

Don't put down the camera

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I recently spoke on peace. I made a small contribution to one of [Barna's Frames books](#) and went to a launch event a couple of days ago. (Here's a [link](#). It's all pretty interesting, but the peace segment starts at about 1:30:00). According to their research, Americans are concerned about domestic violence, bullying, gang violence, and wars. So I was talking about domestic and gang violence when someone tweeted:

Has carol ever lived in a city where she has been subjected to violence or ever been in a gang? How does she "know" so much?

The "know" in quotes is always difficult, mainly because people often question my legitimacy. I'm a five-foot tall white woman, so why should I be talking about community violence, educational inequities, and poverty? Why would the world need another know-it-all "ally," blabbering about stuff she doesn't know at all?

To answer the question, of course, I've lived in urban areas. I have been subjected to violence inside and outside of my home. I have been sexually assaulted. No, I have not been in a gang. Yes, I have worked with gang members, homeless people, sex workers, pedophiles, inmates and domestic violence victims. I've worked within rural and urban poverty.

Many years ago, [Paul Fussell](#) wrote about class and talked about the particular nature of the clergy to be able to transcend class. I don't think it's always true. We know the difference between a male Episcopal priest in a prestigious downtown church and a Charismatic man preaching in a storefront. Many of us have been with clergy who have been so set in their class structure that they can't even afford to spend an ounce of respect on a waitress's dignity.

Yet it has been true for a lot of us. We can be slippery, moving in and out of different segments of our society with relative ease. I've had tea with people in poverty and presidents in the same afternoon.

But I have to admit, my long defense also comes with a pang of guilt and another revelation of my ever-present insecurities. I've never started some amazing non-profit (something I thought I was called to before I began at Western Presbyterian). I often hear my activist friends saying, "Shut up and *do something*." And I always feel like I'm not doing enough. I'm not going deep enough. I'm not... enough.

This particular question, and the overall question about if I've earned the right to talk about social justice issues, reminded me of a story [I read](#) a couple of weeks ago. It was about a journalist who was taking pictures at a Civil Rights march. Children were being harassed, so the man put down his camera and helped the kids.

But Martin Luther King, Jr. was frustrated by the photographer's decision. He argued that many people could have helped the children, but there was only one person with the camera, and a photo could have had a much larger impact. Recording the event could have changed everything. A well-crafted picture could have ended up on the front page of every newspaper and in the annals of history.

The story seared me, and I thought, *maybe I'm supposed to be the guy with the camera*. I'm not a journalist or a photographer. I can't pretend any sort of detachment to my subject matter. I'm a little white woman, but somehow, I've still been able to listen, record events and bring attention.

As a pastor, I often preach about something and members of the congregation will say, "You can't talk about this, get us all worked up, and then not *do* anything about it!"

But as church leaders, sometimes that's all we can do. We have to feebly hand it over. We have our ears, hearts, and words. We pray that God will use them. But we also have limitations--time, energy, and ability. And even though we feel helpless, like we can never do enough, sometimes being the person who takes the picture or tells the story is our most important job.