not a happy camper. I stayed there one year. I didn't feel like I needed to adjust. I knew I was smart. I always had to defend myself. I was OK with me.

At first, as she thought back, the pain she described seemed a little distant, abstract.

I was Catholic, with a white Jesus above my bed. At night, I would fall on my knees and pray for world peace and for everyone to get along and love one another no matter their color.

I hate seeing people in pain. I had an innocence. I heard my parents talk about injustice. I didn't like fighting. I wanted everyone to be at peace.

But then she remembered the moment that undid her, the central pain that she has channeled into her purpose: the story of the ride in the green and white Plymouth.

I was in the 5th grade. Maybe I had volleyball practice, so we were leaving the playground after dark. My dad was driving me home in a green and white Plymouth. White top, green sides. This was Daddy's car. We passed a 7-11 on the corner. Driving.

A young, white police officer stopped us. My father turns to me and cautions "Do not say a word, Mary Edith." Because my strength is speaking out and he knows I would want to.

My father spoke Italian, German, French; he highly valued standard English. He had been a medic in World War 2. He was a New Orleans Public School teacher. He taught physics and chemistry at Xavier Prep. He had a master's degree. He really believed in shared humanity.

We are stopped by a young, White police officer who looked younger than my brothers.

"This is a nice car you have."

When the White man knocks on the window, Daddy's demeanor changes. I thought, "Did an alien just possess my dad?" My father always taught us to look people in the eye, be clear in your communication. But now he rolls the window down, hands on the wheel, chin to his chest. He does not make eye contact.

I'm looking at my dad and at the police officer, who is looking at my dad and at me. I'm sure the police officer sees my Black skin.

"This is a nice car you have."

My dad said, "yes Suh."

This is my single horrific experience that helped to shape the woman I am today. My dad was my hero.

"Yes, Suh."

"Where are you going?"

"Home, Suh."

"Do you have your license?"

"Yes, Suh."

"Can I see it?"

"I have to go in my wallet that's behind me, in my pants."

"Well get it out, boy."

"I'm going into my pants." He very slowly puts his hand behind him, pulls out his wallet.

"All right Daniel T. Brown Sr. Okay." The police officer goes away and comes back.

"All right, boy. Keep following the speed limit."

The school wasn't that far from my house. We were in a lower middle class Black neighborhood. All I saw was the streetlight or the moonlight shining on my dad's skin, dark almost purple. His jaw clenched. A single tear drop. He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his eye.

"Mary Edith, get your books. We're going inside."

We never talked about it for a long time.

Then my senior year, we were driving home in the dark again. I asked, "That thing that happened Daddy, I never forgot that."

He said in so many words: "Sometimes in life, Mary Edith, when you know that something you love is in immediate danger, it is more important to put your pride—to put everything to the side to protect what you love. It's not easy to do that. During that time, had I chosen to be belligerent, that could have cost me my life, and you your innocence and your life. It could have left your mother without a husband, your brothers & sister without a father and a little sister. I had to momentarily choose to put everything else aside.

"I saw where the power was. Even though the officer thought he was strong, he was choosing to act violently because he was weak. He needed to justify to himself and his reason to exist by seeking to demean me in front of my child.

"I, being the stronger of the two, the elder of the two, I realize weakness when I see it. I took my power of choice to put my artillery to the side to safeguard what I love."

He broke down what he loved about being a father. He talked about protecting my innocence. He didn't say it, but a little Black girl being raped at

that time wouldn't be investigated. Or two bodies being missing wouldn't be found.

I never mentioned the tear.

I see that it took courage in that moment. He was prepared. I watched my father as a Black man having to negotiate a situation that could have meant his life and the innocence and life of his daughter. He was a World War II veteran. He and my mom had taught me about racism, and we knew about it – and I read *Invisible Man* in elementary school, and I listened to my parents sitting with White clergy from Xavier when they were talking about voting – but this was the first time I experienced it.

Sister Mary was a senior when she revisited that conversation with her dad. But the entire time since fifth grade, it had stayed with her. Now she understands this as the singular defining event in her life that shaped her:

That's where I got my power of choice. Thinking through things and pausing before acting. I saw that one false step could irrevocably cause pain to yourself others. You have to be mindful of how to choose your battle.

The combination of her gifts – speaking, connecting, seeing people's potential – plus the pain of this ride in the green and white Plymouth, came together to give Sister Mary her life's purpose. As a co-founder of LPTM, she infuses what she learned from this moment into her interactions. "It gives me joy to see boys who understand the power of choice like my dad had."

2c. *The Purpose*

At LPTM we understand that we are all an amalgamation of what we've been taught, what we've experienced, and what we've been exposed to. This is wisdom we have learned from Elder Bill. We understand the power of thinking through things and pausing before acting. We have tremendous agency by paying close attention to our thoughts, our words, our actions. Through all the mediums of expression, as we tell ourselves and others about our lives and experiences, we have to pay attention to how we tell the story, how we place ourselves in our stories.

At LPTM, we recognize the tremendous inequality that manifests in an under-resourced neighborhood, with all the structural deficits that reinforce that inequality. And to move forward with conviction and power, we need to claim our own agency despite these systems. We need to be able to name the oppressors and see the weakness of their frame; we need to be able to reject the distorted justifications that oppressors use to maintain their power.

