Consolations of a Pixie Priest[1]

Donyelle C. McCray

Before launching into my lecture, I have a brief note on pronouns. This paper focuses on Pauli Murray, a freedom fighter, attorney, poet, Episcopal priest, and a person for whom self-definition was very costly. The barriers were many and varied – and one concerns language itself. Today, most scholars describe Pauli as gender nonconforming, but Pauli had less agency around gender expression than many do today and lived during a time when binary pronouns were commonly used by people of all genders. In conversation I typically use she/they pronouns for Pauli, but this paper includes many more she/her pronouns. I use them: First, to maintain consistency with sources and direct quotations in which Pauli uses she series pronouns. Pauli's gender identity was only shared with a tiny inner circle that excluded many close friends and relatives. Pauli was intentional about using she/her pronouns after age 60 in certain ministry contexts. In addition, terms that might be objectionable early in life are embraced at other points.

I try to honor the fullness of Pauli's identity and the need for the visibility of historical figures who were trans or nonbinary. And I respect the fact that we are working with historical fragments and do not know which pronouns Pauli would choose today. Speaking and writing about people from earlier historical contexts with gradual gender transitions or whose gender identities were not publicly known during their lifetime, requires attention to the uniqueness of each case, and openness to ambiguity. Pauli Murray scholars are taking different approaches to these questions and humility is required of us all.

1 Some biographical details included in this address were previously published in McCray, Donyelle: »Pauli Murray: In & Out of the Pulpit«, in: Ottoni-Wilhelm, Dawn (Ed.), Preaching the Fear of God in a Fear-Filled World. Proceedings from the 13th Conference of Societas Homiletica, Durham2018 (= Homiletic Perspectives 11; = Studia Homiletica 12), Zürich: LIT-Verlag 2020, pp. 41–57.

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1 Introduction

Pauli Murray once said, »If anyone should ask a Negro woman what is her greatest achievement, her honest answer would be, ›I survived!‹«[2] On one level, surviving involved developing the toughness to face discrimination. But survival also meant finding a path forward in the face of unimaginable loss. That time came for Pauli during the winter of 1973 after the death of Irene Barlow, a confidante of 16 years whom Pauli describe as the »closest person« in her life and her »silent partner«[3]. In this lecture, I will offer a portrait of Pauli Murray and reflect on the ministry that blossoms after Barlow's death.

2 Early Life

Pauli Murray's story begins in Baltimore, Maryland on November 20, 1910, when Agnes Fitzgerald Murray and William Murray had their fourth child. The couple had a rocky marriage, continually breaking up and getting back together, but spent most of their marriage in Baltimore, where they attended Saint James Episcopal Church. The church was pastored by the Reverend George Freeman Bragg, an African American priest known for his advocacy on behalf of Baltimore's Black citizens and for child welfare. When Pauli was baptized on July 9, 1911, the Book of Common Prayer instructed Father Bragg to give »hearty thanks« to God, calling the baby »thine own Child by adoption.«[4]. The words would ring true in painful ways. In March of 1914, Agnes, just 35 years old and pregnant with the couple's seventh child, died of a stroke. William was in a years-long battle with mental illness and was unable to care for the children by himself. The Murray siblings were separated and cared for by other relatives. Little Pauli went to Durham to live with an aunt, Pauline Dame, and Agnes' parents, Robert and Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald.

Not long afterwards, tragedy struck again. In 1917, William's mental health worsened, and he was committed to Crownsville State Hospital in Maryland. The social stigma associated with his confinement would trouble the family for years. Then, in 1923, when Pauli was twelve, William became the victim of a racially motivated attack. He was beaten to death by an inexperienced hospital guard.

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2 Rosenberg, Rosalind: Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray, New York: Oxford University Press 2017, p. 5.

3 R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 2), p. 353.

4 The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America (New York: Printed for the General Convention 1892), p. 250.

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Other family members tried to address this void by telling vivid legends about Agnes and Will, giving Pauli a sense of their personalities. But there was no way to soften the magnitude of this loss. Yet, from a young age Pauli felt a continuing nearness to certain deceased relatives.

