



**We are
Called**

TO HEAL. TO UNITE. TO JUSTICE.

Team Reflections

No. 11 Cultural Competency & Humility

Cultural competency is a vital aspect of a health equity strategy. Disparities exist in part because we don't always know and understand one another very well. In our diverse and pluralistic society, there is much to learn. Real deep learning entails a willing spirit, or what could be called cultural humility, which views those who are different from us as teachers. They are the experts who can teach us what they need, what's important to them and what human flourishing looks like for them.

Sister Thea Bowman was a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration with unparalleled charisma. She drew inspiration from Jesus and her African American roots. [11.1] Central to that identity is the gift of music and song. In 1989 she gave an inspiring lesson of sorts to a gathering of U.S. Catholic Bishops on spirituality and her identity as a Black Catholic in the church. She turned her speech to the bishops into a piece for a Black Catholic hymnal:

To the Americas, African men and women brought sacred songs and chants that reminded them of their homelands and that sustained them in separation and in captivity, songs to respond to all life situations, and the ability to create new songs to answer new needs.

African Americans in sacred song preserved the memory of African religious rites and symbols, of a holistic African spirituality, of rhythms and tones and harmonics that communicated their deepest feelings across barriers of region and language.

African Americans in fields and quarters, at work, in secret meetings, in slave festivals, in churches, camp meets and revivals, wherever they met or congregated, consoled and strengthened themselves and one another with sacred song — moans, chants, shouts, psalms, hymns and jubilees, first African songs, then African American songs. In the crucible of separation and suffering, African American sacred song was formed. ...

Black sacred song celebrates our God, [God's] goodness, [God's] promise, our faith and hope, our journey toward the promise. Black sacred song carries melodies and tonalities, rhythms and harmonies; metaphors,

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symbols and stories of faith that speak to our hearts; words, phrases and images that touch and move us. ...

Black sacred song has been at once a source and an expression of Black faith, spirituality and devotion. By song, our people have called the Spirit into our hearts, homes, churches and communities. [11.2]

At the end of her speech to the U.S. Bishops, Sister Thea had them standing and singing "We Shall Overcome!" The next time you hear a black patient's family and loved ones singing or chanting to mourn, celebrate or comfort, know that it comes from a deep spiritual place. Perhaps consider joining them knowing that together, we shall overcome, someday.

Consider

- Have you ever heard black families sing with a loved one in the hospital? Do you recall your reaction and feelings? Can you imagine what you might think if you heard music or rhythmic clapping and sound coming from a hospital room?
- Are there other examples when you have seen how music helped bring solace and healing to people of diverse cultures?

Let us pray together,

*No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since Love is lord of heav'n and earth,
how can I keep from singing?*

Robert Lowery, Hymn, "How Can I Keep from Singing"

[11.1] Thea Bowman, "The Gift of African American Sacred Song" in *Lead Me, Guide Me: The African American Catholic Hymnal* (G.I.A. Publications: 1987).