

Ora Houston



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54:10

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SPEAKERS

Ora Houston, Rabert Sheppard



Rabert Sheppard 00:03

It is April 6, 2022. This is Rabert Sheppard, interviewing Ms. Houston in Austin, Texas for the Religions Texas project. Good morning, Ms. Houston.



Ora Houston 00:21

Good morning.



Rabert Sheppard 00:23

All right, I won't delay, so we'll jump right in. Let me pull up my questions.



Ora Houston 00:39

Some of those questions would take a day to answer, but I understand the time limit.



Rabert Sheppard 00:50

Okay, well, let's begin at the beginning, life history questions. Tell me about your story, your family, your upbringing, the significant experiences that you may have had, and that have made you who you are.



Ora Houston 01:09

So many people think that I was born in Austin, Texas, because I've been here so long, but I'm actually a native of Rome, Georgia. My father moved here, and my mom moved here in the 40s, when he became associated with Samuel Huston College, [one of] two historically Black

colleges that were in Austin at the time. And so I grew up at 815 East 11th Street, right across the street from Samuel Houston College. Now most people in Austin would know it as a place where it's right across the street from where Franklin's Barbecue is. Franklin's wasn't there. That was a college campus back in those days. And so I grew up on that college campus, went to segregated public schools during the Jim Crow era, got what I consider a very quality education, because in those days, the Black instructors and professors, as we were calling them, knew what it would take for us to succeed, and they made sure that we had all that we needed. They identified our gifts, but they also made sure we had the other attributes that we would need to be successful in a pretty segregated environment.

Ora Houston 02:33

In 1954, my parents, understanding wealth-building, bought property on 22nd Street in Austin, Texas, and they lived there 'til they died. And then I currently live in their house that was built in 1954. The interesting thing about Austin is that [it sees itself] as being progressive, but Maynor Road, which some people may or may not know, was the dividing line between where Black people could purchase land and White people could purchase land. I live just south of Maynor Road, and you can see if you drive through the neighborhood, the difference in the ways the streets were laid out, and the tree covering, and all the things we talk about, the blocks and all the things that we talk about now, how that was different on one side of the street to the other. So I've been here all this time, went to all the Black schools, proud graduate of LC Anderson High School, class of 1961, member of the Yellow Jacket Band. The Yellow Jacket Band, very proud of that, and very proud of my relationship to the Alumni Association there.

Ora Houston 03:59

Been a public servant, most of my life. I think I got that from my mom and my dad. My dad received his degree in business from the University of Kansas in 1933. The first person to receive a graduate degree from the University of Texas was in the 50s. So Kansas was a little bit ahead of the curve when making sure that Americans of African ancestry got quality education. My mom was a social worker. She was the second Black individual, the first female, to get a degree at the University of Texas School of Social Work. So I had the social service side, and I had the financial side, and both of them, very active in the community and very involved politically, would take me to buy their poll tax, when they were buying the poll tax, so they could vote. Always voted, sometimes voted for different people, and in the yard would have different signs up, one for the more social service kind of person where my mother was leaning, and one for the more financial kind of person where my dad was. And so I was brought up in an environment where it was important to give back. My father was a Methodist. Wesley United Methodist Church was his home church, and my mother was an Episcopalian. But I went to both services, so that I could decide on my own what I chose to be as a person of faith as I got older. And so I chose the Episcopal faith, and I've been a member of St. James Episcopal Church since about 19 - ooh, I can't even remember. I think I was fourteen at the time, I don't remember what - and I'm older than that now, so I've been there a long time.

Ora Houston 06:03

And let me see, what else? Worked with Child Protective Services, Adult Protective Services in

California. Austin, Travis County Mental Health/Mental Retardation, which is now called Integral Care. [Community Service] Department of the Austin State School and the Department of Mental Health/Mental Retardation, as the state-wide coordinator of the In-Home & Family Support Program when I retired from that position. In the 80s, I decided to run for school board and lost that election in a runoff, because I didn't understand that the people who come and vote initially have to be encouraged to come back and vote during runoff. And so I made some assumptions. And at that point, I said, "Politics is not for me." And it was not until 2014, where my ministry was then to become a public servant again and run for city council in Austin. That was over in 2019. And for the last, I guess that's three years, not only being conscious of my health, I've been in the process of trying to restore my soul from four years of public service. So I think that's pretty much all that you want right now, right? I can't hear you at all.