Pauli suggests that being orphaned and having virtually no contact with her parents after age three shifted her understanding of boundaries. As Rosalind Rosenberg explains,

> »Most of the world accepted as self-evident the difference between male and female. Pauli never did. Her inability to take that, or any other conventional boundary, for granted provided the source of her deepest anguish, but also of her most significant insights throughout her life.«[5]

As early as age eight, Pauli preferred wearing what was then considered boys clothing. Later young Pauli would confide that they felt »in between«[6] with respect to gender. Aunt Pauline responded with endearment, calling Pauli, »my little boy-girl«[7]. In addition to honoring Pauli's choice of clothing, even buying a brogue hat and coat that Pauli selected from the boys' section of a department store, Aunt Pauline allowed Pauli to chop wood and take up a paper route – roles typically reserved for boys.

Church served as a space where Aunt Pauline was less flexible. At Saint Titus Episcopal Church, Pauli was required to wear dresses and respect the church's rule of only allowing boys to serve as acolytes. Despite these restrictions, eight-year-old Pauli baptized a cousin and became unusually engaged in church, playing the organ, and serving as a lay assistant to an uncle who was a priest. Pauli even described the Episcopal church as a »natural extension of my home life«[8], but any early leanings toward the priestly vocation were thwarted. The priesthood was treated as a male prerogative.

One person seemed to perceive Pauli's giftedness despite the gender barriers: Bishop Henry B. Delany, a long-time family friend and one of the first two African American suffragan bishops serving in the Episcopal Church in the United States. On his deathbed, Bishop Delany blessed Pauli and called her a »child of destiny«[9].

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5 R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 2), pp. 16–17.

6 R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 2), p. 2. Rosenberg uses the phrase »outwardly female but inwardly male«.

7 R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 2), p. 2.

8 Murray, Pauli: Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet, Knoxville: University of Tennessee ^{2}1989, p. 48.

9 P. Murray: Autobiography (note 8), p. 70.

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That encounter took place when Pauli was around 17, but it had a life-long effect.[10] Pauli felt re-named and blessed to forge a new path. While Pauli's baptism and birth certificates read »Anna Pauline Murray«, Pauli used several names that reflected a more fluid gender identity, including »Paul«, »Pete«, (as an abbreviation for Peter Pan) and »Pixie«, but completed a legal name change to become »Pauli«.[11]

Immediately after graduating from high school, Pauli moved to New York, eventually enrolling in Hunter College but matriculating slowly due to limited finances. There were periods of study peppered with time off traveling the rails, hitchhiking, and working.[12] Pauli worked as a janitor, typist, switchboard operator, and waited tables—anything to pay the bills.[13] For a short time, Pauli lived in a Harlem ashram with a community devoted to blending Christianity and Gandhian principles but left the community shortly after being criticized for smoking cigarettes.[14]

During the 1940s, Pauli challenged Jim Crow laws on Greyhound buses and led successful sit-ins at two Washington, D.C. restaurants. Enrolling in Howard Law School, she came up with an argument to unsettle the doctrine of separate but equal in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. This argument later became a key resource for Thurgood Marshall and Spotswood Robinson in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* cases that called for the desegregation of public schools throughout the United States. Pauli wanted to do further study at Harvard Law School, but the school did not accept women. Her rejection letter read in part, »Your picture and the salutation on your college transcript indicate that you are not of the sex entitled to be admitted to Harvard Law School.«[15] Pauli challenged this response with a multi-tiered appeal that included a letter to the Harvard Corporation:

> »[G]entlemen, 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 on this subject. Are you to tell me that one is as difficult as the other?«[16]

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10 See P. Murray: Autobiography (note 8), p. 70. As Pauli puts it, »Those words were to have a lasting impact on my life. […] The solemnity of this act and the prophetic quality of Bishop Delany's words would follow me through the years.«

11 See R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 2), pp. 14, 29, 32, 39, 42, 359, and 390. Because of the gender dynamics and the clear deliberation demonstrated in this legal name change, I intentionally use ›Pauli‹ in lieu of the standard practice of using the surname, ›Murray‹, in this lecture.

12 See R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 2), p. 39.

13 See R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 2), pp. 32, 36–37.

14 See R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 2), p. 101.

15 P. Murray: Autobiography (note 8), p. 239. In this volume, this quotation is described as an approximation.

16 P. Murray: Autobiography (note 8), p. 243.

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Later, Pauli attended the University of California and began a career as a civil rights lawyer. She served briefly as Deputy Attorney General of California and on the legal staff of the American Jewish Congress before joining Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton and Garrison, a major law firm in New York. And there, in 1956, Pauli met a coworker, Irene Barlow, the firm's office manager.

