

Faith Without Works is Dead: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work

EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton - MAP Center Equity Fellow - IN

TRANSCRIPTION

Robin J.: Good afternoon, everyone. I still haven't gotten my DJ skills together yet, so sorry for the abrupt stop in the music. We're going to go ahead and get started because I anticipate that this session will be rich and full of dialogue. And I want to leave as much room for all of that as possible. My name is Robin Jackson and I want to welcome you all to today's *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable* entitled *Faith Without Works is Dead: Exploring the Role of Faith and Equity in Justice Centered Work*. This Roundtable, facilitated by Dr. Crystal Morton, will bring together women from different faith traditions to have a critical conversation about the role of faith in their equity and justice-centered work. I am the Products Lead and a Doctoral Research Assistant with Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center, or the MAP Center. I'm serving as your Host and Technical Director today. I am joined by my colleague, Erin Sanborn, who is also a Doctoral Research Assistant at the MAP Center, and will be serving as my Assistant Technical Director. Erin?

Erin S.: Good afternoon everyone. This is just a reminder that *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtables* are intended to be interactive. Participants are asked to interact in real time via our teleconferencing format. Also, to reduce noise, we please ask that if you are not speaking, you have your microphones on mute. Lastly, the video camera function has been turned on. Thus, if you have a webcam and you'd like to join, please feel free to do so by clicking the camera icon at the lower right corner of your screen. Please feel free, throughout the conversation, to send me a chat message either privately, if you have any type of connectivity issues. Again, please do not forget to mute your microphone when you are not speaking.

Erin S.: Additionally, as we begin today's Roundtable, we want to remind you that this is a Virtual Roundtable. So, we ask you for...to make...to feel...please feel free to

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make yourself comfortable, move about as needed, take breaks as needed. And we also wanted to let you know that all images on the PowerPoint, have alt text.

- Robin J.:** I was muted. One of our goals at the MAP center is to engage participants in well-defined content-rich technical assistance such that knowledge and expertise are shared in a way that results in transformative, systemic change as well as personal reflection and growth. To this end we aim to make this unique learning available on our website via recording and transcription. Additionally, sharing photos of today's conversation on our social media platforms. We encouraged participants to consider this disclaimer as they share and engage today. There will be a group picture at the end of this and you will be prompted, we will not catch you off guard, so be looking out for that.
- Robin J.:** During today's Roundtable, we align to the four commitments when discussing this topic. First, stay engaged in the conversation. Second, experience discomfort. Third, speak your truth. And finally, and lastly, expect and accept non-closure.
- Robin J.:** I am pleased to introduce to you all today's facilitator of the conversation, Dr. Crystal Hill Morton. Dr. Morton is an Associate Professor of Mathematics Education at Indiana University, Purdue University, at Indianapolis. Her research is driven by a passion to understand why African American students, particularly females, are disproportionately under-achieving in mathematics. She is also a former high school mathematics teacher. She seeks to uncover the barriers that hinder many African American females from being successful in mathematics education courses, and from pursuing advanced study in the subject. Focusing on mathematics and science development of African American students, Dr. Morton has co-designed and implemented several summer programs, engaging girls

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and young women in mathematics in order to increase their confidence and interests in stem-related careers. Welcome everyone and thank you, Dr. Morton for having us today.

Crystal M.: Alright, Thank you. And I want to say, thank you again and welcome to everyone. Before I get started with introducing this phenomenal panel, I do want to take time to acknowledge and appreciate Dr. Daniela Cook, who's an Associate Professor at the University of South Carolina. And Dr. Mercedes Cannon, who is the Associate Director of Adaptive Educational Services at IUPUI. It is through collaborative work that we are doing around faith and social justice that the foundation for this *Virtual Roundtable* was laid. So, I do want to acknowledge and appreciate them for their time to work with me on this endeavor.

Crystal M.: So now I want to introduce to you, and oh also thank you to the Great Lakes Equity Center, and MAP and also to Robin and Erin for your support for this event today. And now I want to introduce this phenomenal panel. We have Arlène Casimir, who is a Brooklyn-based activist, educator, healer, consultant and author. She has spent the last 13 years honing her practice and research, with a focus on literacy, trauma, spirituality, and social justice. As a first-generation Haitian American, Arlène recognizes the power of community, literacy and spiritual resilience to help others live with personal integrity, transcends their circumstances and author their own lives. So, thank you so much, Arlène for joining us.

Crystal M.: We also have Dr. Akosua Lesesne, who is an educational design leader. She specializes in developing and leading the implementation of education, leader and the instructional coaching, curriculum, programs, and pedagogy that employ an African American education for liberation approach to inspire Black

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learners. Akosua is an ordained Presbyterian elder. She was also licensed and ordained at the New Mount Olive Baptist Church, Fort Lauderdale, Florida by the late Reverend Dr. Mack King Carter.

Crystal M.: Next, we have Olísa Yaa Tolokun, and she's going to help me if I'm getting pronunciation wrong. She is an Apetebí (wife of the divinity Òrúnmilà)--

Olísa Yaa: Òrúnmilà.

Crystal M.: Òrúnmilà, and—

Olísa Yaa: ...and Íyalorísa, an initiated priestess of Ọṣún in the Ifá/Yorùbá spiritual tradition. I'm also a devotee of Damballa Wedo, and Mother of Many.