At LPTM, though the Human Development System curriculum, we extend this analysis to provide tools for the young apprentices to analyze situations and understand the inherent potential behind any moment. For example, we model (drawing from Buddhist teachings) how to turn anger into courage (as Mary's father did). We model how to turn greed into compassion, how to turn ignorance into wisdom.

3. *Finding Purpose as a Tool for Sustainable Social Justice Action*

Those who have committed their lives to social justice work find a purpose in addressing human suffering. To make that work sustainable, we have to identify honestly and fully how the work connects to our own, personal pain. We have to look at the amalgamation of what we've been taught, what we've experienced, and what we've been exposed to, and we need to have the courage to go inside the good, the bad, the ugly of your life's journey from the time you were a child to today.

The Latin root for the word *passion* is *pati*, to suffer. What are you struggling to release yourself from, and where are you struggling to go? Look inward to see your gifts. Look inward to identify your true self, the part of who you are that you don't readily show to the world. What do you know about yourself?

Then put these together: Take what you do really, really well and look at the thing that attacked you and that you detest, what causes pain – use your thoughts words and actions to make a difference.

We know this is not easy. We have to re-learn it every day. It is a process. It takes courage to think through in your brain when you are afraid. Pausing to acknowledge your pain and to take note of where the power really is – that is a profound strength. It has to be cultivated. Discovering both your gifts and your self-awareness are on-going, constant processes.

This work is not only an intellectual approach; it has to constantly remain three dimensional. It is how you move through the world—who you physically are, dealing with all the -isms that would contain you. Pay attention to how you show up on the planet. People will react immediately to your physicality.

This philosophy is not an ephemeral tool, lofty in its idealism. It is a tool for confronting oppression day to day. These days, Life Pieces leans into this approach as we confront an existential crisis of gun violence. As pandemic restrictions have lifted, gun violence has spiked in the areas of DC where LPTM is located. In 2021 alone, according to the DC Police Department, 241 assaults with guns occurred in Ward 7. From November 2021 to March 2022, Drew Elementary School has been placed on lockdown a total of eight times. LPTM staff and management rushed the young boys off the Drew playground to shelter in place, while gunshots blasted; sometimes police helicopters thundered overhead to search for shooters.

Our children fear the gun violence around their homes. One LPTM thirteen-year-old noted that “I hear around 8 to over 25 gunshots per night.” They have shared how they follow safety procedures in their own homes: sometimes the boys are responsible for making sure their younger siblings have scrambled under the bed or are fully hidden in the closet; they rush to close curtains and hope a bullet doesn't come through the window as they do. Just last month, a mother was killed by a stray bullet as she sat in a car only a few feet from Riverside Center, where our high school youth gather for Saturday programs. We continue to look for meeting spaces outside of Ward 7; we have been warned that the already intolerable levels of violence will be even worse this summer.

LPTM has implemented safety precautions within our signature after-school programming. We rush the boys off the playground, we hide in classrooms. This is happening in what we had promised would be a place of love and security.

In these moments, Sister Mary reminds the family at LPTM that violence is a symptom of the weak. Those causing violence seek to justify their power through control and domination. They are trying to kill and destroy something that they don't see in themselves—or something they hate in themselves, so they want to destroy it.

People will think power is in a gun, money, kicking you in the gut until you taste blood.

No, power is knowing that you have the choice to control your thoughts, words and actions. Power is thoughts words and actions to change anger into courage, greed into compassion, ignorance into knowledge.

Holding onto this approach in the midst of constant violence is a challenge. It takes courage to think through in your brain when you are afraid. It takes courage to love. It is tempting to point fingers and lay blame. There are many actors and stakeholders who have some responsibility for this rise in violence; there are many actors involved who would use this moment to garner fleeting attention without really committing to getting things done. And it is exhausting to try to make room in our own scared and tired hearts to see the soul-bags of the shooters, to remember the suffering and pain that causes a young man to pick up a gun. To get to hard-care solutions, you have to let go of the sensationalism and build on a network of honest connections, with other people who are doing the internal work to bring their real gifts and their real purposes to this issue. In this work, we lean into our partnerships where everyone has their own innate, creative abilities to bring to the table. We are not in this alone. This is a work in progress.

When we are awakened to a sense of purpose, our power is limitless.

The world needs answers and solutions to many social issues. The sustainable solution is through collectives who are rooted in self-awareness and can speak to the depth of their purpose. Who can come together and say, “This is who we are.” When different individuals do their own things, reacting to a moment, they aren't rooted, so they are fleeting. They will come and go. But when people come together who have found purpose, they can effect systemic change that is longer lasting.

Finding purpose is a journey. We hope that we have offered you some tools to begin.

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Author Bios

Mary Brown is the co-founder and Executive Director of Life Pieces to Masterpieces, a nonprofit in Washington, DC.

Phyllis Ryder is the Secretary of the Board for Life Pieces to Masterpieces and an Associate Professor of Writing at the George Washington University, where she teaches community-engaged writing classes.

This essay is written collaboratively, through shared conversations. The experience and wisdom are grounded in the LPTM Human Development System, an approach Mary Brown developed for the program in her role as co-founder, and which is “the heart of all our work at Life Pieces” (LPTM “What We Do”). Phyllis Ryder provided structure and framing. Together we asked questions of each other, probed for deeper understandings, compared our discoveries.