Pauli and ›Renie‹, as Irene was called, developed a deep connection almost immediately. After learning that they were both Episcopalians, they began attending worship services together.[17] They became active members of St Mark's in the Bowery Church in New York, where Renie became the first woman on the vestry. Later, the two attended Calvary Church. Both were predominantly white congregations. While attending these congregations, worshipping together was a vital part of their relationship. They both sought to make the Episcopal Church more inclusive of »the least of these«[18] in accordance with Matthew 25:40.

Their bond remained strong even as Pauli's work took her away from New York – first to Accra for a year to teach at the University of Ghana, then to New Haven (Connecticut), where she studied at Yale Law School, becoming the first African American to earn a doctorate there, and later to Boston when Pauli accepted a faculty position at Brandeis University. Even though they found it necessary to maintain separate households, they took steps to legalize their union: Pauli was Renie's power-of-attorney and had legal authorization to make medical decisions on her behalf.

In Renie, Pauli found a soul mate who balanced her predispositions. While Pauli could be excitable and impulsive, Renie tended to be calm, steady, and exceptionally efficient. Their mutual love of spirituality, literature, art, and city life gave them endless topics of conversation and sources for private jokes.

It is hard to find words to express what Renie meant to Pauli. Renie was an oasis in long struggle to be seen, loved, and understood when even medical professionals struggled to understand Pauli's gender identity. During the early 1940s, Pauli wrote to doctors with requests for male hormones but was repeatedly dismissed.[19] Being dismissed hurt. In a letter to her Aunt Pauline around this time, Pauli wrote:

> »[T]his little ›boy-girl‹ personality as you jokingly call it sometimes gets me into trouble […] but where you and a few people understand, the world does not accept my pattern of life. And to try to live by society's standards always causes me such inner conflict that at times it's almost unbearable. I don't know whether I'm right or whether society (or some medical authority) is right—I only know how I feel and what makes me happy.«[20]

17 See R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 2), p. 215.

18 R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 2), p. 353.

19 See R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 2), p. 117, pp. 119–121.

20 Azaransky, Sarah: The Dream is Freedom: Pauli Murray and American Democratic Faith, New York: Oxford University Press 2011, p. 22.

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Pauli's brother Bill once sent a letter in which he insisted on calling Pauli ›Anna Pauline‹. Pauli wrote back to correct him, saying, »now Brother Love, about this ›Anna Pauline‹ business, I may be ›Pollyanna‹ to you, but it is still Pauli to me.«[21] The letter was signed, »Pauli (little-brother-sister-or what have you).«[22]

On a few occasions, the anguish of trying to be what others expected was too much to bear. Between 1937 and 1947, Pauli was hospitalized at least three times for emotional breakdowns. Repeatedly, Pauli asked doctors to perform exploratory surgery, expecting them to discover hidden male sex organs. If doctors would just find the answer or prescribe some male hormones, Pauli thought maybe a lasting sense of peace and wellness would be possible.

During one period of hospitalization at the Long Island Rest Home in Amityville, New York, Pauli pressed doctors for explanations, composing a lengthy series of questions that included the following:

(7) Where do you think is the seat of conflict—in the brain, the body, the glands—or where?
(8) Where could I go to get an answer? What fields are doing experimentation and have the equipment?
(9) Why this nervous excitable [sic!] condition *all* my life and the very natural falling in love with the female sex?

Terrific breakdowns after each love affair that has become unsuccessful? Why the willingness to fight instead of running away in this instance?[23]

More questions followed concerning romantic attraction, heteronormativity, and her longstanding desire for monogamy. She also pressed questions about the limits of psychiatry:

(12) Why is it that I believe that psychiatry does not have the answer to true homosexuality, but that experimental science does?
(15) Why do I prefer experimentation on the male side, instead of attempted adjustment as a normal woman?[24]
She also wondered »what hospitals, fields or medical institutions« were experimenting »in this and other countries?«[25]

21 S. Azaransky: The Dream is Freedom (note 20), p. 22.
22 S. Azaransky: The Dream is Freedom (note 20), p. 22.
23 See R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 2), pp. 57–60, p. 121; Pauli Murray Papers, 1827–1985, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MC 412, Series I, Box 4, Folder 71.
24 See R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 23), pp. 57–60, p. 121; Pauli Murray Papers (note 23), Box 4, Folder 71.
25 Pauli Murray Papers (note 23), MC 412, Series I, Box 4, Folder 71.