Crystal M.: Yes. Thank you.

Olísa Yaa: You're welcome!

Crystal M.: She's also the executive director of Sankofa Psychological Services of Atlanta, and the founder of the Sakhu School of Psychology. Olísa is also a licensed professional counselor, spiritual coach, and a licensed addiction counselor.

Crystal M.: Next, we have Dr. Ronda Henry-Anthony, who is an Associate Professor of English and Africana Studies, Public Scholar of African American Studies in Undergraduate Research. She's a past Director of Africana Studies, and Founding Executive Director of the Olaniyan Scholars Program at Indiana University, Purdue University Indianapolis. She's also working with colleagues to develop an edited

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volume of spirituality and sistah circles as a way to support and nurture and encourage Black women.

- Crystal M.:** And lastly, we have Hanaa Elmi, who was a Somalian-Canadian elementary educator in Ontario, Canada. She is a graduate of the University of Windsor and has served in various community roles within both educational and religious spaces. She was a recipient of her district's "Outstanding Service Award" in 2019. Hanaa is rooted in community work, being in service to her students, families, and colleagues, and ensuring that classrooms are safe, responsive and humanizing spaces for children. And she just wrapped up teaching second grade or so. Thank you all for being here.
- Crystal M.:** So, um the purpose of the day is to have this discussion around faith and equity in justice-centered work. And we know that spirituality, historically and contemporarily, has played a major role in the lives of Black women in the academy, and really every space. But very rarely do we have these public discourses. So, we wanted to have this conversation today about the importance of our faith in professional contexts.
- Crystal M.:** We're going to focus on having the women that are here with us today to share their stories. And in addition to what you have on this slide, I just believe it's very important for Black women to share their own truth. And so I wanted us to have this space today for these women to share their truth about how they center their faith and their justice and equity-centered work that they do in their everyday lives. So just wanted to have a platform to hear their voices. So, I have requested those who are attending with us today, as this conversation is happening, this is truly a conversation. So, if you have questions, you can ask those questions. As the conversation goes on, there are some things I want you to ponder. How did

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you put your faith in action? How does what the panelists are saying resonate with your faith, and how you put your faith in action, and there may be anything else that comes up. So feel free to put that in the chat. There may be pauses and moments where if you have a question and you want to share that question out loud, un-mute yourself. You can do that as well. So please, you want this to be an interactive conversation.

Crystal M.: All right. So I'm going to start, and I'm going to start with Olísa because she is the first-person that...she's under me on my screen. So, I want each panelist to first just share a little bit about how you would describe your faith tradition. I would encourage everyone to the, all the panelists, I want them to answer this question. And then when we get to the next question, we're just going to have a free-flowing conversation. So, Olísa, I'm going to turn it over to you.

Olísa Yaa: Okay. That's not what I was expecting or hoping for, but here we go. How would I describe my faith tradition? I would describe myself as a African spiritualist. Africana spiritualist, actually more accurately. Meaning that I'm initiated to Oshun, who some are familiar with, from the Ifá Yoruba tradition, Odisha tradition. But I describe my faith tradition much more broadly than that. As an Africana woman and practitioner who honors the Akan tradition, the Vodun tradition the diaspora traditions as they exist in Candomblé, in Brazil and Kula. So, I consider all of Africa mine. As a part of my birthright, and as a part of my spiritual practice. Does that answer that?

Crystal M.: Yes. Thank you. Dr. Akosua.

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- Akosua L.:** Why did I know you're going to come to me next? I was actually hoping that you would. I'm really excited to go after Olísa. Am I saying that right? Olísa?
- Olísa Yaa:** It's Olísa. I actually, I actually prefer to be called Olísa Yaa, which is my first and middle name together.
- Akosua L.:** Wonderful. So, I'm actually excited to go after Olísa Yaa because, starting backwards, I would say over the past maybe like two or three years I actually have become very, very interested in African spirituality, Ifá in particular. So that's just kind of where I am right now. But just, just to describe my faith tradition prior, prior to this, and it's not accurate to say that I'm interested. My spirit is being drawn to that, and I'm excited to be to be following that, that drawing. But prior to that, as you saw in my bio, I am ordained Presbyterian, and also licensed and ordained Baptist. What that is, is really just a reflection of my understanding that my core is deeply spiritual. My way of being is deeply spiritual. And I have felt called from a very young age, I would say, to actually support people in their spiritual development. And so it's a journey. I can't really point to one religious tradition, but I will say central to that is really just this notion of Black liberation. I'm a Southern Black American woman which, which for people who know, like our ancestors, our elders are deeply spiritual people, even if they don't describe that, that their way of knowing as being spiritual. And so anyway, I'm not sure if I answered the question, but it's kind of all of them altogether. And I would say mostly, it's just understanding that, that there is a spiritual element to life, and it actually drives life, and it is, and it is not separate from our notions of liberation and our struggle for liberation as, as Black, and African people.
- Crystal M.:** Absolutely, absolutely. Um, Sister Arlène.

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Arlène C.: All right, thank you. So, I think this is such an interesting question because when I think about the word tradition it's, you know, what has been passed down, like what you've inherited. And I consider myself spiritual as well, but also someone who serves the Lwa. So, when I think about like, what it means to be spiritual and what it means to serve the Lwa and Haitian voodoo, there's this running joke in Haiti that 90 percent of Haitians are Catholic, and 10 percent are Protestant, and 100% practice Haitian voodoo. And it's, it's such a funny joke. And it's particularly funny to me because I was raised Catholic. However, this tradition of Haitian voodoo came into my life through dreams.

