

A Rendezvous of Victory  
(A Spiritual Reflection on the Loss of George Floyd)  
April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
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North Universalist Chapel Society

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Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister here, at North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) in Woodstock, Vermont. Today is Sunday, April 25<sup>th</sup> and the title of this morning's reflection is A Rendezvous of Victory—A Spiritual Reflection on the Loss of George Floyd. To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is good to be together."

I am oftentimes delighted but I'm rarely ever stunned by the music of contemporary musicians. The artists that I love most were active in the 60s and in 70s. That makes them old folks now. Time does that to us all. It's fun to look at contemporary photographs, pictures of Herbie Hancock and Carlos Santana, pictures of Joni Mitchell and various members of the Allman Brothers bands and think, "Oh, my God. My heroes are all grandparents now." And what am I even saying? Some of my best friends are grandparents now! I don't have children myself but we are all affected by time. This is life. That's the way it is.

You know, it's harder, though, to look at other pictures, harder to look at pictures of people like Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix, pictures of John Lennon and Richie Havens and to know that they aren't with us anymore. Richie Havens was 72 years young when he died. Like no one else, he sang,

Little Darling, it's been a long, cold lonely winter

A tune he borrowed from The Beatles, from George Harrison who wrote it. And Miles Davis was only 65. Lennon was 40...and Jimi Hendrix was only 28. He was five years younger than Jesus...and a better guitarist. [tough smile]

Now, I apologize. Some might find my tone offensive. I don't mean it to be. I don't wish it to be. Please forgive me my transgression, if you feel it as such. I am trying to make a deeper point. I'm trying to say that time is precious. We don't have time enough to throw one another out of the garden. It's important that we make the most of the time that we are given. Jesus made the most of his 33 years. Jimi Hendrix made the most of his 28. Did George Floyd make the most of his 46 years on Earth? Wait! Don't answer that! It's not appropriate for me to ask—not in this context...for we are talking about making the most of the time that has been given to us? To ask this of George Floyd requires us to reframe the question slightly. One cannot ask if George Floyd made the most of the time that heaven allowed. One can only ask if he made the most of the time that Derek Chauvin allowed. [tough smile]

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I am oftentimes delighted but I'm rarely ever stunned by the music of contemporary musicians...but I came across an artist last week who really

surprised me. Madison Cunningham. I listened to something that she'd written. It was called Song in My Head. Maybe you've heard of her already—I'm not on the cutting edge these days—but she's amazing and she's twenty-five years old. She writes,

There's a song in my head  
Oh, a line that never stops playing  
I'm not sure how it ends  
I can't remember when I heard what you were saying

I make the best out of the worst  
I make up half the words  
And wear the t-shirt of a band I've never heard  
Because it hurts to be on the outside looking in

This young woman writes amazing poetry and I wonder if George Floyd felt this way...at the moment that the soul left the body, broken and pressed down to the pavement, right there, before our very eyes. "...because it hurts to be on the outside...looking in." I wonder if George Floyd looked down on himself as he lay dying...or if he chose to look away from the moment of his death. I hope he looked away. []

Madison Cunningham has an angelic voice. She has a broad range and she uses it well. She writes,

I do my best to listen  
But I'm uncomfortable with too much silence  
From the passenger seat, you said, "What does that mean?"  
I said, "I'm learning to live with the violence"

And I'm not the kind who wants to be lost,  
I don't wanna be forgotten  
I don't wanna pretend that it's alright  
I wanna see these walls crumble and dissolve around me

She's borrowing from Joni Mitchell...the way I hear it. I think that she is. She borrows from a song called Jericho. Mitchell wrote,

I'll try to keep myself open up to you  
That's a promise that I made to love when it was new  
"Just like Jericho" I said []  
"Let these wall come tumbling down"  
Let them fall right on the ground  
Let all these dogs go running free  
The wild and the gentle dogs kenneled in me

Something wild and gentle is now freeing up in us, something spare and exposed and powerfully vulnerable, reminding us, recalling us, asking us in kindness to return to our better selves.

The great theologian, Rev. Howard Thurman said the very same thing. He said, “Keep afresh before me the moments of my high resolve.” It was the proverb that he used to return to his better self. It was the mantra that he used to call us to call us there to meet him. It was to be and is to be a rendezvous of victory.

Howard Thurman wrote a book called Jesus and the Disinherited. He wrote it back in 1949. It begins bravely. He writes,

Many and varied are the interpretations dealing with the teachings and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But few of these interpretations deal with what the teachings and the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall.

What would Jesus say? What would Jesus say to George Floyd when his ‘back was against the wall,’ as he lay prone and gasping beneath the knee of a murderer? I don’t have an answer to this question. It’s too soon to tell for me, too early to say...and I don’t believe that I would be better prepared in the slightest were I to be asked this question a year from now...or a hundred years from now. I would like to think that George Floyd already knows what Jesus would say. I would like to think that they laughing together right now...and rooting for us. That would constitute a victory to me.

