

Carrying Freedom

January 17th, 2021
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, January 17th of 2021 and the title of this morning's reflection is Carrying Freedom at this moment in the calendar year when we celebrate the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King.

Two News Flashes. News Flash #1. Ron Miller and I are putting an online class together. It's called Learning and Thinking Critically in Challenging Times. It should be a lot of fun. For more information, see the InTouch newsletter or check out the North Chapel website. Join us.

News Flash #2. The new vaccines are out although the implementation is problematic...but the vaccines are here and they are changing how we see the world. Optimistically, I say that the course of life is changing...from a downward-facing spiral to an arc of possibility. May we see this soon reflected in our world.

Change is nothing new. It is foundational in our culture...when it leads to a deeper sense of peace, when it leads to the decrease of suffering, when it leads to the streams of justice and to the rivers of righteousness—not the narrow sense of righteousness with its violence and abuse but that broad sense of connection and consent, accord and deep agreement, that wider circle drawn around the fullness of humankind that directs us all toward the healthy stewardship of the common good. May we shoulder up this healthy sense of change and carry it on, having laid down the burdens that no longer serve us.

For almost a year now, the idea of carrying something within us has not been positive, quite the opposite. It's been associated with the pandemic, with COVID-19. In 2020, we slowly come to imagine one another as possible enemies, as potential carriers of a terrible disease. We've had a lot to learn and as is now obvious have hardly mastered what we've needed to master. In fact, we haven't mastered anything at all. We've done otherwise. We've politicized this crisis. We've responded poorly. This past week, a record 4,327 died of COVID-19 in a single day. That's ninety-four more people than have died in Japan [] since the global pandemic was declared in March of last year! And there are many other countries in that category.

Adjusting for population size does not change the fact that we are struggling now and we've been struggling for some time, since before the current masking controversies. Our struggle shows up in the different ways in which that we've learned to carry freedom—as a flag, as a firearm, as a flower... But, maybe, things are changing now. Maybe a new star is on the rise...a younger light...because, in a real sense, we've made it through the darkest part of the year. Each day, morning comes a little earlier and every night, the evening star sunset a little later. The poet named Paul McCartney writes,

By dawn's first light, I'll come back to your room again
With my carnation hidden by the packages I'm carrying
I'm carrying something for you

McCartney was singing of love but what do these words mean to us? What is this lovely “something” that the poet is carrying? What if this lovely “something” is our freedom? I do see the mess we’re in. It’s impossible not to see it. Please don’t let my positivity mislead you. It’s a deep choice and it’s difficult to make but I choose to carry freedom lightly.

Legend has it that Martin Luther King would always carry around with him a dog-eared copy of “Civil Disobedience,” the famous essay by Henry David Thoreau (1849). Thoreau wrote,

I HEARTILY ACCEPT THE motto,—“That government is best that governs least;” and I should like to see it acted up more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, in finally amounts to this, which I also believe,—“That government is best that governs not at all;” and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government they will have.

Thoreau was not talking about lawlessness. He was not talking about what’s happening now. He was talking about cultural maturity. As yet, we don’t know nearly enough about cultural maturity. But growth is possible...if we choose to grow...and we will make that choice. We’re a good people, a beautiful people and we’ll choose well and well enough...so long as we cleave to principles of freedom. There are many. I will name three.

The first that comes to mind comes to us through James Baldwin. He said, “Freedom requires the most rigid discipline.” The freedom of one person cannot require the subjugation of another. Baldwin spent his life writing about that concept.

The second principle of freedom was delivered by a friend in Maryland. She said, “Your freedom to flail your arms about stops here at my nose.” Have you heard that one? This saying—or the likes of it—is attributed to three different men: to Oliver Wendell Holmes (a Supreme Court Justice and, as you may know, also a Unitarian), to John Stuart Mill (the philosopher) and to President Abraham Lincoln.

Aptly enough, the third principle of freedom comes to us from Martin Luther King, a man who carries the gospel of freedom in his bones. In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” he writes,

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets...left their villages and carried their [message beyond their home towns], so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom...¹

Martin Luther King was a drum major for justice, a civil rights leader and a champion of human rights. He was also deeply religious. He was a Christian, a 20th-century theologian and a fully engaged servant of God. And also driving him—in part—was a rebellious, New England writer, a student of Ralph Waldo Emerson, a 19th-century, Unitarian-raised, transcendentalist...a wildly bearded, clear-eyed, somewhat smelly guy with a chip on his shoulder about having to pay taxes—Henry David Thoreau. And 114 years after he wrote “Civil Disobedience,” King wrote his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Both men chose

to carry freedom...and they did so in different ways. I wonder if their burdens were heavy or light.