Arlène C.: So, this, and so I was able to share stories and things with my dad that like literally brought him to his knees. Because as someone who's been in America as a first-generation Haitian-American, there was so many things that he thought "there's no way you could've known that. I never taught that to you. And as a child, I've kept that from you because our way of living, our way of being has been demonized and villainized and weaponized against us." And so for me, it's really been a journey of returning back to the roots, and really honoring the ways that I've been called into this faith tradition by my ancestors, by the Lwa, from my family, and really just following in that tradition. I think, as my journey unfolded into this tradition as well, I think there were so many things that I've inherited from...I believe there's so many things I inherited from multiple past lives, if you will, that I continue to harness within this lifetime. And so, I see my faith tradition as a spiritual inheritance from my ancestors, my Haitian ancestors, and also accumulation of my experiences across lifetimes that I channel and live and existence today.

Crystal M.: Thank you, Arlène. I'm going to now go to Dr. Ronda.

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Ronda A.: Good afternoon, everyone. It's good to see you here, and I'm so glad to be here. I would describe my faith tradition in maybe the same way as Arlene. I hope I'm pronouncing that correctly, as passed down from my ancestors as well. And mine is Judeo-Christian in, in traditional sense and that southern Black sense, going back for five generations. And that is where my faith, it is seated and, and, and grounded in Jesus Christ and recognizing Him as my Lord. But I will also want to say this, thinking in terms of Black folks in our history in this country, that this is not the Judeo-Christian tradition associated with groups like the Ku Klux Klan, and other white supremacists or even right-wing evangelicals. The God they serve, I don't know. I have to say that. The God I serve as a very different God. Certainly, called upon by the same terms. But the God that they talk about, the God that they engage, is not the God that I engage. And so again, mine is also grounded in a tradition, especially a womanist, Black woman tradition because those are the folks who pass this down to me, and taught me who God was, and how to have faith in God. And how to walk in that faith in strength and in power, His power. And how to put down the desires of the flesh and not let those things dominate me.

Ronda A.: And so that is how I would describe my faith, my faith tradition. Now it has been very difficult to practice that faith within the arena that I work professionally. And so, for many years in academia, I didn't feel like I could be upfront about or speak about my Christian faith, and my belief in Jesus Christ. But I'm so thankful that I've come into a time in my life, and in my, my spiritual walk with sisters who allow me to be who I truly am, and to bring my whole self into the room. And to practice our faith in a way that is nurturing, and supportive, and communal. And I believe in the same way that our ancestors practiced it. And not in this sort of individualistic religious or, or promoting this sort of religious establishment and

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both kinds of things. But in that truly spiritual sense, and connective sense of supporting each other in our daily walk. And I'll stop there. But thank you.

Crystal M.: Thank you. And Hanaa. Sister Hanaa.

Hanaa E.: Thank you for having me. I didn't want Dr. Ronda to stop talking. 'cause I thought ...amazing. So, I'm so happy that I'm here just listening to all of the pieces that sisters are sharing that, and as I'm visibly Muslim, I'm East African. And when we talk about that piece, about tradition, I just really latched on to that because it really made me think about being born into a Muslim family, being raised as a Muslim. At what point did I actively choose to be a member of my faith group? At what point that I choose to actively be in service to God? And it really made me question, because especially being Muslim and growing up post 9-1-1, Islam is extremely villainized in the West. So, it was a lot of trying to hide faith, trying to protect yourself, trying to practice in secret.

Hanaa E.: Not being allowed to be openly Muslim, or visibly Muslim. And when I think about that intentionality of when I chose...I remember being a young girl, and the same thing that sisters are sharing of being drawn, being drawn to this call of faith and service and community. And just being deeply rooted in heart work. The work of this internal, what kind of person do I want to be and how do I want to reflect that into the world? So as a Muslim, that's really like my faith tradition, that's really is rooted in this God-centered, intentional actions. Very communally-based and really rooted in that heart work of looking at, internally, what kind of person am I? And what am I going to carry on to this next life? Because in our faith, we believe there's something after this. So, what am I carrying forward is always the big question. So, thank you for having me.

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Crystal M.: You're welcome. And I purposely didn't say much after each panelist spoke, because I just wanted us to have a moment to hear them, and just to see how it's like this beautiful tapestry we have now. I was very intentional about having women that come from different faith traditions, just to so that, you know, we're in a current context where religion is something that's seen as very divisive. It's used to divide and oppress. So being able to see how we can walk in our faith traditions, and also walk in unity especially, while we are doing this justice and equity-centered work. So, thank you all for sharing. I want to continue to keep this conversation going. And as I said before, this is a conversation, so I'm not going to call on anyone to speak next, but I'm going to pose the question, and I just ask, sisters, if you have something to say to, to please say it and just keep this conversation going on. And those who are listening with us, please engage in the chat, and if you have specific questions, just make that known as well. So, the next question that I wanted someone to talk about, everyone to talk about, but just one of you can start is: What is your vision of justice and equity? And also, at the same time, talk about how your faith impacts that vision.

