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Finding the courage to be blatantly believer-ish

by Mariam Williams

At the Intersection

At the Academy Awards on March 2, I heard something surprising: "Lord God, I praise you."

Darlene Love said these words as she joined the director and producers of "20 Feet from Stardom" to accept the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature Film. Then Love, one of the singers who stars as herself in the documentary, broke into an a cappella version of "His Eye Is on the Sparrow."

The moment is in a YouTube video of the most memorable speeches of the night. It is rare that Oscar recipients burst into song -- the awards go to technicians and performers who aren't necessarily singers, after all -- but Love's invocation intrigued me more. Hearing it made me a little confused about which awards show I was watching. God gets a lot of credit at the Grammy Awards, even if it seems hypocritical or disingenuous (e.g., saying, "I thank God for helping me write this song full of curse words and misogynistic rhetoric), but I can't remember ever hearing anything as blatantly believer-ish as, "Lord God, I praise you" at the Oscars. People thank the academy, the people who funded their project, their colleagues on the set, parents, life partners and sometimes a teacher who made a difference. But God? No, the Oscars aren't his night to shine.

I've had passing thoughts about why this is, and they all come down to comfort and culture. The Grammys, with its awards for gospel music and its abundance of black artists who start their singing careers in church, presents a safe place to go into Christian-speak. At the Oscars, God is out of place among an audience full of celebrities who either are known to practice Scientology or who aren't known to practice anything at all.

At the Academy Awards, Darlene Love didn't care about what religious beliefs might be represented in the audience. I know she's a singer, and she probably just wanted to sing, but she started her acceptance speech with giving God the credit, and she sang a gospel song. I'm sure no one was hiding tomatoes in

their couture dresses to throw at performers they disliked, but still, it takes guts to do that in front of an audience that might not share your beliefs.

When I'm in that situation, I code switch. "Code-switching" refers to mixing languages and speech patterns in conversation as the speaker deems appropriate given his or her surroundings. I've all but abandoned this practice in its traditional sense in my work vs. home worlds; the way I speak is probably about 90 percent consistent between both places. I know I'm more relaxed with my speech and that I speak with a different cadence when I'm with only my mom, the person I'm most comfortable with. But alterations in my use of slang or jargon that only certain groups would understand happens most often when I go between church and very liberal work spaces.

My full-time job is in social justice and in academia. Although I'm well aware I'm not the only Christian in the social justice community in Louisville, Ky., I almost never see people from my church attending the talks or rallies I attend. I also know that plenty of people in attendance have experienced discrimination from Christians. And in academia, I rarely meet scholars who have been able to reconcile their accumulated knowledge with the myths they were taught as children.

In these settings, I don't go into Christian-speak. I don't call victories "blessings" or attribute challenges to tests of faith. Everything isn't in God's plan, and he doesn't work things out. And when other people are open about their atheism, agnosticism or more general secularism, I don't try to change their minds.

I've wondered if my quiet comes off as shame for being Christian or if people can tell I'm Christian at all without knowing my writing. Not being as blatantly believer-ish as Darlene Love was at the Oscars protects me against ridicule and allegations of hypocrisy or pretense, and it keeps the peace by preventing discussion of religion, always an explosive topic. But I shouldn't base sharing my beliefs on what others may think.

For the next several weeks, people will notice Christians not eating meat or sugar. They'll stop smoking and watching reality television shows, or they'll temporarily close all their social media accounts as part of Lenten fasts. Christians and non-Christians alike will notice the changes, and even if they've never given any indication of their faith before, the fasting Christians suddenly will be exhibiting blatantly believer-ish behavior. They'll open themselves up to ridicule, hostility and allegations of hypocrisy.

Since I spent the first several weeks of the year in a fast, I won't be giving up anything for Lent. Instead, I'll be checking my behavior for inconsistencies and looking for opportunities to be blatantly believer-ish not just in Christian-speak but in bold acts of faith, kindness and justice.

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