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# Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II

In this issue of *Exhibition*, editor Ellen Snyder-Grenier talks with pastor and activist William J. Barber, II to learn how his work toward civil, social, and economic justice might inform how museum exhibitions can address today's pressing national and global issues.

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**Q Ellen** Your work has been described as a new brand of civil rights activism. *For those who may not yet know of you, can you tell us a bit about your approach to social justice? What drives you?*

**A Rev. Barber** I am, first and foremost, a preacher. Like Jesus, the brown-skinned Palestinian Jew I follow, I'm driven by the vision of the ancient prophet who said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...." I stand in a long line of moral witnesses who have tried to tell the truth and live it. My father taught me that there is no way to love God without working for justice.

"Moral fusion organizing" is what we call the grassroots, coalition building that gave rise to Moral Mondays in North Carolina. We believe this kind of movement-building has the capacity to revive the heart of democracy in America. It is based on two fundamental convictions: first, that only a moral movement can overcome the left/right divisions that paralyze political life in America. Some things aren't left versus right. They're just right versus wrong.

So we need a moral movement. But we also have to get beyond single-issue organizing to see that the same forces allied against poor people are working against black and brown people, LGBTQ people, the environment, education, and healthcare. Our movement has said, "If they're cynical enough to stick together, we ought to be smart enough to come together."

That's moral fusion organizing. It's what brought white and black people together in a moral movement for abolition and women's suffrage. It's what brought civil rights and labor together in the "civil rights"



The **Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II** is Pastor, Greenleaf Christian Church, Disciples of Christ in Goldsboro, North Carolina; President and Senior Lecturer at Repairers of the Breach; and architect of the Forward Together Moral Movement. He has served as president of the North Carolina NAACP - the largest state conference in the South - since 2006, and sits on the National NAACP board of directors. A highly sought-after speaker, he has keynoted hundreds of national and state conferences, including the 2016 Democratic National Convention, and is regularly featured in national media outlets. His two most recent books are *Forward Together: A Moral Message for the Nation* and *The Third Reconstruction: How a Moral Movement is Overcoming the Politics of Division and Fear*.

movement. Moral fusion organizing is the only thing that has ever been able to fundamentally reconstruct America. And it is increasingly clear that the survival of this republic depends on a Third Reconstruction. This is why we've committed to build a new Poor People's Campaign and Call for a National Moral Revival.

**Q Ellen** As president of the North Carolina NAACP, writes historian Tim Tyson in *The Crisis*, you built "a statewide interracial fusion political coalition that has not been seriously attempted since 1900." This ties into your belief in the power of "we" - what you call "the most important word in the social justice vocabulary." *What is the key to crossing divides and connecting people of all backgrounds around pressing issues and common goals? How do we get to "we" - ?*

**A Rev. Barber** First we have to recognize that the principle strategy of the forces working against democracy in America is divide-and-conquer. Slavery was sustained for generations by the myth among poor white people that however bad off they were, they were better than a slave. The same strategy is at work in contemporary nativism, which tries to pit poor working people against immigrants, Muslims, and LGBTQ neighbors.

Richard Nixon's campaign strategists studied George Wallace. They said, "If we can harness that fear without appearing to be racist, we can control the South." That's called the Southern Strategy. And it worked. Long before Donald Trump made it to the White House, Southern politicians locked up and defined national politics by pitting white evangelicals against the black and brown people with whom they share so much in common.

Once people see through this strategy that has been used against them, moral fusion organizing invites them into a new community. This is important. Because we can't measure the success of our movement by elections alone. A Third Reconstruction has already begun in this country wherever black, white and brown, rich and poor, gay and straight are coming together. At every Moral Monday, I tell people to look

around and see who's with us. When we come together, we've already won.

But we have to stay together - to learn new practices for being together and holding one another up. And this takes time. Taking action together - going to jail together to stand up for what we believe in together - forms new bonds. A moral movement knows that we will be met with resistance, but that the resistance is our confirmation. "Only a dying mule kicks the hardest," they used to say in South Africa. "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you... and then you win," Gandhi said. A moral movement has to take the long view.

**Q Ellen** In your book *Forward Together*, you write that words should not be quarantined in the sanctuary, but rather, should be used to "move the masses to engage in deeply moral actions." You yourself are a passionate and powerful speaker and writer. *What is the key to writing the right words in the right way - a way that will ensure they will resonate and have impact?*

**A Rev. Barber** *Forward Together* is a collection of the sermons I preached on the statehouse lawn in 2013, when "Moral Mondays" were born out of 13 consecutive weeks of protests and mass rallies against the extremists' takeover of state government in North Carolina. Our opposition called us "Moron Mondays" when we started. Many so-called moderates said our language was extreme. But we knew it was powerful because it brought people together and compelled them to take direct action, week after week.

My writing is not original. It is rooted in the prophetic texts of ancient Israel and the preaching tradition of formerly enslaved African Americans who entered America's public life after the Civil War, during Reconstruction. For many Americans, Martin Luther King, Jr., is the only preacher they've ever heard from that tradition - and many have never heard the most radical and prophetic things he said. But the power of that tradition is that it speaks out of the experience of America's most basic contradiction - that we



declared our independence in the name of liberty while accepting and justifying chattel slavery. It is the tradition summed up by the great poet, Langston Hughes, who wrote, “America never was America to me / and yet I swear this oath – / America will be!” Whenever I write – whenever I preach – I submit to that tradition and let it speak through me.

**Q Ellen** This issue looks at the exhibition as forum/activist/advocate for the issues of our times – issues that range from racism to climate change to LGBTQ rights. *In our age of conflict and uncertainty, what advice do you have for us on how exhibitions – the public face of museums – can speak to today’s most pressing issues?*

**A Rev. Barber** Museums, like preachers, are storytellers. You have to tell the truth. But the truth is more than facts – more than just “what happened.” We all need some framework to help us make sense of what happened – why it matters and how.

I believe the future of America depends on a Third Reconstruction. Which means we need a popular understanding of what Reconstruction was about after the Civil War – how it was resisted by the Klan and why popular history for over a century – North and South – called the deconstruction movement that led to Jim Crow “Redemption.” We need to understand that the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, and War on Poverty were not simply a “civil rights movement,” to address the concerns of aggrieved minorities. They were fragmentary achievements of a Second Reconstruction that aimed to address the fundamental injustice at the heart of America’s story: we stole this land from Native Americans and built a nation with the stolen labor of enslaved Africans.

We cannot understand contemporary “issues” apart from this history. So whatever the subject of your exhibition, I’d encourage you to ask, how can we tell the truth in a way that helps reconstruct America and revive the heart of this democracy? ■

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