Arlène C.: Okay, I can go first. I believe...I think about what Dr. Cornell West says, that like social justice, justice in general, is what love looks like in public. And I also think about how bell hooks defines love. This belief in...a belief and a commitment in nurturing...someone's...supporting someone on their journey, and nurturing their full potential. Like, I don't know, I'm not quoting exactly right, but just this idea of being committed to nurturing someone's full potential, and being willing to do that in public. So, when I think about my faith and how my faith impacts my vision, I believe in internal and external liberation. I believe in freedom. Freedom to be all of who you are, freedom to be your highest self. And that when we are our highest selves, we are in service of the Most-High God, and we are in service of helping all things and people to be in their highest selves. But we live in a society that really

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doesn't allow people to be their highest selves, or support them on that journey. And so, I think that's the work. It's how do we love people publicly and love people in a wholesome way, not in the way that Toni Morrison describes it where she says love is only as good as the lover, and a hateful lover loves hatefully. How can we love people from our highest selves? That's my vision for justice and equity in this work.

Ronda A.: I would like to follow up on that, because I agree with so many of those statements that you made, Arlène. I keep following you, and I love it. I think that my vision of justice and equity is just about that. It's about love. And that loving through the higher self is about that agapé love, the love that does not respond in relationship, the love that does not expect anything in return. And so then for me, it goes back to, and is grounded in, my desire to follow God. And to understand that, to do that in a, in a way that is most valuable is to do it by putting aside my own flesh. And so, if there are ways in which my flesh is sort of influencing how I love. And for me that justice and equity work takes place in academia through the students that I support and helping them to bring their whole self into the room. As well as, as Arlène says, to reach their goals. All of those goals that they express that they want to reach. That has been my work for the last 30 years, I would say.

Ronda A.: And so, putting aside my flesh to do this work, and to love in a way that is not really necessarily about me, but is about the need of that person, and being led and empowered through the Holy Spirit to do that work in a way that moves beyond me. It isn't just based on what I see, or what I think, or what I feel. Because many times I don't feel like, right? I don't feel like being bothered. I don't feel like getting up. I don't feel like doing my job. But that higher calling, and that passion, and that connection to God. I didn't even realize how connected to God it was until I began to do the work around spirituality, and truly understand

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why I structured my program the way that I did. And I won't call it my program; it is God's program, but He used me to structure it, and how it was grounded in our African ancestors, and our roots as African Americans. And then our intersections and identity and not only being Black, but also being women. And how Black women are the salt of the earth, and we support communities. It doesn't matter from what perspective we're coming from. Many times, we're trying to come out of that love space. And for me, that vision and that faith in God, and its impact on my vision, is all about being able to love out of that space that works in a higher place than my own flesh, and my own tired, and my own want to or not want to. But thinking through what I can do, in the Holy Spirit and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to help bless, nurture, support, allow someone else to achieve what it is that God would have them to be fully.

Crystal M.: Just leaving some space. Does Anyone else? Okay.

Hanaa E.: No, go ahead, Dr. Akosua.

Akosua L.: Ok, so I have a couple different things that come to mind. I'm trying to like, not have my thoughts run together. One of the things that come to mind as far as the vision for justice and equity is that the Divine Being, the Creator, and the kind of host of having the heavenly beings that, that I believe are engaged with us every day, I believe are concerned about oppression. And, and, and are on the side of the oppressed. And so as, as Arlene mentioned, and several other people have mentioned throughout our time together, is that, you know, both that internal and external oppression are not divine, right? It's not the divine order of things, and it actually is an enemy of whatever you want to call God, the Creator, or whatever. And so, it's, so not only is a vision of justice and equity, it's, you

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know, it's, it's the freeing of oppression. And I believe that that is the prerogative of God, of the Creator.

Akosua L.: And then also, children and young people play a very, to me play a very special role in that, that, that it is our duty I think, to protect young people, to create spaces for young people where they can be everything that they were created to be. For us to be fully in touch with who, with their destiny and to create space for them to live out their, their divine destiny. And systems of oppression do not allow that, right? Like when I think about the oppression of Black people, and African folks globally, the thing that...there are lots of cringe-worthy things that happen in the name of white dominance. And one of the most shameful things that, that we did not spare Black children. And I think that God is really upset about that. Like I think, I think that that is an offense. And so, so, through the justice and equity work, I think looks like fighting against oppression, right? I don't think that...I think some people see that as not spiritual, but I think that the Creator is fighting with us, against oppression, because oppression is the enemy of divinity. So I'll just leave it there. I have lots of lots of things to share, but I'll leave it there.

Olisa Yaa.: I concur, wholeheartedly, with most of what everyone has said, but I'm particularly Akosua's last comments. And it reminds me of, in the Ifá tradition, the concept of Ori, that everyone comes with a divine destiny, and a divine right, if it is connected to that destiny, to fulfill their personal mission in making the world a better place, making the community a better place. And oppression, then, is not just an offense against an individual person or community, but in an offense against the Supreme Spirit by whatever name that spirit is called—whether it's Oludumare, whether it's [inaudible], whatever that is, if we come here and are given, and exists with, a spark of the Supreme Being, and someone or some people attempt to suppress that, then they're suppressing the divinity that the divinity has for us. So

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it's our right and responsibility to take justice into our own hands so that we may fulfill our destiny. It is, I think I'm talking in a circle now, I see that. I agree. That's what I'm saying. I agree.