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During other hospital stays, there are no questions, no words, just tears. When Pauli's romantic interest in a sophomore at Howard University became public, she had to be taken to Freedman's Hospital. There, she sobbed uncontrollably and had to be sedated. The hospital records are difficult to read because they show that she has no appetite, few visitors, and is overwhelmed with grief.

I share these details from Pauli's life because I want to stress how important this relationship with Renie was. In essence, there was ›Before Renie‹, a time marked by much isolation and misrecognition, and ›After Renie‹, a time that still had its difficulties, but those difficulties were faced with a loving companion.

So, when Renie became ill in 1972, and later learned she had a brain tumor, Pauli was devastated. She was very involved in the treatment process and commuted from Boston to New York to accompany Renie to medical appointments. Despite aggressive treatment, Renie died on February 21, 1973. Pauli described her death as a »personal disaster«[26]. Unlike most surviving partners or spouses, Pauli was not showered with care and attention after Renie's death. Pauli experienced a form of grief that Kenneth Doka clinically categorizes as disenfranchised grief, meaning the grief is extended and complicated because of the lack of social recognition for the magnitude of the loss.[27] Part of Pauli's path forward through the pain was to honor Renie's memory by seeking holy orders. By becoming a priest, the divine love she received through Renie could be shared with others in need. So, in 1973, much to the shock of her close friends and family, Pauli quit her tenured professorship at Brandeis University and enrolled in seminary. At the time, she was in her early 60s—an age when friends thought she should be thinking about retirement, not starting a new venture.

3 Pauli's Priesthood

From the start, it was clear that Pauli was an atypical student. Pauli's seminary application includes multiple areas where the word ›he‹ has been stricken and the word ›she‹ inserted, and some of the questions on the form are answered with sarcastic remarks.[28] For example, the form asks, »Have you ever seen a physician regarding emotional or mental difficulties?« Pauli responds by writing, »Who hasn't?«[29] These

26 R. Rosenberg: Jane Crow (note 2), p. 353.

27 See the title of the book edited by Kenneth Doka (Ed.): Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow, Lexington (MA): Lexington Books 1989.

28 See Pauli Murray: Seminary Application, V26.01, Virginia Theological Seminary Archives, Alexandria, Virginia.

29 P. Murray: Application (note 28), V26.01.

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early tensions foreshadowed what would be a lonely journey, one Pauli described as more demanding than earning a law degree or doctorate.

Despite the many challenges of seminary, Pauli graduated and on January 8, 1977, was ordained a priest. She was celebrated as the first African American woman priest in the Episcopal Church, USA. Yet, the excitement never resulted in an opportunity to serve as the pastor or rector of a congregation. Pauli had to find a new path. In the end, her ministry had two primary aims: the first was caring for the sick and dying. Pauli made regular visits to a number of sick and shut-in Christians whom she treated as her congregants. She also had an informal chaplaincy at the Washington Home Hospice and would pray with people in their final moments.

4 Pauli, the Preacher

The second part of Pauli's ministry involved preaching. Though she was not invited to be the pastor or rector, she did have a steady stream of preaching invitations. For Pauli, preaching was a care event; it was a way to interrupt cycles of hatred and misunderstanding and bridge the divisions within the human family. To be more precise, preaching was a time to challenge racial and gender hierarchies and invite listeners into the freedom and joy of the gospel.

A study of Pauli's sermon manuscripts reveals repeated emphasis on the listener's identity as a child of God. This identity precedes and subverts all other aspects of human identity and reveals them as partial. Pauli explains:

> »To think of oneself as a child of God is a liberating experience; it is to free oneself from all feelings of inferiority, whether of race, or color, or sex, or age, or economic status, or position in life. When I say that I am a child of God—made in his image (the theologians like to use the term *imago dei*)—I imply that ›Black is beautiful‹, that White is beautiful, that Red is beautiful, or Yellow is beautiful. I do not need to make special pleading for my sex—male or female, or in-between—to bolster self-esteem. When I truly believe that God is my Father and Mother, in short, my Creator, I am bound also to believe that all men, women, and children of whatever race, color, creed, or ethnic origin, are my sisters-and-brothers-in-Christ, whether they are Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, black Muslims, members of the Judaic faith, Russian Orthodox, Buddhists, or atheists.«[30]

As children of God, Pauli suggests, our call is to radiate the love that envelops the world. This singular purpose is achieved in an endless variety of ways, and a pri-

30 Pinn, Anthony B. (Ed.): Pauli Murray: Selected Sermons and Writings, Selected with an Introduction by Anthony B. Pinn, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2006, p. 15.