It’s almost impossible to see what constitutes a ‘win’ in times like these. Right now, it’s hard to know the meaning of success. The good way forward seems so obvious—to speak the truth in love—but we have so much trouble choosing the obvious sometimes. Without urgency but with grace (and most importantly, in time), the meaning of success will reveal itself. So, as the barricades and the razor wire come down in Minneapolis, let us slowly make a monument of victory. Let there rise a George Floyd Square within us all. Are you going...’cuz I will meet you there.

“I just cried so hard,” she said. “This last hour my heart was beating so fast, I was so anxious, anxiety (busting) through the roof. But to know GUILTY ON ALL 3 CHARGES !!! THANK YOU GOD THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU.

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This is what winning looks like these days—the legal system functioning as it should. Guilty on all three counts. This was the best, possible outcome. And yet, the best possible outcome still tears the heart in two, still leaves the heart both broken and triumphant. Both at once.

We had a spectacular win in Minnesota and it resounds around the world. Everyone was watching the trial. It was heartbreaking and triumphant. He was found guilty. It was a spectacular win.

It is unnerving, what constitutes a “spectacular win” these days. A “spectacular win” is when the justice system functions as it should, when it adequately honors the death of a black man at the hands of the police—when it honors the death...not when it saves the life. And a “spectacular win” like this one has never happened before. Never before in the history of Minnesota has an even such as this transpired. Derek Chauvin is the first police officer in the history of the

state to be found guilty in a case like this. It's historic. It will go down in history. And it felt so iffy, even though the criminality of his behavior was clear. It was all too clear...and too violent, too vulgar, too vitriolic, too vile. Still, he had his lawyer enter a "not guilty" plea on his behalf. He hoped somehow... He wanted to get away with it. He did not. He was convicted. The court found him guilty—the jury was unanimous—on all charges. The legal system functioned as it was supposed to function. That's a "spectacular win." I am deeply relieved although I can't quite say that I'm happy.

It is all far too damaging to the soul to make good sense of...but still, we try...in our shock, in our grief, in great incredulity, in disbelief. We saw. We watched. We witnessed the casual brutality, the indifference, the banality...the casual cruelty of slow-death, the average violence and slow-taking of life, the slow-motion taking of breath, a process that was nine and a half minutes long. Something that is almost unnamable shatters away from us, something precious and we will have to work very hard in order to get it back. We will have to be honest with one another in order to get it back.

The systems of protection started immediately. The initial police report did not stand out. It was sad but not irregular. It was run of the mill, unremarkable—tragic but matter of fact. After receiving an emergency call from a local business owner about a counterfeit \$20 bill, the police responded. Their initial report was entitled "Man Dies [After] Medical Incident During Police Interaction." In part, read as follows:

Two officers arrived and located the suspect, a male believed to be in his 40s, in his car. He was ordered to step from his car. After he got out, he physically resisted officers. Officers were able to get the suspect into handcuffs and noted he appeared to be suffering medical distress. Officers called for an ambulance. He was transported to Hennepin County Medical Center...where he died a short time later.

That was the first, official story. [pause] Nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds 'happen to be missing' from this report. Fortunately, a fearless teenager captured this time on video. She filmed it all on her cell phone and shared her vision with the world...and she gave the lie to first, official story.

For 330 days, Darnella Frazier has been our first best witness. She is a teenager and she watched a role model in uniform kill a black man uneventfully and in broad daylight. She'd been holding her breath ever since...for nearly a year. She was finally able to release what had been held inside her chest when the verdict was announced on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of April, just a few days ago. In loving prayer and through joyful tears, at 5:19, she posted,

I just cried so hard. This last hour my heart was beating so fast, I was so anxious, anxiety bussing through the roof. But to know GUILTY ON ALL 3 CHARGES !!! THANK YOU GOD THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU. George Floyd we did it!! justice has been served

After 330 days, Darnella Frazer could finally breath again, reflecting on the loss of George Floyd.

Darnella could breath again...and so too could Debra Watts, Debra and the rest of her family. They have all been breathless, not for 330 days, but for 65 years. They've been breathless since the 28<sup>th</sup> day of August in 1955...when a beloved member of their family—a 14-year-old boy named Emmett Till—was tortured, killed and thrown from the named Tallahatchie in Mississippi, a good ways north of Jackson.

The 28<sup>th</sup> day of August has remained special to us. It was the day chosen in 1963, eight years later, for Martin Luther King to deliver his most famous address. "From every mountainside, let freedom ring." And when this happens, and when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

Free at last.

Free at last.

Thank God Almighty...

Darnella Frazier was thanking God, continuing the breath and the breathlessness that goes back 65 years and beyond.

The breath that was tethered and tied down and bound up within the chest of Darnella Frazier was the same breath tethered and tied down and bound within Debra Watts...was the same breath choked from the body of George Floyd on the streets of Minneapolis...was the same breath stolen by the two men who threw young Emmett Till into the Tallahatchie River back in 1955.