Hanaa E.: Yeah, I'm going to add on because everything everyone said, I just, I was just jotting things down, because it made me think of so many things, but that piece about love. And I was reading this quote by Valerie Core, she talks about revolutionary love, not being this like give and take, but it's being, "I love you and I want to serve you that because I see myself in you." We are one, we are all connected. So, it's not this idea that you help me, and I'll help you. But if we're thinking about really serving God, it comes from this place that we are all one. We're all a collective. And in our faith tradition we have this prophetic saying that says, you know, when as a, as an Umrah, as a people, we're like one body. And when one part of our body hurts, the entire body hurts. It's kinda like when you close the door on your finger and, I mean, it's just your finger, but everywhere else on your body can feel the pain of that finger. And when I hear that, as like our faith tradition and our prophetic guidance, it tells me, this is, this is why we're here. We're here as a communal people to be together, to feel the pain of each other. And it's not only something that we do because we want to do it, but it's a divine duty. We've been ordered to do it. It's, it's the work of our life on earth, is to serve other people too, face against injustice.

Hanaa E.: So, it makes me think of all the things like in our faith that are, equity sort of built-in. When I think of...we have one of the pillars of our faith is to give alms, that's a 2.5% of your wealth to the people. This is a matter...we look at how capitalism is destroying the world and communities; and it's not being in service to people. And these are things that our faith tells us are imbedded, to say that injustice in this regard is wrong. And we're going to make sure that this is

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implemented so everyone is on an equal footing. Everyone is served, and justice is being spoken to. And that piece, that Akosua said about injustice and this barrier tha...it's making me think of all these things. I want to try and get my thoughts straight. But made me think of this one thing about we say, that when someone is oppressed, there is no barrier between their call to God and earth. Like there's nothing there. It's completely open, and we are meant to really take that seriously. So you're not meant to, to constantly think about how you're harming other people. And when we think about the next life in our faith, we're thinking about moving on. Something that really, it's constantly in my mind, is when we think about how we may harm other people, we think of how we might harm ourselves. In our faith when we are brought to the next life for judgment, we're also going to be facing the people who we've harmed. Not just things that we've done wrong and God accounting for our sins or things that we might have done right or wrong, but also the people that we might have harmed along the way. And God will bring us together and say like, "This person has a complaint against you," you know, and I'm thinking in my head, every last injustice that is on Earth, this is kind of leads into a question about navigating things, but it kind of gives us force of reasons to think, when we act, everything has to have an intention behind it. Every interaction. Nothing is too minute: at the grocery store, students in your classroom, your elderly grandparents, every single thing is accounted for, and it's all encapsulated in this idea of justice and equity, and how faith ties it all together. So, I don't know, if any of that makes sense, but that's where I was going.

Crystal M.: Yes. Well, you, oh is someone else about to say something?

Erin S.: Dr. Morton, I was just going to surface a couple of the questions from, the from the chat. Perfect. Some of the panelists have already touched on this. One question

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was asking how can we get schools, or institutions such as schools, to nurture and love students, and allow all students the freedom to be who they are? That was one question. And then the other, the other question that was in the chat was, does the notion of evil play a role in your faith practices? And if so, how is it represented, as well as engaged through your faith?

Akosua L.: I'm gonna...I have some thoughts, and I'm gonna try to keep them very brief. Some thoughts that touch on both of those questions. And regarding the first question of how do we get schools to recognize, I think they're saying every child's purpose and their divinity? And my response may seem very cynical. But schools in the United States, you know, James Baldwin says we have to face the fact that they never built schools to educate Black people. That the purpose of Black people in this country was for service, and for profit. Black people were capital. And you can't reform that, right? Right. I mean, schools are operating exactly the way they were meant to operate. And just like every other institution in this country, the purpose was to always have a subjugated class, which would always be Indigenous or Black folks. And in fact, I'm not even sure about Indigenous because the original plan, right, the strategy was to kill Indigenous folks so that we could have the lands, and to work Black people to death so that we could have the profit from their work.

Akosua L.: And so, while I'm not trying, I would never minimize the power of individual teachers, or even individual schools or after school programs or things of that nature. I mean, we're all in there for a reason. And at some point, we need to confront the fact that schools are operating—the system is operating—exactly as it was intended to operate. And then create and recreate a response to that reality, right? Which to me looks like abolition, right? We talk about abolishing the police. Like we really need to abolish the system that was meant, at every level, to

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create and to maintain a subjugated class of folks, and namely Black folks and the Indigenous people who were left. But the goal was to get rid of Indigenous folks. I don't know if that's a helpful answer, but that's the answer that comes to me.

Akosua L.: And then secondly, I did see the question, I did see the comment come through of, you know, how does evil play in? And, you know, oppression is evil. And I know that, you know, there are many faith traditions, rightfully, like I, as sister Hanaa was saying, we do need to look at our individual actions. And at the same time, there are, sometimes we overfocus on like the personal, like this is evil, right? Like this personal sin as evil, this personal thing is evil. But my late father in ministry, Reverend Dr. Mack King Carter, who was also centered in Black liberation theology, he talked about structural sin, right, right. And so, the system, the system of oppression, the system of the system of capitalist, capitalism is sinful, it's evil, right? And we think of evil as, Arlene said, sometimes we think of evil as voodoo, or, you know, or white, white supremacy has made us think that's some things are evil, that really aren't evil. They just are people's culture. But what we know for sure is evil, is white supremacy. And so yes, absolutely evil. Evil does factor into, into my belief system. And an evil is the system of oppression. Evil is colonization. That's evil. It's structural sin. It's structural evil. And, and that is what we are fighting against. And yes, you know, like personally I fight to be honest and to be kind and all those things. I'm not saying those things aren't important. But that's, but also understand that structural sin is just as evil as those other intrapersonal things—or more, maybe even. I don't know if that's helpful, but those that came to me.

