

Readings for January 27, 2008

We have all looked at the deeds of others and said, "I could never do that." That is not the point. Heroism is not necessarily about great dramatic deeds of daring. We are not called to imitate each other's actions, nor to feel disempowered by our failure to be what we are not. We are called to be faithful, to follow our own inner leadings, in our own time, using the particular and special gifts that are unique to each one of us...

--Helen Steven, 2005

For the Sake of Strangers

No matter what the grief, its weight,
we are obliged to carry it.
We rise and gather momentum, the dull strength
that pushes us through crowds.
And then the young boy gives me directions
so avidly. A woman holds the glass door open,
Waits patiently for my empty body to pass through.
All day it continues, each kindness
reaching toward another- a stranger
singing to no one as I pass on the path, trees
offering their blossoms, a retarded child
who lifts his almond eyes and smiles.
Somehow they always find me, seem even
to be waiting, determined to keep me
from myself, from the thing that calls to me
as it must have once called to them-
this temptation to step off the edge
and fall weightless away from the world.

Dorianne Laux

I am comforted by words sent by a friend, based on the Talmud: “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

--Charlie Clements, 2003

This Work Will Break Your Heart

Unity Church

January 27, 2008

His unit came ashore at Anzio. They fought their way up the spine of Italy, taking tortured hill towns one by one. Within a few weeks every member of his platoon was dead. He was sent home wounded. The ship put in at Mobile. He headed home to Indiana on the train. Somewhere along the way the train stopped long enough for him to stretch his legs. On crutches and still in considerable pain he picked his way across the platform and over to the station. His throat was dry. He bent down to drink from the fountain and woke up in a pool of blood on the floor. The men who beat him didn't know or didn't care about the Silver Star pinned to his chest. They only saw a black man drinking from a fountain plainly labeled "for white's only."

The next night at home in Fort Wayne he told his mother that he wasn't sure he could live in America anymore. She told him about a new minister who had just come to town, a white man who, on the day he arrived, before he and his family had even begun to move in, had been seen downtown joining the NAACP. "He's a Unitarian, whatever that is," she said. "Maybe you should talk to him." He went over to see him the next day. They talked about the war. They talked about racism. They talked about his future and the future of the country. That minister arranged a college interview and then a scholarship. And though when he came home from college to visit he still sang tenor in the AME church of his childhood, that young black veteran began to going to church twice every Sunday, once for the music and again for a new transforming message.

Why do people change? Why do people actually change their lives? Everyone suffers but only the few and the brave choose consciously to change their lives. “Most men (and women) wrote Thoreau, “live lives of quiet desperation.” We put up with it. It’s just the way things are. We sigh and say “the more things change the more they stay the same.” We can easily understand that truly desperate situations can force us to change. But as a rule, we’d rather not. As the 20th century American poet, Paul Simon wrote: *“We work our jobs, collect our pay, believe we’re gliding down the highway when in fact we’re slip sliding away.”*

My friend Charles had no choice. He came back from the war burdened by his grief, decorated for his bravery in battle, only to find that the freedom his best friends had died for was still withheld from him at home.

But what of those of us who live in privilege and peace? Why-ever would we want to change our lives? We say we long for transformation. We say that’s what the church is for. But for the most part we stand back from moments and from movements, which we know will change us. I don’t suggest we should change just for the sake of change. But I have to believe that you and I can choose to change our lives not out of desperation but because we remember how it feels to live in harmony and hope. Sometimes memories of a better time or glimpses of a better way inspire us.

I am here to tell you I have lived in that fair land we love to sing about. As a child I lived in that Beloved Community. Since then I have been bound to serve a love that will not let me go. I’ve tried to escape it. I’ve tried to ignore it. God knows I could keep myself busy enough running around trying to address your many needs. I’ve felt the “temptation to step off the edge and fall weightless away from the world.” But here I am with you, still in the struggle,

still in the world, keeping cynicism and self-doubt at bay, hoping against hope to be counted still among the faithful.

Effective, transformational ministry takes place at the intersection of spiritual development and social progress. Some would have us choose one above the other. But the fact is they are utterly interdependent. Practice, prayer and praise in time make us increasingly aware of other people's lives. We come to feel what they feel. In Alice Walker's The Color Purple Shug testifies to her spiritual awakening. Shug says:

"My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: the feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed."

