

## Movie discussion resource     **My Name is Pauli Murray (2021)**

*Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.*

**Genre:** documentary (available on Amazon Prime streaming)

**Rating:** M (mature themes, violence, drug use, coarse language)

**Length:** 91 mins

**Director:** Betsy West and Julie Cohen

**Country of origin:** USA



### **Synopsis:**

*Note: given the non-binary status, the term 'them' and 'their' may be used in lieu of gender specific pronouns.*

"You say, 'I can't' – I'll show you I can, even if I die trying" (Pauli Murray 1910-1985).

Murray was one of the most influential figures in 20th century history in the U.S. - transgender, non-conforming, non-binary, gay/queer, pioneering feminist black lawyer (she preferred 'Negro'), fearless activist and civil rights trailblazer, writer and poet, who influenced both Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Murray understood what it was to exist beyond previously accepted categories and cultural norms. Murray was an early architect of the idea that the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment should guarantee not just racial but gender equality. Murray challenged the constitutionality of segregation. Murray's personal path and tireless advocacy foreshadowed some of the most politically consequential issues of our time, shaping landmark litigation - and consciousness - around race and gender equity.

Murray became the first African American student to receive a doctorate from Yale Law School and the first African-American woman to be ordained as an Episcopal priest in 1977. Murray emphasized the particularity of African American women's experiences, while proclaiming a universal message of salvation.

Told largely in their own words, *My Name is Pauli Murray* is a candid recounting of the segregated south. It includes writings as well as newly discovered photographs, video footage and audio interviews, chronicling how Murray spent their life grappling with gender norms and identifying as non-binary. It premiered at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival. "It's not often we're introduced to a true luminary, and Pauli Murray was just that. Murray questioned systems of oppression and conformity throughout the mid-twentieth century, with a radical vision consistently ahead of the times. Pauli Murray's trailblazing legal foresight influenced landmark civil rights decisions and gender equality legislation that transformed our world."

### **General questions for discussion**

*Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie:*

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the documentary?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ What resonated with your own experience?
- ❖ Who have been significant influencers for you, and in what way?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

### **The bus**

"The bus was the quintessence of the segregation evil. The intimacy of the bus interior permitted the public humiliation of the black people to be carried out in the presence of the privileged white spectators who witnessed our shame in silence or indifference".

Pauli preceded Rosa Parks and others by 15 years in the civil rights movement - but most people don't know her name. Pauli Murray was one of the most remarkable and consequential figures in American 20th century history" (New York Times). How can one person be so pivotal and yet their name is not one you have ever learned? Discuss.

In what ways do 'privileged white spectators' continue to look on in silence or indifference at the concerns of others in our time and place - refugees, impact of the environmental crisis in the Pacific etc. Discuss.

### **Change is sure to come**

For the first two years of law school at Howard University, Murray was the only woman, though at first she was not acknowledged in class and for some time she wasn't able to speak. Nevertheless Murray topped the honours list for her academic work, and in 1944 graduated first in her class. While at Howard, Murray coined the term 'Jane Crow' to refer to discrimination based not only on race, as was

the case with 'Jim Crow' racial segregation laws, but also on gender. The law students at Howard University had been discussing how best to bring an end to Jim Crow. Lawyers had been chipping away at segregation by questioning the "equal" part of the "separate but equal" doctrine. Fed up with the limited and incremental results, Pauli Murray proposed a radical alternative: why not challenge the "separate" part instead? Her idea seemed both impractical and reckless to her peers. They told her that any challenge to Plessy would result in the Supreme Court affirming it instead. Undeterred, Murray told them they were wrong. Then, with the whole class as her witness, she made a bet with her professor, a man named Spottswood Robinson: ten bucks said Plessy would be overturned within 25 years. Murray was right. Plessy was overturned in a decade - and, when it was, Robinson owed her a lot more than \$10. In her final law-school paper, Murray had formalized the idea she'd hatched in class that day, arguing that segregation violated the 13th and 14th Amendments of the U.S. Constitution. When Robinson joined with others to try to end Jim Crow, he remembered Murray's paper, fished it out of his files, and presented it to his colleagues - the team that, in 1954, successfully argued *Brown v. Board of Education*. => What kind of legislative change has happened in your lifetime, despite the obstacles. Discuss.

### **Hope**

It is challenging maintaining hope when you are engaged in issues, seeking to bring about change. (The environmental crisis is one for our present day). Pauli Murray says, 'Hope is a crushed stalk between clenched fingers. Hope is a song in a weary throat'. In addition to dogged determination and stubbornness, what sustained and motivated Pauli Murray? Discuss.

### **Influences of the Influencers**

Murray was orphaned early in life, and lived with her Aunt Pauline at the home of her maternal grandparents, Cornelia and Robert Fitzgerald. Cornelia was born in bondage; her mother was a part-Cherokee slave named Harriet, her father the owner's son and Harriet's frequent rapist. Robert, by contrast, was raised in Pennsylvania, attended anti-slavery meetings with Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, and fought for the Union in the Civil War. Together, they formed part of a large and close-knit family whose members ranged from Episcopalians to Quakers, impoverished to wealthy, fair-skinned and blue-eyed to dark-skinned and curly-haired. When they all got together, Murray wrote, it looked "like a United Nations in miniature."

=> What are the influencers/influences in your own life that shape the way you view the world?

### **We shall endure**

"To the oppressors now you are strong and we are but grapes aching with ripeness. Crush us. Squeeze from us all the brave life contained in these full skins. But ours is a subtle strength, potent with centuries of yearning. We shall endure to steal your sense in that lonely twilight of your winter's grief".

This thought resonates with much of the biblical narrative - with the oppressed Hebrew people, the people in exile, the people under Roman occupation. 'We shall endure....' Discuss.

### **Non-violence/direct action**

Gandhi famously remarked, "It may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world." Inspired by Gandhian principles of nonviolence and the strategy of civil disobedience, Murray was in the vanguard of black activists to use nonviolent direct action, challenging segregation and actively working alongside civil rights leaders such as King and Rosa Parks.

The January 6th Capitol insurrection in Washington and other violent exercises of power colluding with lies, mischief and manic mayhem, stand in contrast to the principles of non-violent direct action. Is violence so endemic now that it is part of the fabric of society, or is non-violence (that Jesus preaches) the only hope for transformative change? Discuss.

### **Pauli the Priest**

Pauli Murray - gay/queer; a black bisexual woman - was pioneering in many ways. And then she became an Episcopal priest. Sometimes God chooses the 'least likely' to offer significant leadership. Discuss examples from the biblical witness and your own experience.