Ronda A.: Well, and I will just add to that, just to bring those two questions together. I think another evil that exists is this whole idea of taking spirituality out of schools. I think you ignore...it's like this whole mandate not to allow students from age three

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on, not to bring their whole self, into the classroom. Certainly, I agree with the Akosua in terms of this evil of oppression, right? And it's specific effects on people of Color, especially Black and Brown people, right? And so, I think all of that is tied to evil and that's part of what we are all sort of dealing with, and trying to sort of resist through our spiritual practices. At least that's what I see from my perspective. But the fact that that children aren't allowed in a space that they're going to be in the majority of their time during the week, not to develop their spiritual self. There's no attention paid to that. To me, is part of the reason why our society is the way that it is: an exploitation. And capitalism and patriarchy and all the other isms that, again, I consider to be evil as well, are allowed to flourish.

Ronda A.: There is no development of character. There is no development of the spiritual part of the mind, and the soul, and the body, that would then set the foundation for holding people accountable for their actions. Just as most spiritual systems call for us to do: paying attention to our individual acts and actions, treating others as we want to be treated. At this point in the U.S. school system, there is no space really to talk about those things. Some schools have this whole thing about character training, but there is nothing that speaks to the spiritual self of our children. And I believe that as long as that goes on, our society will continue to devolve into the chaos and the mess that we currently see it is in. And this lack of concern, you know; think COVID and vaccines, this lack of concern for what is happening to other people. We can make our decisions in a vacuum. We can express our freedoms and our rights, any way we choose, notwithstanding the fact that to have freedom, there must be limits and boundaries around it because your freedom and expression of it, impacts that next person. And so, to me, it's the complete opposite of agapé love, and the kind of higher love that we've all

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expressed is important for us in our spiritual practice, and in our lives and how we think about and conduct ourselves in this life.

Olisa Yaa: I have a similar analysis of the school systems and school reform, as opposed to a very similar analysis and I am inclined to think that the school system cannot be reformed because it is so...what, what a lot of people call white supremacy, what I call white misanthropy, because I refuse to use the term supremacy, because supremacy means supreme. It means higher than, and it perpetuates the illusion that Europeans are higher than Africana people, or anybody else. And I think that the term misanthropy is much more appropriate. Misanthropy is the hatred of humankind, and that's the evil that I see. As a practitioner of a traditional African spiritual system, as one who absolutely honors the vodun and Oluwa, and seeing how it has been demonized. And not just that becoming from, being the granddaughter of a hoodoo healer of the highest order, right? My grandmother, in her time, was often ostracized and alienated because she, she practiced an African spiritual tradition in the best way that she knew how. And that, that made her seem different than a lot of other people. And from a traditional perspective, there is no divine concept of good and evil. Or there's no, there's no completely evil being, right? But what we experience day-to-day, when we think of the murder of Africana people, when we think of injustice, when we think of hatred, when we think a rape, that is the evil that we have to confront. And I think it's important to do so.

Olisa Yaa: When I think about it in the context of education, the solution for me and for my children whenever possible, has been to have them in independent African-centered institutions of higher learning, period. Because that's the only way that they can maintain the integrity of who they are, if their spiritual tradition can be truly honored. I think that it would be wonderful if spirituality can be in the schools

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in a way where everyone can be honored, their perspective and background can be honored the way did they see the Supreme Being, the Most High, whatever way you want to call it, could be honored. But it is highly unlikely that that can happen, that that would ever happen, with the current leadership in the school systems. So, I wonder, and would be just as concerned about any attempts from those oppressors, to participate in our liberation on a, on a pedagogical level when clearly they don't have the capacity to even begin to understand who we are, or what spirituality really looks like for us. I'm done.

Crystal M.: Go ahead, Arlène, I saw you unmute yourself.

Arlène C.: Oh yes. I wanted to add to that, you know, as I think about both questions, I do believe that it's, it's going to be important for Freedom Schools to continue to emerge. And those Freedom Schools be spaces where children can live in their truth, and in their light. And really develop in that. Because that's just going to be really important. And when I think about the notion of evil, it's so interesting because as I've been studying and learning more about just African spiritual traditions, particularly voodoo, this notion of evil doesn't exist. In fact, there is the notion of like Job, which is like the trickster. So instead of seeing it like as the devil, it's like no, there's like tricksters. Even, you know, growing up, we know Hollywood completely just painted, you know, voodoo as something so terrible and, and just, you know, demonic. And listening to a Haitian acupuncturist clearly explain like this notion of using needles and dolls was to heal people, like literally to heal people from a distance. That was like one of the original ways of like acupuncture. And so just how things have been turned around and villainized has been so interesting to see. But going back to this idea of the trickster, it makes me think about what Toni Morrison says, like the very function, the serious function

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of racism is distraction. And that's what a trickster will do: will distract you. It's about what we see.

