

**Reconstruction and Renewal:
For The New President and A Continuing Story**

A sermon by Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia
at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
on January 25, 2009

Readings

Walt Whitman

We are called to this sacred hour by the words of our poets – the bards of our liberty and our history ...

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear;
each one singing his, as it should be, blithe and strong;
—Each singing what belongs to her, and to none else;
The day of what belongs to the day
—At night, the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing, with open mouths, their strong melodious songs.

Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.
Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed--
I, too, am America.

James Weldon Johnson, from O Black and Unknown Bards

O black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?
Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise

Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?

What merely living clod, what captive thing,
Could up toward God through all its darkness grope,
And find within its deadened heart to sing
These songs of sorrow, love and faith, and hope?
How did it catch that subtle undertone,
That note in music heard not with the ears?
How sound the elusive reed so seldom blown,
Which stirs the soul or melts the heart to tears.

Diane Feinstein

On the Steps of the Capitol building this Tuesday, United States Senator Diane Feinstein said: In a world where political strife is too often settled with violence, we come here every four years to bestow the power of the presidency upon our democratically elected leader. Those who doubt the supremacy of the ballot over the bullet can never diminish the power engendered by nonviolent struggles for justice and equality, like the one that made this day possible. No triumph tainted by brutality could ever match the sweet victory of this hour and what it means to those who marched and died to make it a reality. Our work is not yet finished, but future generations will mark this morning as the turning point for real and necessary change in our nation. They will look back and remember that this was the moment when the dream that once echoed across history, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial finally reached the walls of the White House.

Sermon

You've probably guessed that I'm going to talk about the Inauguration of President Barack Obama. This is a time to bind people together beyond party affiliation – it's a time to speak to realities and possibilities. So I'll beg your indulgence for one more short reflection on this moment and our history. During election season it was vital that the nation focus on the strengths of the candidates and not on the issue of race. Election over, we can say that – race is a factor. The election of Barack Obama is a signal moment. As openly gay Episcopal Bishop Eugene Robinson said in the opening prayer of Inauguration week: Bless us with discomfort – at the easy, simplistic "answers" we've preferred to hear from our politicians, instead of the truth, about ourselves and our world, which we need to face if we are going to rise to the challenges of the future. And I respond amen: let us be blessed with creative discomfort so that we, indeed, rise to this signal moment. What does the moment signal? Let me paint a picture.

On June 23rd, 1963 in Detroit, Michigan, the Reverend C.L. Franklin – father of Aretha Franklin -- introduced the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. with these words – let the trumpets sound, let the bells ring, let the drums roll, lay out the red carpet -- here comes America's beloved freedom fighter. Could he have foretold the day that we'd see this week? That day King called the United States an anemic democracy and declared -- that the clock of destiny is ticking and we must act before it is too late. And while it is so very late – the miracle we saw on Pennsylvania Avenue – red carpet, drums rolling, bells ringing, and trumpets sounding still came as a moment of tearful amazement for me. Aretha Franklin blessed the day in her proud hat and classic voice and sang

America. In childhood I believed what they taught me at school -- in the sweet land of liberty. We sang it. I wanted it so badly – a little Jewish girl, sitting on the front porch during the long nights of the long hot summer and wondering why, in the words of another song -- more people weren't crowned with a sense of fairness and openness. I was heartbroken and baffled by racism as a child. And this Tuesday, in a moment that was made of billions of painstaking and profound moments – the first African American man was elected President. And a great healing took place. He is not the descendant of slaves – but of a white woman and a Kenyan man. His campaign was not about race – I was alert to his steady focus on the biggest picture and his resistance to pressures to belong to one side or another – or even to foster that sort of division. With momentary flusters he managed to maintain a thoughtful grace throughout a blistering campaign and there he was – black and beautiful – taking the Oath of Office. I wanted the Inauguration to be about all the American people and all our struggles, fears, needs, blessings and our shared future. It was. At the same time it was a moment when our anemic democracy rose and met the challenge of history. I reveled, but first I felt gripped by a sharp grief and a haunting. What flashed through my mind were the centuries of slavery that made this nation wealthy among nations, and then the 130 plus years of achingly slow progress: generations enduring the yoke of racism. In my mind's eye: I saw the marches, I saw Dr. King's home the night it was fired bombed, I saw bodies that swung from trees, I saw the soldiers whose service and sacrifice went nearly unnoticed in war after war.