R

Rabert Sheppard 07:31

Yeah, we can move to the next question. I know you described some of your work. Are there any organizers or historical figures that you look up to, any influences that you may have had in your life? And what challenges have you faced in your work? So basically, three: organizers, challenges, and influences.

O

Ora Houston 08:07

So I guess the first - again, growing up during Jim Crow, I got the history of my ancestors. And so I think the first person that is an influencer is sister Harriet Tubman. I mean, that sister was bad. She did not take prisoners. She was not playing with folks. She understood what her ministry was and tried to engage communities to help them gain their freedom. And so that would be the first person. I think then after her, I think that Mrs. King, I know people talk about Martin, but I think that Mrs. King had a unique place in the history of this country and the history of the civil rights movement. And I don't think sometimes that she gets enough credit, because she was quiet. She was more reserved. She did not seek the public eye. She worked behind the scenes. And so I think that Mrs. King would be my my second person. And then how many do I have to name here?

R

Rabert Sheppard 09:30

As many as you like.

O

Ora Houston 09:31

Well, my mom. My mom was one of those people who was, regardless of what I was thinking I needed to do or wanted to do, she was very supportive. And she went about her social justice work in a different kind of way, working with people who were living in public housing. She was the first person over - it was called Project Enable, which was an EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] program from the federal government. And so she was very active in that work on the ground. But she also got involved politically with some people to help them to

try to make sure that they understood that the people we're talking about had a voice. And they could use their voice, but they had to have some training on what it was to use it, how to find it, and how to express it. So I got some of that from my mom.

Ora Houston 10:37

And then I'm gonna say me, because I have been through some difficult times in my life. And I don't talk about this often, but I was in a relationship, a marriage, and it became very abusive, both verbally, emotionally, and sexually abusive. And because this had never happened in my family, I didn't have the words to say to my mom. I knew I couldn't say it to my dad, because he had an old forty-five gun that he would shoot on New Year's, and we knew that if I tried to tell him what this man had done, that that would be the first option for him. But it was hard to tell anybody, because I was embarrassed. I didn't know what to do, didn't know how to do it. And so I was living in San Francisco at the time, and finally, I called and said, "Daddy, I need to come home. Can you send me a plane ticket for me and the kids?" And he did. And he never asked why. Again, you have to understand, my parents were born in the thirties. So they weren't people that were verbal, or asked questions. There's some secrets I'm sure they took their grave that I still don't know about.

Ora Houston 12:04

But so that was one, and then in the other one was another marriage was fraught with infidelity. I mean, had a family, not a family-family, but another woman up in another state and because of the travel, would travel to another state and have that relationship, and then have our relationship here. Very active in the church. And so after that happened, I said to the church, "I am so mad at God. I cannot believe that this is happening to me." And the pastor, the Episcopal priest that was helping me get through this said, "You know what Ora? God can handle anything you can send God's way. And so just let it out. That's what you need to do." So for about three years, I went to church and just sat in the back of the church and cried and fumed. And then at some point, God said, "You know what? You got to get up. You got to get up. I got work for you to do, and you need to be about the work that [I need you to do] - don't be sitting in pity. You've pitied yourself long enough. Get up and go back to work."

