

Audre Lorde: Breaking silence and the power of difference



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

I have been reading "The Selected Works of Audre Lorde," a Black lesbian poet who died in 1992 (she also described herself as a mother and "warrior"). This is my first time hearing her voice though I've heard her name from James Baldwin and others. I'm discovering how clearly she speaks truth relevant to her time as well as our own.

For a class I taught on "Contemporary Freethinkers," I read from her essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." Few in my class knew Lorde, so I was glad to introduce a wise voice also new to me. I read these lines aloud: "For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the

truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it ... [It] is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding." Language is critically important in teaching, living, speaking, acting. She shines a light on the way fear, especially fear of difference, keeps us silent and therefore inactive. "[While] we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us." She concludes: "The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken." Brilliantly said.

Lorde continues this theme of difference in her address to students at Hunter College in New York. In "Difference and Survival," she makes a powerful

case for inclusion and diversity. "It is within our differences that we are both most powerful and most vulnerable, and some of the most difficult tasks of our lives are the claiming of differences and learning to use those differences for bridges rather than as barriers between us." The bridge analogy has probably been overused, yet it still presents an image for spanning those barriers, even the imaginary ones in our heads.

One phrase she uses, "the house of your difference," brought another analogy to mind. Picture a street lined with many styles and colors of houses. Some people live on one side, some live on the other side. Several simple questions could be asked: What's a street for? What purpose does a road serve? Whose street is it? Obviously, it's everyone's street and like any street the purpose is to go somewhere; to get "there," wherever that may be for anyone at any time. It would serve no purpose to build

a bridge across the street, unless an overpass is needed.

Now, imagine the houses or apartments on either side of this particular street. Neighbors could be any ethnicity, gender, political views or religion. A diverse assortment of children play in the street, though it can be a dangerous place. Streets are always dangerous, because cars travel up and down streets. Here's where Lorde's insight drives a fresh thought. What different people, from different homes on different sides, most need, is the freedom to walk, run, bike or drive into the street and down the road. In other words, we all need what the street provides: free and open access to sidewalks and avenues to transport ourselves to where we need to go. Streets are common, democratic, liberating. Anyone can use the street as long as they abide by rules that guide ev-

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eryone else.

Audre Lorde calls our attention to the “very real differences between us, of race, sex, age, sexuality, class, vision.” And she recognizes what makes us different isn’t what keeps dividing us. It’s our “refusal to examine the distortions”

propagated by those who seek to drive us apart, who use our differences to divide and define us (those who believe they direct all avenues and determine the directions we move in).

In relation to religious differences, I think Audre Lorde offers a fascinating alternative to what we think our variations in belief truly mean. So much time and effort is spent comparing or criticizing the houses across the street, or, on the other hand, “building bridges” to

span the divisions, while ignoring the thoroughfare itself. Lorde shifts our attention to “the house of your difference” where resides our “greatest power” as well as our “deepest vulnerability.” Yet the focus moves beyond the unique houses we dwell in (or belief systems we live into). The open avenue ahead concerns “the very fabric of your lives, your dreams, your hopes, your visions, your place upon the earth.” Our differences may be “polarities,” but these can “spark

possibilities” of a “unifying vision” for the future.

We need to listen to the voice of this Lorde.

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