The rough road through the valley of bigotry into a land of liberty is twisting. As President Obama said: the challenges we face are real. Just as the Inauguration was a moment of rejoicing and reckoning with the past it was also a reckoning with a journey we are still on. A colleague pointed out this news from Forsyth County, GA, not far from Atlanta. On January 18th, as she was driving to Washington, DC to witness history, Pam Graf a passionate supporter of Barack Obama received a call that her house had been set ablaze. No one was in it at the time. She drove back to meet with county fire investigators...The house was entirely destroyed by the fire. The news article read; “Most shocking ... Spray painted on the fence around the home it said, "Beware [expletive deleted] your black boy will die." "They don't support the president, so they attack me.” said Graf, who displayed Obama signs in her front yard and had gotten a note in her mailbox demanding she take them down. It told her to "watch her back" and contained racial slurs.” I want to thank my colleague – the Reverend Cynthia Landrum who brought this news to my attention.

These things will happen as those who are frightened of change strike back in fear. But we who are grounded in our principles, strengthened by love, know that we can rise above this fear and reach out to those who fear and even those who scare us.

We cannot do not need one person to save us. We need to save our communities, our nation, and our world together. We need greatness of heart. At times we all feel the vulnerability of this new President – too many have been slain in the service of the movement of humanity toward freedom and equality. We feel his vulnerability because we know that we live in a nation where terror has had power. Yet we also live in the nation where the refusal of one woman to move to the back of the bus helped to catalyze an unstoppable freedom movement. The historian of the Civil Rights years – Taylor Branch wrote: “every citizen can work miracles. This story is filled with ordinary citizens becoming heroes because they followed King's example to take democracy seriously

across the barriers that divide us... that, to me, is the great and abiding lesson of America and the King years today..."

When I heard Branch speak, he gave me strength. From his words and his breadth of history I recognized that despite – or because of our challenges we also have the gifts, as a nation, to live out our greatness. It just takes time and courage.

I lived in Atlanta for many years and it was in there that, in spite of years of schooling, I finally *got* that there had been a time when our nation was going make some small amends to the legions of newly freed slaves – and that this Reconstruction was waiting for us to complete it. The feeling was cemented when I returned to visit and went to the Cyclorama in Grant Park. You may know it – it's a large canvass painting 42 feet x 358 feet set on the walls of a circular room the largest canvass oil painting in the world – and it depicts the battle of Atlanta. It was painted in 1885. At the cyclorama I was touched by the intensity of the battle, the terrible suffering and the long held sense of loss by Confederates. In another area was an exhibit of the soldiers of the Civil War. The sight of their youth and vulnerability was also deeply moving. From there I went to the King Center and watched footage of the fire hoses and police dogs. I read the many quotations on nonviolence by King that are engraved throughout the center and I stood by the reflecting pool. Around me for many blocks were the projects – where the descendants of freed slaves lived because they never did get their 40 acres and a mule. The day made my heart heavy in a way that has remained with me and can't remotely compare with the heaviness of heart of the African American people – who lived that history and lived with its consequences.

Reconstruction was a time of promise in our nation. So much blood had been shed – and it's an interesting question – could slavery have ended without civil war? I'm no historian – but I sometimes wonder if the Civil War was not a war of south and north but of the north against its own complacency. There were countless ways that pressure could have been brought to bear upon the south and the slaveholders – that the north failed to use time and again. In any case – when war ended – the country was exhausted and scarred by loss and other wounds of battle. The freed slaves were jubilant, yet also scarred by centuries of loss and so many wounds. But as Frederick Douglass so wisely said "the work does not end with the abolition of slavery, but only begins."

In 1865 the Thirteenth Amendment was approved in January and ratified in December, abolishing slavery in the United States. In March the Congress established the Freedmen's Bureau to provide assistance to freed slaves. On April 9th Lee surrendered to Grant and the Civil War ended. On April 15th Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. President Andrew Johnson took office. Work began in earnest to bind up a nation's wounds. And, as the smoke cleared and the work began so did the Ku Klux Klan, a terrorist group in Tennessee. In 1866 the Civil Rights Act was passed – which declared that all persons born in the United States were now citizens, without regard to race, color, or previous condition. The rise of groups such as the KKK created an atmosphere of terror that undercut the work of this act. In 1866, therefore, the 14th amendment was passed which made all persons born or naturalized in the United States – citizens with equal "privileges and immunities". Again – easier said than done. Meanwhile states were passing laws that ran counter to these federal measures. As freed persons and their supporters met, white terrorists would sometimes attack resulting in at least two massacres. It was wave and counter wave. As the Federal Government attempted to