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mary hindrance is the failure to recognize our own belovedness. Easily distracted by money, titles, achievements, or racial hierarchies, we fall prey to counterfeit identities and mistake partial dimensions of who we are as the whole. Pauli tries to interrupt this pattern by reminding listeners that they are children of the Holy One who is known by many names, that the full meaning of their lives cannot be discerned in the temporal sphere, and that their identities are still unfolding.

On a practical level, the emphasis on identity exploration means addressing the central psychological and spiritual battles faced by the listener. As Henry Mitchell and Frank Thomas have observed, deconstructing negative tapes that run in the minds of listeners and recording new tapes is an imperative part of preaching.[31] To be most effective in this regard, preaching should address the blueprint of the listeners' worldview because »shame is all too often the dominant experience of the self«[32]. This homiletical approach requires reaching listeners at the subconscious level with clear assertions about their true identities and peeling back distorting inner narratives that inhibit self-recognition.[33]

Along this line, Pauli regularly makes explicitly affirming statements about gender identities. For example, Murray suggests Jesus might return as a woman, that women may have been present at the Lord's Supper, and during a Father's Day sermon suggests that a Father-Mother or more inclusive approach might be more appropriate.[34] In a similar vein she specifically includes same-gender loving people and gender-nonconforming people when listing the children of God.[35]

The aim of these interventions was to deepen listeners' sense of themselves as children of God. Both aspects of this term were central for Pauli: first, being children. But docility is not what is in mind here; instead, the emphasis on being a child of God suggests being a brave, playful, risk-taking child who has a secure sense of belovedness. Secondly, being ›of God‹ refers to being a unique, in some ways unfathomable bearer of grace—mysterious by God's design. Preaching involved diving into this mystery and deepening our notions of personhood. As 1 John 3:2 says, »Beloved, we are God's children now. What we will be has not yet been revealed.« Or, drawing on the Apostle Paul, whom Pauli described as a namesake, »What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him« (1 Cor 2:9).

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31 See Mitchell, Henry H.: Celebration & Experience in Preaching, Nashville: Abingdon 1990, pp. 39–40; Thomas, Frank A.: They Like to Never Quit Praisin‹ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching, Cleveland: Pilgrim Press 1997, p. 9; Wimberly, Edward P.: Moving from Shame to Self-Worth. Preaching & Pastoral Care, Nashville: Abingdon 1999, pp. 17–18.

32 E. Wimberly: Shame to Self-Worth (note 31), p. 124.

33 See Jordan, Merle R.: Taking on the Gods. The Task of the Pastoral Counselor, Nashville: Abingdon 1986, p. 34.

34 See P. Murray: Selected Sermons (note 30), p. 15, p. 49, p. 120.

35 See P. Murray: Selected Sermons (note 30), p. 15, p. 82.

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In other words, preaching was a time to address the crisis of belonging, to ask, ›Who does God say I am? And how do I live in the truth of that?‹ Pauli believed that when we hold the fragments of our lives in the light of the Spirit, we gain the courage to reframe and re-interpret our lives. She articulates this possibility for expansion in her poem aptly titled »Prophecy«:

Prophecy
I sing of a new American
Separate from all others,
Yet enlarged and diminished by all others.
I am the child of kings and serfs, freemen and slaves,
Having neither superiors nor inferiors,
Progeny of all colors, all cultures, all systems, all beliefs.
I have been enslaved, yet my spirit is unbound.
I have been cast aside, but I sparkle in the darkness.
I have been slain but live on in the rivers of history.
I seek no conquest, no wealth, no power, no revenge;
I seek only discovery
Of the illimitable heights and depths of my own being.[36]

This vibrant vision of human multiplicity grounds her preaching and pastoral care until her death on July 1, 1985.

5 Coda

Fast forward to March 2021. I stood at Pauli Murray's grave at the Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York, a grave Pauli shares with two aunts, Pauline F. Dame and Sarah A. F. Small, and with Irene Barlow and her mother, Mary Barlow. I gave thanks for the bond between Pauli Murray and Irene Barlow, a bond that is still miraculously bearing fruit.

36 Murray, Pauli: Dark Testament and Other Poems, Norwalk, CT: Silvermine 1970, p. 71.

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