Ora Houston 13:21

And so at that point, I started being more engaged in the community, in the church work. So I was elected to [be a lay Deputy to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, which meets every three years]. Every three years they have a convention, and there people who are elected to go, both lay and clergy. And for three years, I was elected as a lay clergy person. That's nine years, three, six, nine. Three three year terms, I was elected [lay Deputy] to represent the Diocese of Texas [three times] at the General Convention and had some amazing formation experiences there. I remember the first one I went to was we were electing a new Presiding Bishop of the church, and the bishops came back, the smoke was sent up, and the bishops came back, and people were passing out buttons that said, "It's a girl." And I may start crying now, because that was Presiding Bishop Katharine Schori. And I thought, "Oh my god, I have witnessed yet another miracle in the church that we've got a female bishop." And then the next day we had the first communion where she was going to preside. And I saw men, primarily

White men, clergy, and lay people get up and leave because they did not want to take communion from a female. And I sat here in Columbus, Ohio going, "Now, some of you were fed at the breast of your mom, and yet you won't be fed by this woman? Seriously?"

O Ora Houston 15:02

And so that started me on a whole 'nother journey with the church, paying attention to what the Episcopal Church was saying, what we were doing, how we were saying it. The next moment for me was a priest got up to speak, because we vote on a lot. We're like the Democratic and Republican Party. We vote on a lot of stuff before it becomes the policy and the polity of our church. And there was a young woman speaking at the mic about something that had to do with transgender individuals. And at the end of her presentation, she acknowledged that she was born male, and had transitioned to a female. And again, I just bawled. Why would somebody need to share that with everybody? Why we can't just accept her for who she is, and who she presents herself to be? And so after that was over, we had a chance meeting in the hall, and I expressed my thanks [to] her for sharing that information, and for the journey that she had been on, and for allowing all these thousands of people now to participate in that journey with her.

O Ora Houston 16:25

And so those are two things. There were other things that come to mind. Oh and the hate. The hate from the people in Kansas. It was a group from Kansas outside the convention center. And the language that they used, I'm thinking, "Oh my goodness, and these folks call themselves believers. And yet, how can you call children of God - I don't care what they look like, what they believe in, what their sexuality is, or not, who they love or not. How can you call and talk about God's children in the way that you're doing?" So that was an anger that I had, and I had to work through that. But those are some of the things in my church life that helped me bring it all together, that my role in life is ministry as a lay person. I take that role very seriously. I don't try to proselytize. I try to show by my actions that I'm trying to live that life that God has called me to live. And so I'm not sure if that answered your question, but that's my answer, and I'm sticking to it.

R Rabert Sheppard 17:43

Oh that was rich, complex, nuanced, difficult, lovely. It was beautiful. It definitely answered to the fullest. Mrs. Houston, who is your community? Who do you serve?

O Ora Houston 18:03

When I worked for child welfare, there were children that I was protecting. When I worked at the Department of Mental Health/Mental Retardation, there were people with different abilities that I protected. Then when I stopped working and retired, I had an opportunity to work with Senator Gonzalo Barrientos's office in the capitol for three or four sessions. It was not as antagonistic and mean and ugly as it is now. So we actually had prayer meetings with Republican senators and staff. And we would sing songs, and we would have conversations, but

everybody was respectful. There was a space there, where you could have your beliefs, and it wasn't ugly and mean, and we can just differ on some things. And so I did that for three years, I mean, three sessions and [three] special sessions. Because he called me one time, and I told you about my mother being over Project Enable. Well, Gonzalo was one of the people she [employed] to be an outreach worker to the Hispanic community. So I kind of grew up with him. And he called me one day and asked me if I knew a young Black person who would be willing to be the receptionist during the session in the front of his office. And I said, "I don't know a young Black one, but I know an old Black one who would be willing to go." And so I did that. And because I was probably the only person of his age, and I could go and say, "You know, you probably shouldn't say it that way. You probably should say it another way." And we're still good friends, but that was an experience.

 Ora Houston 19:56

And so after that, I thought, "Okay, I'm gonna start doing some volunteer work." And so I volunteered with SAFE Alliance, what they call it now. Used to be SAFE Place. I was on the hot-line answering the phone from seven in the morning until noon on Saturdays. That was my usual schedule. I would give talks about how you identify what abuse looks like. And it's not love, no matter what people say, "I just love you, and I got-" that's not love. And also help people identify resources in the community that they can reach out to. Served on the board of directors there for a while. So I started doing that kind of thing. I started volunteering at Family Eldercare, because my mom and dad were getting older, need to know the resources. The boards need to be diverse. They can't all look alike, because all communities have different needs. They respond to people differently. And so I was encouraging my seniors, my elders, my wisdom keepers, to reach out to Family Eldercare to get the services that they provided. So I did that kind of service for a while.