make right centuries of wrong – grant rights and to provide material support to the people who had made American wealth possible and yet owned next to nothing – some states and numbers of angry white people organized to challenge those rights. Still, African Americans were elected to public office, formed community groups, became public leaders on all levels. In 1870 the Fifteenth Amendment was passed and it gave all male citizens the right to vote. When I learned about Reconstruction – I was shocked to realize that there had been African Americans in the House and Senate mere years after the Civil War. I was shocked to realize that the Civil Rights Bill that even a year ago was being argued over was enacted in March of 1875 – though it was later declared unconstitutional. For a time Congress gave to African Americans the right to equal treatment in public places and transportation. Acts of terror – vandalism, death threats, rape, lynching, and pressure from a small but fearful southern constituency undermined justice for a time. In 1879 the last Federal Troops left South Carolina and the cloud of segregation and Jim Crow descended. The Freedmen’s Bureau was dismantled and Reconstruction was abandoned – as were the needs and dreams of millions of free people of color. By the time that the Cyclorama was painted Reconstruction was moribund. The failure of Reconstruction was a betrayal of the African American community, it was a forsaking of America’s debt, of the bright promise of freedom, it was a signal that the Civil War would need to be fought again and again – in the houses of government, the courts of law, and on the streets of our cities.

And thus it was. I don’t know how people survive such heartbreak and betrayal. That our streets did not run with blood is a miracle. It gives proof to the reality that terrorism can discourage but not stop the movement toward freedom. I think it bears witness to something essential: that African Americans believed in the land bright/with freedom’s holy light. The song that Aretha sang was written by a white Baptist preacher in 1831—the Reverend Samuel Smith – a man who didn’t somehow realize that the hymn’s tune also belonged to God Save the Queen. African Americans, abandoned, abused, and betrayed – still worked with faith that the vision would become reality and, after all, how do you escape this struggle in the only country you have ever known? I’m reminded of Maya Angelou’s great and terrifying poem

The free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wings
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.
But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.
... a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream

his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing
The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Let us praise poets for the turns of phrase that allow us to surround and then pounce upon a reality that is hard to put into words – let us praise poets as we should praise all artists for doing the hard work of expressing immense human realities. Even more – let us praise the spirit of generations of people of color who sang so that they could remember freedom. Last week Jeff Hamrick – our marvelous music director – and I were talking about the coded music of slavery – songs like follow the drinking gourd – which hid and at the same time revealed the directions along the Underground Railroad. From generation to generation, African Americans sent the deep music of freedom from heart to heart. And now this moment: – when a man born in freedom – not of the descendants of slaves – but African and American nonetheless – could embody both the spirit of the free bird and understand the spirit of the caged bird and could see beyond both. In him a new time is made real. Remember the generations of Israelites who had to perish in the desert and Moses himself who never got to see the Promised Land? Likely, you remember the words that Dr. King spoke the night before he was shot: “Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!”

Well -- The Israelites had to wait for a new generation to be born that could taste the fruit of freedom – with its bitterness and burden as well as its sweetness – and in that new generation they could pass into Israel. I'm not so sure that America is the Promised Land. But it's the land we have and the one that we must set right and do right by.

When I think of the election that just transpired and the historic swearing in of our first African American President – I know that nothing that shifts history comes cheap. What did that day signal? In the words of Senator Feinstein: “Those who doubt the supremacy of the ballot over the bullet can never diminish the power engendered by nonviolent struggles for justice and equality like the one that made this day possible.” Amen. I know that for every martyr there have been scores of lesser known people whose steady work has helped to create a more just society. I remember my father calling home from Washington DC as he marched with thousands marching with Dr. King. I remember my pride in him. There are millions of small stories in which people have made a difference and healed history – and perhaps, in the great scope of human history, not so very slowly. The President said: “let us mark this day with remembrance, of who we are and how far we have traveled.”

There has been great courage along this road. From the proud backs of African American children entering schools to the firsts of every kind. First Hockey players, first public school teachers, first doctors, first ones to brave prejudice and do the job.

There is farther to go – but this is the moment in which we are called. This is the call to complete Reconstruction – to make available to every American the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and a share of the greatest riches we have to offer: a voice and hand in shaping the future, comradeship, courage, and freedom. As long as Reconstruction remains uncompleted the truth of our great nation remains only a half truth – but this week we watched ourselves move closer to wholeness. And this wholeness promises a future of which we can sing. While there will be haunting vestiges of hatred, fear, and pain, this moment is our call beyond all that to a social healing we can only begin to imagine. It is amazing to be alive in this moment and answering this call – put into words by the new President: “Let it be said by our children’s children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.” And I say that we too Sing America – and the song we sing is for all people – a song of freedom and healing, of vision and creation, of courage and love. The song we sing is finer even than the ones we were taught in school – because it is the song of our souls – joined together in a new harmony we are only just beginning to improvise. We can roll out the red carpet, let the trumpets sound, let the bells ring, let the drums roll – meant to signal the coming of heaven on earth. It is an imperfect heaven made by our own beautiful and fumbling hands. And the angel songs are our voices raised together singing as we greet the new day which we have made.