Arlène C.: And of course the miracles. Nothing exists but love everything else is an illusion. Like white supremacy is a delusion. Like really getting to the core of recognizing all of these things. And know that those things keep us from doing our work. They keep us explaining over and over our reason for existing. They keep us explaining over and over our reason for being, and it's distracting us from our, you know, it distracts us from our reason for being on Earth. And I think there are malicious people that exist, the malicious structures that are misanthropic as Olísa Yaa, Olísa Yaa I hope I'm saying your name right, shared. I just think it's important to recognize that, you know, in a lot of traditions, there was what is beneficial for you, and what is hurtful for you. And not this notion of like evil. That is a very European concept, this notion of evil, and in fact, it's like what is beneficial for you. You could have a friend who might seem like a good friend, but then your life starts falling apart, right? Same with a faith tradition, or like with a way of existing in terms of faith: anything in life could be either detrimental or beneficial. And it's how do we choose what's most beneficial for us, that will allow us to bring heaven on earth in our own way, for ourselves and for our families. I think that's something to think about.

Crystal M.: Yes, I wish we had like another hour. Well, we have about four minutes and so I thank you all so much for just sharing, you know, just from your heart this evening. So, I have one last question, and you have about 90 seconds to answer it. So could you just talk a little bit about how your faith helped you navigate the very taxing aspect of doing equity and justice-centered work?

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Akousa L.: So, my faith helps me to understand that my life is, is a link in a long chain in the struggle for divinity, which is the struggle for justice, right? And so, while I will work hard and work diligently in my lifetime, it helps me to understand that I'm also reaching for those...I'm standing on the shoulders of those who were before. And I also can leave work to do for those who come after. And that that helps me when I feel like, "oh, I have to do it all now," when I lean into maybe stressing myself out, and not practicing self-care. That, that it's a, it's a long, it's a long history, in my history, and my work is intertwined in that, in that long chain in that that the divide is working on our behalf, working with us on our behalf.

Crystal M.: Do we have any other panelists that would like to respond?

Hanaa E.: I can jump in. I thank you so much. I'm just absorbing all this, and I'm just so happy that I'm here with all of you. When I look at this question, it really makes me think, you know, what's my sense of purpose on Earth? And when I think of my faith, it really grounds me in why I'm here. And in our faith, that you really believe that nothing is in our control at the end of the day, everything is in God's control. There's a plan. There's, there's, a verse in the Quran that talks about the ink drying. So God already planned everything that was going to happen. And we're here to do the work, and to really trust that God will have us in the best place possible, and that will support us through all that we're doing. And when I think of that last question about curriculum, it just made me think of, you know, every day like I'm being in the classroom, how this activates in my life everyday, how I'm trying to center my faith and the work that I do. And it really does make me think of all the violence that students are facing in school. And even something so small or really large but small, and something that teachers don't even think about is like science curriculum. We were talking yesterday about grade one curriculums, talking about inanimate, inanimate objects. And how in a lot of faith traditions, for

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example, trees, they're alive, they have spirit. So, when you're teaching students like those things, actually they are part of a cycle, they are part of people. So, I just, it really does connect me to this idea that everything that we do is for this divine duty, and it's all in God's control. So that's it really helps me navigate a lot of this work.

Crystal M.: Ok. Go ahead, Arlène.

Arlène C.: I think I would not be able to do this work without my faith, without the strength of the ancestors. I, I think that was really like rekindled for me in the Sisters in Education circle by the founder, founding sister, Dr. Akosua saying, thank you so much for creating that group. It's life-changing for me because I felt like I entered a classroom where I could be me, and where I was really like pushed to be myself. And I think it's so important to have spaces where you could be yourself, because I was literally ready to walk out of the door. And it wasn't until, like Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings said to me, like we're always healing because we're always acquiring wounds. And so, let's heal together. Let's make sure that we're healing together in this space that Akosua created for us. That really was life-changing for me as an educator because I have pockets of that, that I tried to create on my own, but I was never surrounded by elders.

Arlène C.: And, you know, in a space where I could invoke the presence of the sacred, and the sacred meaning that divine power, and also the ancestral power. All of the women who've come before us, and to fill strengthened by them. That strength has never subsided from that moment. It was just a spark, and as soon as it was lit, it was so powerful for me. And I continue to see the ripple effects. And I continue to see myself show up courageously. And I continue to feel and experience the powerful presence of my ancestors, and Lwa after God. So I think,

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you know, having a community, a soft place to land, having people to process with, having just a practice, a spiritual practice. Those are the three things that have sustained me in this work. And without those things, I don't think that I would still be an educator right now.

Crystal M.: All right, so again, I want to say thank you to each and every one of our phenomenal panelists for giving of your time, and sharing your experience today. I have learned a lot myself. I've taken in a lot. And I just wanted to say, you know, as we wrap up, to just continue to be your whole selves and continue to create spaces that individuals can be their whole selves. And really understanding that notion of that unconditional love that agapé love. And just loving people for who they are, and not trying to change them, but just loving them for who they are, and just continue to love and do the work, and relying on one another. I mean from today, I have taken away that you can come from different faith traditions, and still walk alongside each other to get the work done. And I know in education Sister Akosua says this all the time is about the babies. We have to take care of our children. And that means showing them that unconditional love. So thank you all to everyone who's here. We're not finished. It's just we're wrapping up this piece of the conversation. And so, I'm now going to turn it back over to Robin.