 Ora Houston 21:14

And then the city council passed the resolution to go to single member districts. And I was very active in that, because I had found that the council did not seem to listen to the majority of the people. They listened to a precious few of the people, and that in order for us to get our issues heard, we had to be more involved. There was a token seat for a Black person and a token seat for a Hispanic person. And so in order to get anything done, we had to go to everybody. And so I thought ten-one, having districts where people could represent the vast community that they have in their district is the way we need to go. And so I got involved in that. And at some point, somebody asked me, would I be willing to run for district one? And I said, "No way." I cannot say on this Zoom call what I said other than that.

 Ora Houston 22:26

They said, "Just think about it." I said, "Well, what I will do is that I will go around to the various communities in the proposed district one and just listen." So district one at that time had about 77,000 people in it, and it's about forty-six square miles. It went from across I-35 down to the capitol, north to Howard Lane and across toll road 130, which most people think is in Maynor area, but it's actually in Austin city government, and down to 7th Street. And so I would go around and just listen to neighborhood groups and go to people's churches. There's a

Vietnamese Catholic Church way out north. I went to that. I called first and asked if it was alright if I could come, and they gave me to a lady, a sister by the name of Sister Anne who was my contact from then on. And she said, "Well, do you speak Vietnamese?" I said "No, ma'am, but I can worship God wherever." And so when I walked in, she obviously knew. She had got me the information in English, so that I could at least follow the service. Because Roman Catholic Church and Episcopal Church [are similar], I knew when to cross myself, when to stand up, when to give the peace, and that kind of thing. So that was a wonderful experience. [Attended a] Korean church with - we had Mandarin and, I can remember, English of course, and then another language. And they sang one of my favorite songs in Mandarin, and I just bawled. And I thought, "Wow, this is amazing." So everywhere I would go, I would talk about why I was there and what I hoped to do.

Ora Houston 24:15

So I did that. Listened to people, listened to what their issues were. And then I said, "Okay, so now it's time for me to talk." I talked to my children, "Is this something that's going to be okay with you, 'cause you all adults now, and I don't want you to be embarrassed by your mother stepping out." And so no, they thought they could do that. Yeah, okay. And so I decided to have a little talk with Jesus. And I usually have these conversations in the car or in church. I mean, it doesn't matter, but it's always to music. And some people meditate, some people walk, some people do prayer rituals of other kinds, but mine always is through music. And it had happened several times before when I said, "Do I really need to [attend another] General Convention?" Asked the congregation to pray, to sing, oh my goodness, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" all the time that I was gone so that I would be uplifted. I knew they were praying that song for me. There was something before that, that - oh, when I was coming out of that mess in my head about I was unworthy and didn't need to be in church. It was "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior." "While on others... do not pass me by." And so I had these songs that God had already said, "Now this is [me]. I'm talking to you now."

Ora Houston 25:46

So I went to a Baptist church at 7:45 in the morning. And I said, "Okay Lord, we need to talk. Is this what you need me to do? Because if not, I can keep doing what I'm doing. But if this is something that you think I can benefit your people in this way, then let me know." So the first song they sang was "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior." And I looked up at in the ceiling, and I said, "Okay, that doesn't count. That doesn't count, because you know that's one of my songs. That doesn't count." So we go through it. Baptist services still are kind of long, even at 7:45 in the morning, but we went on, and the next song was "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." And I said, "Okay, you're pulling out all the old stops, now. You got to do better. You know that those are my songs, so you got to do better." The very last song the choir sang, was a song that I had never heard anyplace but in the Roman Catholic Church, and I'm part of the Cursillo movement, and I've heard it there, but never in a Baptist church. And it's "I, the Lord of Sea and Sky." And there's the verses, and then the refrain and verses go [sings], "I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry." So they do all that, and then [sings], "Who will I send?" The refrain is, "Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart." And I cried and cried, and I said, "You got me. You got me. I can do this. I can do this because I know that, and I will always, while I sit on that dais, I will hold all your people. Doesn't matter whether they're Democrats or Republicans, progressive or