There is awful talk about more violence at state capitols across the country and I'm very sad to see this in the news. I do see the division and the fracture and the fault lines and the fissures that are hurting us. I know they are not served by closed-mindedness. So, what do we do? How do we get a little over ourselves.

I needed help. I needed a teacher...a brother of spirit, as it were. And I met my teacher in Montpelier, on the front lawn of the State House, at a rally for the Poor People's Campaign. There were hundreds of us. No counter-protest except for one man—a brave man, a braver man than I.

Leather-clad in black, he rode up on his Harley Davidson. He tried to address the rally but he couldn't. The organizers told him to go away. And when he realized that he would not be allowed to speak, he got disruptive for a while. Finally, he walked away defeated. I felt bad for him. At the rally, we were standing for things that were beautiful and important but sadly, we weren't standing for each other. I didn't know that at the time but my heart sure did.

The rally was clustered near the State House, on the stairs. We had our signs and slogans. We had a righteous cause. And yet, we didn't have the strength of heart to make room for this man. Making room for him was not the purpose of the rally. I understand that. I'm not blaming anybody. I'm not mad. I just know how disconnected we've become. We are too good at yelling at each other like punchless boxers in the ring—utterly convinced of our respective righteousness, of our impenetrable ideas...of freedom. We were free to yell and sing and chant and champion the hardened idea that we already believed about the world. We were not the slightest bit interested in another person's point of view. And this brave man, he wasn't talking to us, by the way. he was yelling too. He was as closed-minded as the rest of us.

How do we choose otherwise? When do we come together and really listen to each other? Maybe we are building toward that now. It's hard to tell. When five people die and one takes his own life, it's impossible.

Then, something happened at the rally. Something happened and I only knew it in my heart. So, I led with that. Actually. Physically. I led with my heart. I clasped my hands behind my back and I walked across the State House lawn. I wanted to meet my teacher face-to-face.

I approached him respectfully. I was not his judge. I hadn't heard what he said to the organizers but identified with his frustration. I have felt shut out of things before. I have been isolated. Many times, I have been made to feel alone.

So, I approached my teacher and I held out my right hand...and he recoiled from me in fear. And my heart just shattered. Suddenly, I understood his choice. My right hand was extended but my left was behind my back. In my mind, I'm leading with my heart, groovy minister style. In his mind, I might have been a threat. For all he knew, I could have been dangerous, carrying something hurtful, some kind of weapon, behind my back.

I had come in peace. I had laid my burden down but my teacher had no way of knowing that. So, I just told him. I told him by showing him that both of my hands were empty, that it wasn't a trick, that I wasn't trapping him and suddenly, his hardened exterior broke. He took down his defenses and there we were.

And then and there, he told me about himself, about his time of service in the military, about his commitment to family with his wife who was standing right there. I did not think that he should have been given the microphone at the rally but when he shared about his life, I would not stand in his way. He said he wasn't racist and he probably felt like he had to. And we regretted something silently together that's never been named. It felt like prayer.

In chapter 54 of the Book of Isaiah, in a chapter entitled The Eternal Covenant of Peace, the following is written:

If anyone stirs up strife, it is not from me; whoever stirs up strife with you shall fall because of you. See, it is I who have created the smith who blows the fire of coals, and produces a weapon fit for its purpose; I have also created the ravager to destroy. No weapon that is fashioned against you shall prosper and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. [Isaiah, 54:15-17]

I heard a song recently, a song that was based on this passage. The artist is Victory Boyd and the composition is entitled No Weapon. Its words were these:

No weapon formed against me shall prosper
It won't work
God will do what he said he would
He will stand by His word
He will come through

It is a stunningly beautiful piece of music. So delicious. So touching and so free. It carries its freedom lightly. I wish we had sung that at that rally in Montpelier. I wish that moment with my teacher could be transformed into a musical. The scene on the front lawn of the State House would be amazing. Bob Burchess could have written the dialogue and directed us. Peg Brightman and Moving Spirit could have done the choreography. We can imagine right now, can we not, a very different kind of insurrection. We can imagine a revolutionary love that can truly overcome all of this difficulty and distress.

Last Sunday, I shared that I had watched the events of the rally-turned-Capitol-breach as they unfolded in real time. I shared that...

...when I learned that there had been gunfire, I prayed that no one was injured. [and] When I learned that a woman [was injured], I prayed that she would not die. [and] When I learned that she had died, it felt...like Hell had broken lose.

