

The Last Waltz (or The Threshold of Possibility—Part One)

February 28th, 2021
Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley
North Universalist Chapel Society

In Gravity and Grace, Simone Weil writes, “ALL THE natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.”

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. I am Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister to North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) here in Woodstock, Vermont. Today is Sunday, February 28th and the title of this morning’s reflection is The Last Waltz (or The Threshold of Possibility—Part One). It’s sort of a rock and roll sermon.

The Band got together in 1960. They called themselves The Hawks back then. And Robbie Robertson wasn’t the leader yet. He had not yet distinguished himself. He was just one of the rest of the guys—Levon Helm, Rick Danko, Richard Manuel, and Garth Hudson. They did eight years of playing bars and doing the club scene. Then, they did eight years of playing larger halls and concert venue. By 1976, it was time to quit. So, they threw a party for themselves, a final concert that was called The Last Waltz and the invited their good friends to come and play. And Ronnie Hawkins came to play. He had been the leader of the group in the 1960s. He sang “Who Do You Love” by Bo Diddley.

I walk 47 miles of barbed wire
I use a cobra-snake for a necktie
I got a brand new house on the roadside
Made from rattlesnake hide...
Who do you love?

It’s a really great song. And Dr. John came and Bobby Charles too. Paul Butterfield, Muddy Waters, Eric Clapton Neil Young, Neil Diamond, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Ringo Starr, Van Morrison, Emmie Lou Harris and the Staple Singers. That was the best part of the show. They did a version of a song called “The Weight” that absolutely blows my mind.

My heart breaks whole, wide open just sing those words and to remember that time and to feel that hopefulness, that optimism, that positivity rising up again inside of me. Do you know this feeling? Have you ever had it? Have you chosen to cherish this feeling as if it were heaven on Earth?

Some say that I get romantic and I appreciate the observation. It is common in the lives of women and men of a certain age—unfortunately, I can say that now—it is common to look back with nostalgia, with the rose-colored glasses of retrospection, at the good old days which were days that really were

just as hard as these. Hard in different ways, perhaps, but just as hard. There is something sobering about that. And most of the time, I think it's true. Most of the time, that is. Other times, I think it's not true, that times are harder now. So, I feel different ways at different times. Things change, depending on my mood. Most of the time, I believe that the good old days were just as hard as these and other times, I think it's harder now.

Who really knows? I know that I do not. What is it like for you when you look back on yesterday? ...when you recall with nostalgia the days of old? Of course, our answers will be different. Things are different for different people. Things seem better for others sometimes. Things seem easier but often, they're not.

I learned that lesson for the first time in a heartbeat when I still lived in Boston. I learned it on my last day of work. I loved my job. I had been working for a woman named Valerie Miller—sharp, savvy, funny, fierce and smarter than anyone I knew. She lives up here now, by the way. She moved to the Upper Valley a few years ago. In fact, she came by to see me at North Chapel in my first year. I have her picture here in my transcript but why don't pause for a moment to take a better look.

[Pause five seconds]

Peaceful person. And sees super cute. Seeing her again just thrilled me. I still smile when I think about it. We spent a wonderful afternoon catching and laughing. We were so happy just being in one another's presence again.

I first met Valerie in the late 1980s. I was working for an organization called the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (or the UUSC). I like in the Service Committee. I like what they do and I like what they stand for. When you go to their website, you learn that their mission is a noble one.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee advances human rights and social justice around the world, partnering with those who confront unjust power structures and mobilizing to challenge oppressive policies. Our work is grounded in the belief that all people have inherent power and dignity.

Dick Scobie was the Executive Director when I worked there and Mary Katherine Mourn holds that position now. She is quite a force. She is one of my favorite ministers. I first came to know her when we were colleagues in the Washington D.C. area. When I was serving the congregation in Silver Spring, Maryland. She was serving nearby, in Fairfax, Virginia. We would get together on occasion.



She's wonderful—sharp, savvy, funny, fierce, smart. Just like Valerie. I think that the two of them would have loved each other. They are both so personable. It's hard to imagine either one having trouble with anyone. [I say this with trepidation...as I am fairly confident that both women would take strong objection to this idea.]

We've all got our battles. When I can be, I chose to be optimistic. I sing so I stay steady in belief in a better world. I sing because I believe that love will guide us. Then again, I might be too romantic. This might be my nostalgia coming on too strong, my rose-colored glasses of retrospection. I freely admit, it's easy for me to see the good in other people. Yet and still, I know that there are exceptions...but the exceptions are rare...mercifully. If you look for the good in people, most of the time, you will find it. It's wise to be careful but let's keep our fears in check. Let's strike the healthy balance between the two.

So, here's the lesson, the one I learned on my last day of work at the UU Service Committee. To celebrate my last day, my work mates took me out to lunch. We went to The Chinese Café in Inman Square in Cambridge. I don't remember what I had for lunch but I remember the fortune cookie. It came with a juicy slice of orange at the end of the meal. We all got one and, of course, we read them to each other. The funniest fortune taught me the lesson about believing that things are better and easier for other people when they're not. The fortune played on a common saying, a myth that has been around for hundreds of years. Everyone knows it. "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence." But the fortune changed it around a bit...and it didn't explode the myth. It confirmed and extended it. It read, "The grass is always greener but it's just as hard to mow." I loved it. It was the perfect end to a great work experience. I'll not soon forget it.