whatever." Because the city council is supposed to be nonpartisan. We don't run an a party platform. I said, "My job is to hold God's people in my heart." And so that's what I tried to do for four years. I forgot what you asked me. I need to get a Kleenex.

R

Rabert Sheppard 28:11

Go ahead. That was beautiful. You've really addressed my next question: how does religion or spirituality guide what you do? What I want to really ask is, how does religion guide your sense of ethics or social justice issues?

O

Ora Houston 28:39

In the life that I have tried to live, it's all the same. It's all the same. My community continues to be all of Austin, just like it was when I served for four years. Of course, I paid particular attention to the people in district one. But there are marginalized people all over the city. And we cannot assume just because someone lives in West Austin, that they're not having difficulty. And so I tried to listen, get the facts, and then make a decision based upon what the facts were and how it helped people. And so sometimes my role in that is to say to people, "What are the unintended consequences that will happen because we don't have everybody at the table?" We have the power brokers at the table. We have the politically active people at the table. We have groups of people who have certain agendas at the table. But the vast majority of the people in this city are not at the table. Nobody is speaking for them.

O

Ora Houston 29:59

And even our White allies, I tell them all the time in conversation, "You are places where I'm never going to be. So if you call yourself a White ally, then my expectation of you is that you will, in fact, speak out and say, 'Before we vote on or consider this policy or this procedure, what is the impact going to be upon the least of these?'" Those conversations don't come up in those political arenas. And so the charge to White allies is that you're going to be in those spaces where I'm not. And so you have to say, "Wait, before we make a decision about this, what is this going to do to the people who clean the floors, cook the food, take care of the babies, teachers, cafeteria workers, people that ride the bus, those people are not in the conversations in general. And so my job now is to maintain the fact that people need to be thinking not about the people who they're comfortable with, but the people they don't know and don't even want to be comfortable with. It's interesting. You know that old saying that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the country? It's still that. It's still that. White people have a difficult time sharing their privilege and their entitlement and their power with others.

O

Ora Houston 31:37

And so I make it a point to go around to Episcopal churches in this town to see how I am welcomed. If I people look me in the eye and say, "Come on in." You don't have to say, "I haven't seen you before, because that's rude." But you can say, "Welcome, come on in. Let me give you a program. Let me show you where the ladies' room is if you need it." The little

reception people have after the service, we at St. James try to walk you over there, so you're not standing there by yourself. But I've gone over to the coffee hour and just stood there waiting for somebody to say something to me. So then I report back to the clergy when I do that to say, "I was at your church on Sunday, and not a soul spoke to me. Not a soul offered to walk me to wherever you all were having the reception." And so there's some assumptions that I think White people need to deal with. And we never talk about that. I told them the other day at one of the conferences for the Union of Black Episcopalians, I said, "I don't know, we keep talking about this. And we know we are the minority in the Episcopal denomination. And we keep talking about inclusion and equity and reparations for all of God's children. Why do we spend so much time on it? It's more of them than it is of us, and they're not caring about it." So we need to shift that burden of responsibility to the White folks and say, "You all have got to come up with something that's different than what you've been doing." That's hard for some people to hear.

O Ora Houston 33:23

We have a One Human Race training at St. James, and we tried to go out and do that kind of training with other congregations. First year we offered it, the Episcopal churches would not accept it. The Methodist Church in Northwest Austin said, "Come talk to us about One Human Race." It's there are no races. There is only one race. And if you could get people to understand that we're all humans. We come from different backgrounds, cultures. We come from Galveston and Rome, Georgia. We come from different places, but we're all human. But people haven't been able to accept that we're human, and they want to continue to divide and separate. And they're doing a pretty good job, because we're not paying attention. Again, I'm not sure that I answered your question. You can ask it again, I'll try again.