The woman who passed away last Wednesday, in the tragedy that took place at the Capitol, was a 14-year veteran of the Air Force and a staunch supporter of President Donald Trump. Her name was Ashli Babbitt and, apparently, not

everyone appreciates her passion for Donald Trump. In light of the magnitude of the violence, it is easy to understand why. What Ashli helped to shatter last week is still too costly to talk about...and what she helped to shatter did not belong to her. The presence of violence was a catastrophe. The level of violence was absurd...coupled, as it was with selfies on Instagram.

I posted about the loss of life to mark a turning point, a point of no return with respect to the meaning and the value of the protest. Heather's death in Charlottesville... George's death in Minneapolis... Michael's death in Ferguson... Trayvon's death in Sanford... Like Martin's death in Memphis, all of these are turning points. It is important that we mark these moments intentionally.

After doing so, I received a range of spirited responses that were neutral, positive and negative. I understand them all and I love all of the people who shared their thoughts. I learned a lot from that experience. All I can say right now is that it's important to mark the turning points. When we don't, absurdity moves in.

During the recent impeachment process (during impeachment two, I guess), an awkward question was raised in the House of Representatives. The question was raised to support and to defend the leader of the Republican Party. Brian Mast (R-FL) said,

Has any one of [the thousands broke the law by violently taking siege of the Capitol] been brought here to answer whether they did that because of our president?

It was a hard moment. I am as grateful for the congressman's military service to our country but I do not appreciate his question. It's hard to know if anyone did. Nobody responded. No one knew what to do with the rhetorical question...and it had to be rhetorical because—according to the rules of order—he, alone, was holding the floor. His fellow Republican, congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene can be seen right behind him, throwing her hands up in confusion.

After half a minute of silence, Congressman Mast yielded the remainder of his time, saying, "It appears I will receive no answer" which is strange because no answer could be given...but Twitter offered one. Someone took a video of [and this I quote], "a rioter with a bullhorn can be...yelling: 'We were invited here. We were invited by the president of the United States.'" I think he was trying to impeach the impeachment and it did not go so well.

On a deeper level, I wonder how Ashli Babbitt would have responded to the congressman's question. She was a veteran...just like he is. I'd love to know what she would have said, complex and passionate woman that she was. She had great faith President Trump...just as she had, according to reports, just as she had for the previous president. It seems that she carried her sense of freedom uncommonly.

It is important to be uncommonly. All of us are in one way or another. And it is important to be commonly connected. It's a paradox. In 1969, the composer and jazz artist Duke Ellington received the Medal of Freedom. Upon accepting it at the White House, he spoke of four freedoms and they were these:

Ellington wished to be free from hate unconditionally
He wished to be free from self-pity
Ellington wished to be free from the fear of doing something that would
help someone else more than it would help myself and he wished to be
free from the kind of pride that [would make him feel better than his]
brother.²

We are not yet free but I'd like to think that we are on the road...and it's a long
road. We'll get there. Surely, we will, carrying freedom lightly. This is becoming
possible.

American life is VERY HARD right now. That's undeniable. Apart from
the insurrection, we are suffering incredible losses, average losses greater than a
9/11 crisis every day. We are in trauma, all of us. So, let's be gentle with
ourselves. Let's carry flowers rather than fury in our hearts. We can do this...but
what will give us the strength? What gives us the tenacity to carry freedom
lightly—in our back pockets, as it were. Love does. Love give us that tenacity.
The old song tells us that...

The road is long with many a winding turn
That leads us to who knows where
Who knows where
But I'm strong...

We are strong, the song reminds us. We are...
Strong enough to carry him
He ain't heavy, [...]

He's my brother and I will not stand apart from him.
So on we go
His welfare is of my concern
No burden is he to bear [and] we'll get there
For I know, he would not encumber me

What love is this? ...the weight to carry that does not hold us down? Dr. King
knew and we can learn from him, especially in a challenging time. King said,
There comes a time, my friends, when people get tired of being plunged
across the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of
nagging despair. There comes a time when people get tired of being
pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing amid the
piercing chill of an alpine November. There comes a time.

We are here, we are here this [morning] because we're tired now.
And I want to say that we are not here advocating violence. We have
never done that. I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and
throughout this nation that we are Christian people. We believe in the
Christian religion. We believe in the teachings of Jesus. The only weapon
that we have in our hands this [morning] is the weapon of protest."

I want to meet my teacher again, my teacher in Montpelier, and I want to know more about him in peace and in the gentle way of freedom.

Martin Luther King could carry freedom in his hand because he carried love within his heart. By dawn's first light, we carry love. May we and may our nation be healed by it and carry on.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

¹ <http://abacus.bates.edu/admin/offices/dos/mlk/letter.html>

² <https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/music-popular-and-jazz-biographies/billy-strayhorn>