Robin J.: I am full. I am so appreciative of you, Dr. Morton, and for every one of your guests who agreed to be a part of this conversation, and be really vulnerable with the audience. And as you all were talking and I was thinking to myself, "I'm going to listen to this myself a few more times before it even gets to the website," because I have those privileges. I'm actually going to pass this over to Erin. We are going to do a group photo. If you would like to be a part of this group photo, and you don't have your camera on, feel free to turn it on right now. Fix your hair, get your clothes together, turn your collar the right way. And Erin we'll take a few photos of

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us. Let me stop sharing. And it looks like Erin we, how many pages that we have right now. We have,

Erin S.: Um, we have two.

Robin J.: So we have two pages. So, you all will have to smile and hold your pose awkwardly until Erin says stop, because we don't know which page you're on.

Erin S.: I'll give an appropriate count down. I always love watching everyone fix their hair. Also I put in the chat that I wanted to mirror also....I just, this is so beautiful and amazing, and I just feel honored to be in the space and to hear each of your perspectives and your stories. So, just thank you for that. Alright. I'm also I'm on a different computer, so we're going to have to practice as well. So hopefully it'll work out, but I'm going to give us the countdown. Ready 1, 2, 3. Okay. Let me check my work. Okay. I think I can figure that out. Okay. Ready and 1, 2, 3. Alright, thank you so much.

Robin J.: Alright. Hold on for just a few more minutes. We have some resources want to share with you all alright. We want to thank you...

Hasan: Can I shout out Yolanda Jackson Green Lewis? I just want to shout her out. I'm sorry.

Robin J.: Are you sorry, Hasan? And I don't know if you are, but I'll accept that. I'll accept anything from you; I haven't seen you in a while.

Hasan: She she knew me when I was an undergraduate at Wisconsin UWP. She was a mentor. Like I haven't seen her in almost...it's almost been twenty years.

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Robin J.: Oh my yes. Look at the space that we've created.

Hasan: So Robin...you don't remember me. I had less hair, but, it's me, so sorry about that.

Robin J.: No, you're good. You're good. We want to thank everyone for joining us today, for today's *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*. We especially want to thank Dr. Morton and her connections, and the conversation that we had today. Additionally, we want to also alert you all to our *(Re)claim, (Re)vitalize, (Re)imagine & (Re)commit: The 20-Minute Talk Antiracist Vodcast Series*. The latest one is entitled *Hope, Healing and Harmony for Antiracism*. This episode, will focus on how one's positionality may define what is hope, healing, and harmony for antiracism. Also the tension of unity versus self-determination. That is, how to acknowledge that those who have been historically marginalized are often called to temper their pursuit of racial justice at the intersections, in efforts to unify fractured communities. Guests will share their ideals and strategies to negotiate the tensions of unity versus racial equity in their school community contexts. And I believe Erin has already probably drop that link for you in the chat.

Robin J.: Also, we have another *Virtual Roundtable* occurring next week, part of our *Equity Connect!* series. During this *Equity Connect!*, our guest state education agency, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, will discuss how they leveraged their partnership with the MAP Center, highlight tools and resources that strengthen their work, and approaches they took in partnership with the MAP Center, to build staff and leadership capacity through the development and/or cultivation of their critical consciousness. Please, that is going to be also a

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really good conversation, I believe. Erin is also dropping the Eventbrite in there, so please please register for that event. Erin?

Erin S.: Ok, United States Department of Education--

Robin J.: You've muted yourself in the middle of your sentence, somehow.

Erin S.: Sorry about that. The United States Department of Education has published two COVID-19 related guides to equitable school reopening. This series provides tools to aid educators in implementing CDC's operational strategy for k-12 schools, through phase prevention by addressing common challenges, and providing practical examples. This series will be updated as additional scientific evidence becomes available. Volume one is *Strategies for Safely Reopening Elementary and Secondary Schools*, and volume two, *Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting all Students' Needs*. These guides are updated as new information comes out from the CDC. And as Robin already stated, I've posted them in the chat.

Kathleen T.: Erin, you're muted again.

Erin S.: My face was "how is that possible? I didn't touch it." But, the end of what I shared with that, I posted the links in the chat. Additionally, I posted our links to our Facebook and our social media. I'm really nervous to touch anything right now. So if you are not already following us on Facebook and social media...Facebook and Twitter, please go on there and follow us. Our information is there. We post information about our events. When we have new publications that come out, we post information regarding those. So please follow us and send the information along to those in your local context.



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Crystal M.: And I ask a quick question. Do you know when the recording to this session will be available?

Robin J.: I'm going to say with confidence by the end of September, beginning of October. We're going to put it in that little chunk there.

Crystal M.: Okay. Thank you.

Robin J.: And finally, Erin has posted several times in the chat. if you did not see it, she will post it one more time right now if she has not done it already, our Post-session Questionnaire. We are a continuous improvement organization, and we do take your feedback seriously, and we implemented for our future professional learning. So please take a moment after this, you know, to fill out that questionnaire for us and let us know how you felt about today's session. Once again, thank you for joining us for today's *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*. And we hope you have a great rest of your week. Thank you all so much for coming then stop recording now.

Crystal M.: Yes, thank you.

[End of Audio]