R Rabert Sheppard 34:19

No, that was really wonderful. You spoke about what your hopes were for the community, but give me some of your visions. What do you hope that you could accomplish or have accomplished? What are some of your goals short and long term, and what changes do you hope to see within your community?

O Ora Houston 34:44

So what I hoped that I accomplished while I was serving the public, the fact that they had an office where they could go to and ask questions. Sometimes the majority of the citizens in the city don't have any connection with the structure of the city, the county, or the state until something happens. And then they don't have a clue. So one of the things that we did was say, "Whatever the question is that you need to ask about how you interact with the city system, call us." We didn't say email us or tweet us. I mean, we had that, but we didn't say that. Call us. Because many of our elders don't know how to do that. And so that's a whole different population of people who are being left out of the conversation. And so we would do that. We'd say, "Now, this is how you do it. We're going to help you through it this time. Next time, if you get into trouble, call us, but these are the things that you need to do." So that was one of the things: how do you educate people?

o Ora Houston 35:50

We would have coffee and chats out in the community at Whataburger and Mickey D's where people could come where they are, not come to where we are downtown, but we would go to where they are. And then they could come in, we would buy them coffee and a biscuit. And they could come with their issues, and staff would be out, and we could talk about that. And then we would have townhall meetings, again, various places. Forty-six square miles is pretty big, so you don't want everybody to coming to the same place. And again, the times are different because we could meet in public. And we'd go to the Baptist church out on Cameron Road, or we'd go to the Vietnamese - we would go all over and have these town hall meetings. And we would take city staff out to those places, so that people could then ask directly, "What's the budget? How do you form the budget? What about the transportation issues? There are potholes on my street, and when you are going to come-" so that they can interact. I mean, they're staff, and they do but they do and what they're told to do, but they never get to interact with the people, and the people have different issues than what the City Council or the City Manager may have. So we did those kinds of things.

o Ora Houston 37:13

So I tried to put down expectations that a council member is not supposed to work on their own understanding, but on the understanding of the majority of the people who are in that community, especially those who can't get to where - don't know how to manipulate the system, like the rich and powerful and privileged. And so I was hoping that would happen. So after three years out now, that hasn't happened, because I used to get phone calls. And people would say, "I need to know how to do this." And I'd say, I put on my voicemail, "If you need assistance from the city, call 978-2101, which is the council district one's number, and ask for help. Don't leave me a message. I don't do it. I can't I can't do that work. I can't do it." They would leave me a message anyway, and I would have to call them back and say, "Did you not listen to the message? Call your city council member. That's who you've got to put the pressure on." I still get those calls. Three years out, I'm still getting those calls. So I think that was my main thing, is to say to people of all stripes, "I care about you. The staff in this district one office cares about you."

o Ora Houston 38:36

We were at the Asian-American Cultural Center. I have gorgeous saris that I wore when I was with my Indian constituents. I mean, I had to learn stuff that I never knew that I needed to learn to be a public servant, because my constituency was so large. And in order for me to represent them, I had to listen to what their needs were. And so that's what I hope my legacy would be when somebody writes my book. But you know what, I don't care about anybody writing my book. My work was for the big guy upstairs. And so I could care less what people think about or say about me. Because I'm sure there are people that think that I didn't do anything. But I did do things, but they were undercover, staff at the city. I would go out and meet the people who [work at] Resource Recovery. I called and said, "Can I come out and talk to your staff and see what you all need from us city council members?" "You're the only person who's ever been out to-" They didn't let me ride in a garbage truck, although I asked them could I ride in one. But I did that. I went over to Austin Energy to find out what, "What is this energy and ERCOT?" No city council person has ever been there. But they live in my district. Those are city employees. I

need to understand what they do, too. So I think, I hope that as I said earlier, I will hold your people in my heart. I think that I tried to do that. And I think that when the notes are written in that book up in the sky, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Well done." That's all I care about.