That sense of interconnectedness, that feeling of being a part of everything, call it merger, call it unity or spiritual reunion, is spoken of in every authentic scripture. It is, in fact the heart of every great tradition. Shug is describing the experience of the Holy. Spiritual heartbreak doesn't always begin with prayer and practice. Sometimes it works the other way as well. Some of us start out as activists. Some families expect it of their children; some learn it in their churches, in scouts or in school. I grew up marching at my mother's side. Our children went with us to marches and rallies for civil rights, for gay liberation and for peace. Compassion is awakened when people get out there and march and sing and organize. Some choose life work that helps them feel that they're making a difference by putting their values to work in the world. Any way love leads you, love will break your heart. Any way love leads you will wake you up and help you know your neighbor's pain. Then what?

Just as Shug stepped away from the old white man god we have rejected the exclusive claim of Christianity. God plays no favorites. Salvation is for everyone. This openness has implications. In Leaves of Grass, a book conceived of as a new, New Testament for a free America, Walt Whitman wrote:

*This is the meal equally set, this the meat for natural hunger,
It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous,
I make appointments with all.
I will not have a single person slighted or left away,
The kept woman, sponger, thief are hereby invited,
The heavy-lipped slave is invited, the venerealee in invited
There shall be no difference between them and the rest.*

*This is the press of a bashful hand, this the float and odor of hair,
This the touch of my lips to yours, this the murmur of yearning,
This the far off depth and height reflecting my own face,
This the thoughtful merge of myself and the outlet again.*

*Do you guess I have some intricate purpose?
Well, I have, for the Fourth-month showers have, and the mica on
the side of a rock has.*

*Do you take it I would astonish?
Does the daylight astonish? Does the early redstart
twittering through the woods?*

*Do I astonish more than they?
This hour I tell things in confidence,
I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you.*

My friends, I tell you in confidence that much as I would like to turn away, much as I would like to let you and myself off the hook, I'm captured by a love that will not let me go.

In the wake of the war, just a few years after that troop ship came into the Port of Mobile, the Women's Alliance at the First Unitarian Church in Chicago, took out an ad in the Daily News saying that they loved their church, that they were sick of prejudice and segregation, and that they would welcome people of all races to their congregation. How charming! How utterly naïve! How unlikely to succeed! But succeed it did.

Persons of color showed up at the church. Some had never known church life. Others had drifted from or been rejected by the churches of their childhoods. They came out of curiosity. They came because they had been invited. They stayed because the congregation was hospitable and because its leaders knew, even back then, that they had at least as much to learn from their new members, as they had to teach them. They also refrained from having their visitors gather in the parlor to talk about their experience of visiting the church. Instead those same women, the ones who had taken out the ad, invited their guests to dinner in their homes.

Ten years later a wonderful children's choir was established at the church. It was fully integrated across lines of race and class. It was equally committed to musical excellence and to social progress. I sang in that choir from the time I was seven years old until my voice changed. We sang at church and with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. We sang with the Met and with the Lyric Opera. We sang at rallies and at marches. We sang in twenty languages. We sang with discipline, precision, great beauty and radiant joy. We moved through the world as both a literal and a figurative image of the Beloved Community. We were a living symbol, freedom carried high on wings of song,

America's promise realized. And then we came of age and our parent's fears combined with other forces larger than ourselves tore us apart. I've been trying to get back there ever since.

This past week I was interviewed by a woman who has been hired by the Unitarian Universalist Association to tell them why some ministers are particularly committed to working for racial justice. I had been anonymously identified as an "ally," the term of art for white people who are reliably supportive of the anti-racism agenda. "Why are you the way you are? What made the difference for you?" she asked me. I told her about my childhood. I told her about the church and the choir. I told her about finding and losing good friends. I told her about, Dovie and Luther and Polly and Aki, about Joe Brewer and Ivy Beard and Mwalimu Imara, about Mark and Sophie and Marsh and Boona, real people, friends and grown-ups who put up with my discomfort around race, held me accountable to my own best intentions, loved me and told me the truth. There is no ideology, no philosophy, no theory, which will substitute for genuine relationships. Dreams die when they don't turn into promises.

"Why do you do this work when you know it will break your heart?" She asked me. I stopped to think about it. I've stopped to think about it a thousand times before. My voice brought with emotion as I said to her, "it isn't ideology you know. It's all about love. Love takes root and grows stronger in hearts broken open by love." You know the images; a divided heart from which a lotus flower grows, a broken heart in which a tree has taken root. *"I knew that if I cut a tree my arm would bleed."*

So pray with me for that naïve courage that carried the day, in years past. May we still be a place for wounded heroes to come home to, a place where

faith and freedom flourish, a place where broken-hearts can learn compassion and organize their love to give the world the shape of justice.

May it be so and Amen.