We are not separate from one another. This is what universalism means. We are connected—by blood and bone and breath and bliss and blossom. "Flowers of thy heart," the prophet sings, "oh God, are they." This was his great beauty. He was the flower of God's heart...and his beauty was not different from our own. When we fail to honor what connects us to the very end of life and beyond the blessing that is this sacred life, we squander our opportunity. We wander from the garden that is the paradise of our living. We lose touch with that which makes us whole and brave and free.

George Floyd was deeply brave...even as Derek Chauvin was killing him. He reasoned with a man who could not hear him. He pleaded with a man who could not see him. "Tough guy," was Derek Chauvin's response when George Floyd cried out for breath. "If you can talk, then you can breath," he said. That's just not how things turned out.

Let us find real freedom on this good day, shall we? Let us rise to meet this day. rise to recognize its beauty. Against the odds and against the grain, let us find real freedom now...with each good breath, the respiration the keeps us all alive...in these good days, that days that have our names written upon them...in mindfulness, in wakefulness, in faith and deep compassion, let us live into the fullness of who we really are. Expansive, brave and free. Grounded. Clear. Loving. Decisive. Shrink not into that which does not serve us well.

“Please don’t allow society to turn you into a person you are not.” A full month before Darnella Frazier posted her gratitude about the verdict, she posted these words on her Facebook page. “Please don’t allow society to turn you into a person you are not.” Sage advice...from a young soul not half my age.

Darnella posted these words on March 19<sup>th</sup>...which, as it turned out, was Derek Chauvin’s birthday. He had just turned 45. Pisces. [pause]

“Please don’t allow society to turn you into a person you are not.”

We have all just experienced a year of something terrible...in the fragile context of COVID-19. My prayer is that the negativity stays safely in the past, that it ends with what we have already endured, what we have already suffered. I pray that it doesn’t continue in us...extending itself, unwelcomed, into who we are and who we soon will be.

In the minutes before the announcement of the verdict in Minnesota, Ma’Khia Bryant[]16 years ol—was shot and killed in Columbus, Ohio. I posted about it on my Facebook page. I got a lot of spirited responses—some positive and some negative...all of them were choosing sides. My online friends were passionately yelling at one another...about her guilt...her culpability (even though she is the one who called the police), about her size, about her weight, about her family history...about the helplessness of the police officers who presumably had no other choice, about who was in the wrong and who was in the right. It was really sad for me...but it wasn’t the first time that something like this had happened. I did what little I could to redirect. I wrote,

Dear Facebook Friends, I posted [about Ma’Khia Bryant] to express my sorrow and nothing more. I am not concerned with legal details or age specificity or body size or the real and unreal threats [at the scene of the tragedy]. I am just being present to the reality of sorrow and to the finality of death at the very moment that Chauvin trial was ending. In the love that I know at the center of my faith, there are no sides, no choices, no parties... For me, right now, there is only a commitment to appreciate the inherent worth and dignity of everyone involved. all souls. this is my choice. it doesn't need to be yours.

Things quieted down after that. And it’s ok. We don’t know what to do with our sorrow, our grief, our fear, our anxiety. We shatter when we feel threatened, when we lose our sense of security, our sense safety and we lose these things in different ways...and we lose ourselves. We wander from the garden...and we lose one another. But just this morning, we sang words that lead home and I’m so grateful. We sang,

Show to us again the garden where all life flows fresh and free  
Gently guide your sons and daughters into full maturity  
Teach us how to trust each other, how to use our good for power  
How to touch the earth with reverence. Then, once more will Eden flower

That's a small win, right there...and we should cherish that. The big win, the spectacular win this morning comes to us from the Caribbean, from a Martinican poet named Aimé Césaire. In *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* or Notebook of a Return to My Native Land, Césaire writes,

The work of (hu-)man(-ity) is only beginning  
and it remains to conquer all of the violence entrenched in the recesses of our  
passion. No race possesses the monopoly of beauty, of intelligence, of force  
and there is a place for all at the rendezvous of victory.

At the rendezvous of victory...

When the news came in about the Chauvin verdict, I was on Zoom. I'm often on Zoom. I was in the monthly, online meeting with the North Chapel Board. On our agenda, there was time set aside to plan for our Community Conversation this Sunday. It takes place after coffee hour, at 11:30. It last one hour. I hope that you will join us! Community Conversations are awesome.

The Board meeting started at 5:00. The Chauvin verdict was announced a few minutes later, as the Board meeting was just getting underway. I muted myself and gestured that I would not be paying attention. I turned off the microphone on the computer, just in case I screamed or sobbed out loud. I had my hand on my chest as Judge Cahill read the jury's unanimous decisions. I couldn't really speak for a while...could tell them what I had learned. I could only gesture. I could only hold up my hand like this. [show hand] I showed three fingers.

I'm sure that the Board could see from my body language that I was relieved. I was relieved by the news that I was hearing and not furiously enraged by it, not broken by it deep within my soul. I was not shattered. I returned to the meeting a few moments later and we talked about building community.

And slowly, these walls that seem to separate will crumble and dissolve. This is a real win for all of us, the real-life rendezvous of victory. I'll see you there. May it be so. Blessed be and amen.