R

Robert Sheppard 40:20

Ms. Houston, I have two more questions. I'll say the last one. This first one though, how do you hope to create a more inclusive Texas?

O

Ora Houston 40:36

Well I turned over that work to the One Human Race group, because I was doing other stuff. We started off calling it *Race: The Power of an Illusion*. I don't know if you remember when *The Help* came out, but *The Help* was a movie, August 2011, somewhere around in there. And my White friends didn't know how to talk about it, and it wasn't funny, and there was some issues that people need to understand about domestic violence and all kinds of stuff. We decided to do a workshop around [the film], and from out of that, *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, [a PBS series], came out. I don't try to create a more inclusive Texas. I try to create a more inclusive group of, again, White people that understand that they're going to have to change some things within their culture for us to see many changes. Because I've lived through - I was born in 1944, and I've seen us go through this revolving door with killings and lynchings, and you kind of go, "What is it they don't get?" And so I think they're going to have to work on themselves to be more inclusive.

O

Ora Houston 42:08

I think that we have got to learn how to not demand. And I know that's hard for us as members of the diaspora, because people have taken so much from us. I think about our indigenous brothers and sisters, and I go, "Wow, how can you not see what you have done to Native people? This was not your land, Europeans. This was the land you took from people and yet murdered." So anyway, that's that. It's just got to be a way to help people understand that inclusivity means all people. Equity means all people. It doesn't mean the people you like, the only people who live in your neighborhood, the people you go to the top of the tall buildings and have drinks with. No, they're the other people. It's people who run the elevators for you. And I speak to everybody that I see. When I get on the elevator, there's somebody running them. Some places still have them, believe it or not. And I say, "Good morning, how you doing today?"

O

Ora Houston 43:23

People are not invisible. And if you want people to be inclusive, you've got to see them. You've got to recognize their humanity, even if it's a smile. And you can't be either/or. I'm not going to be, "All cops are bad. Oh, these are good," because I know that's not true. I know there's some excellent police officers out there. I know there's some excellent Republicans somewhere. I just believe that there are, and if I meet them, I have to meet them without making some

assumptions that they're not good people. I need to be able to tell them my truth, and I need to be able to listen to their truths. And especially when we come to some of the issues that we're dealing with now. Texas is already inclusive. But we're about together a whole lot more Iranians than then I didn't know we had a few of. But every time I go down Congress Avenue, and they're out protesting, I blow my horn in support, because I cannot believe that a human being would do that to a group of people who have done nothing to him.

○ Ora Houston 44:37

Inclusivity is in the mind of the beholder. I think we work on it all the time, because we feel the effects of not being included. But the people who need to be working on it are the people who are included in their own little sphere of power dynamics and control. And somehow, they don't understand inclusiveness, and so they want it their way, and that's the only way they can have it. But being inclusive means to listen to all kinds of ways and saying, "What can we agree on in the middle? What is it that we can agree on in the middle?" And we're not at that point as a country. So I don't know how Texas is going to be that. We're not that way in Austin. We've got people who - democratic socialist, well, I don't even know what that is. And nobody's explained it, but they make a lot of demands on the system that impact my life. And they don't ask me whether I want to be part of that, and I'm going, "Well, explain to me, why are we going to do this without a plan?" We don't have a plan to deal with homelessness, and yet we're going to make these arbitrary rules. So I would like to think that we're going to have an inclusive Texas. In fact, we have one by the number of people who live here and are coming to Texas. But they're coming from places where some of the history of what's happened in this state - they don't know about Juneteenth and Galveston. They don't have a clue. They don't care. Their neighborhood is tall, not wide, and so as long as Austin keeps going this way, it's going to become more and more fractured. And so I don't know that inclusivity is something that I'm gonna put all that energy in. I will try to work with the people that I'm engaged in, and that's all I can do.

○ Ora Houston 46:43

I'll say this one thing. I was at one of my first meetings. I'm on the Board of Trustees of a seminary in town. I won't call their name. I was at a meeting, and they were gonna give so much money. Good, good, good people, good people, but they were gonna give some money to BIPOC, B-I-P-O-C, and I sat there for a few minutes, and I thought, "Well, I'll be damned. They've reduced me to an acronym." And I went berserk. My daughter happened to be here. When I finally put my mute back on, she said, "What happened Mother?" I said, "They were giving a report, and they were talking about BIPOC this," and I said, "What does that mean?" And they told me. I said, "You will not reduce me to an acronym. You will say, 'indigenous, Black, people of color,' but I will never be an acronym." How do you just not understand that? I mean, that's one of those things that you go, "Who came up with that acronym thing?" I know some young person did, and I'm gonna let him have it. But I'm not gonna be an acronym. I'm not. You're gonna either call me Black or American of African descent, but you're not gonna call me BIPOC. I'm not doing it. So we got that changed, I think. They haven't said it in front of me, and I haven't seen it in writing. But we worked on that for a while. And nobody else knew. Nobody else knew. I said, "You have to say what people are, because they're people. They're humans." And so it's been an interesting journey. There are two seminaries that I participate in in this town and both of them [laughs] might have to cut that part out. But inclusive, Texas is inclusive

as the state, it's not until we're very intentional about working on people, and how we identify with people and see people and don't marginalize people right off the bat. I don't see that's happening in my lifetime.

R

Rabert Sheppard 49:13

Ms. Houston, this interview has been filled from the beginning 'til now with wisdom. So I have the question, and I will ask it, but you've given us so much here, so much complexity, depth, nuance. It has just been wonderful. But I need to ask, this is my final question. The people who are listening to this interview, what wisdom would you offer them?

O

Ora Houston 49:53

In the times that we are living in, I would offer people an opportunity to take some breaths, to breathe deeply several times during the day, because we are living in a world, in a city, in a country, in a state that makes our blood pressure rise just by listening to what some of the politicians are saying about people. And I want you to take a breath, let it go, and then think about, what can you do? What can you do to make a difference in this world? My ministry is always going to be, where can I say something, do something, be something that will reflect that I know that I am a child of the living God. And so I have to breathe deeply all the time. I have to catch my breath, because I feel my heart racing. And I know during COVID, we had a lot of problems with COVID that we were not understanding. But I use the first year of COVID, and now still do, to just breathe and get in touch with who I am and who God wants me to be in the midst of the confusion and the angst that people are experiencing. And so breathe, ask, where do you want me to minister? And then let some of that stuff go. Because no one person can do all of this.

O

Ora Houston 51:54

And I try not to bother God all the time, because I know that God is busy over in the Ukraine and Russia. But I have some prayers for them, too. But they're not quite - for Ukraine, I got the right kind of prayers, but for Russia, I'm going, "God, you need to look down on what's going on there and see if you can talk to them a little stronger, because they're not listening." But just because somebody is Muslim or Sikh or Baptist or whatever denominational, however you feel about the divine, I don't really care. As long as you recognize that there's something out there that is outside, bigger than you, and who is trying to look over this world and the people, and especially the poor people. The poor people in Haiti and Nicaragua and the Ukraine and Poland now, folks in Mexico. I said Haiti. But there's so much need, and how can you share some of what you've got? I write checks all the time, in that I can't give a lot, and I'm sure there are people who can give a lot more than I do. But I have to give back, because I have been given so much. I've got to give it back. I don't know if that helps anybody, but that helps me.

R

Rabert Sheppard 53:24

Thank you, Ms. Houston, for taking part in this project. I really appreciate it for sharing all that you have with me and with the people who are listening. That was wonderful. We really appreciate it.

O Ora Houston 53:43

Well, thank you so much for asking me, and y'all make my face not look so red. That's one of the things my dad used to say, "You are not pretty when you cry." But you can't talk about this without tearing up. I do all the time. So there you go.

R Rabert Sheppard 54:02

It was wonderful. I'm gonna stop the recording. Thank you, Ms. Houston.

O Ora Houston 54:07

Thank you, have a great day.