Sometimes, we fear that we may be missing out on something grand. They call it FOMO now—Fear Of Missing Out. Fear gets in the way of other things.

I was born in May of 1965, five years after Robbie Robertson, Levon Helm, Rick Danko, Richard Manuel, and Garth Hudson started playing music together. Malcolm X was killed three months before my birth and Martin Luther King, three years after. I was twenty-five years old in March of 1991, when I learned about the beating of Rodney King. If you recall, Rodney King was the African American man who was brutally beaten by the LAPD. It was a famous case. In fact, fifteen years later, it was still in the news. This was reported on March 3rd of 2006,

From NPR News, this is News and Notes. I'm Ed Gordon. Fifteen years ago today, an amateur photographer would capture what would become the most shocking traffic stop in American history. Grainy images showed several white, Los Angeles police officers surrounding, kicking and beating what looked to be an already subdued African American male. More than a year later, on April 29th, 1992, a jury in Simi Valley, California acquitted four officers charged with beating a now-famous defendant named Rodney King. Just hours after the verdict, chaos would erupt in South

Central Los Angeles and some of the worst rioting in U.S. history would begin.¹

I was twenty-six years old when the riots began. In the fourteen months between the beating and the verdict, during the six-day riot and longer after, news programs across the country were constantly broadcasting those violent images. I think that, collectively, we needed to see it but part of me was beaten every time it played...and I am not different than you. We do not stand apart from one another. Only the forces of racism incline us to believe that we do. One artist writes,

But for the grace of God go I
I must have been born a lucky guy
Heaven only knows how I've been blessed
with the gift of your love

God's gift extends to each and every one of us and it has NOTHING to do with luck. Another poet writes,

How come I can't tell the free world from living hell
And how come all I see is a child of God in misery

Rodney King was a child of God and that is the sober truth...and we should take it seriously. For it alone leads to more beautiful places.

It is important to face the truth and not to hide in the fear of missing something. There is no growth without our collective turning to face truth. It is important to face the truth but facing the truth is not enough. We must choose to face the truth compassionately. This is what time asks of us. For it's been thirty years. This is what our cultural maturity demands. We need the truth but we need more than the truth...and more to us has been given...and it will help us to bear the weight.

My heart breaks whole, wide open just sing those words and to remember that time and to feel that hopefulness, that optimism, that positivity rising up again inside of me. I need just that when sorrow grabs me close and makes me feel so beaten down...and I feel just that when I find my peace, my prayer, my song, my serenity. And I watch that spirit rise in Levon Helm and in Mavis Staples...in her father, Pops, and in Rick Danko as he sang the song that Robbie Robertson wrote, a song he called "The Weight."

My heart breaks whole, wide open just sing those words again. And what's funny is that the words that lift my spirit are not spectacularly artistic. The poetry are beautiful, to be sure, but isn't Shakespeare...not by a long stretch. Yet, it touches us quite deeply when allowed. Back in August of 1968, Robbie Robertson wrote,

I pulled into Nazareth, I was feelin' about half past dead
I just need some place where I can lay my head
"Hey, mister, can you tell me where a man might find a bed?"
He just grinned and shook my hand, "no" was all he said

And everybody sings the chorus,
Take a load off Fanny
Take a load for free
Take a load off Fanny
And (and) (and) you put the load right on me
(You put the load right on me)

The Band performs the music...and the way that these lines follow hard upon each other, the way they layer in together is so lovely...and Levon was singing...and Mavis was singing...and Pops was...and Rick Danko. And everyone sang together on the chorus. It's magical. That last concert was magical...caught for us on film by Martin Scorsese. So, check it out...and when I say that my heart breaks whole, wide open just sing those words, this is what I mean.

The story of "The Weight" seems biblical...in the sense that it echoes that passage from the Gospel of Luke, that passage that is commonly recited at Christmas—Luke, 2:1-7.

In those days, a decree went out from Emperor (or Caesar) Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn.

There was no room for them at the inn. It is not possible to hear the words of Robbie Robertson outside of this context.

I pulled into Nazareth, I was feelin' about half past dead
I just need some place where I can lay my head
"Hey, mister, can you tell me where a man might find a bed?"
He just grinned and shook my hand, "no" was all he said

The person singing the song sure seems like Joseph in the gospel...if one can see the holy in Levon Helm. It's imperfect but I promise you, if you look for the good in others, you will most often find it there. We have to wonder—don't we have to wonder?—what on Earth it would have been like if those officers in southern California had looked for the good in Rodney King, if they had recognized in him his inherent worth and dignity. "What you do to the least of these," Jesus said, "you also do to me." But the song is not about Jesus. It's more about Fanny, whoever she was...and everybody sings the chorus, all as one.

"The Weight." We used to sing this song back in high school. To be honest, the feeling that I remember, the feeling that fills me with hopefulness,

with optimism, with positivity is linked more closely to memories of blasting this song in my friend Mike Carey's basement—hanging out, getting pumped and lifting weights. The biblical references were not entirely lost on me back then but the joy that I was feeling was really more about singing the song, more about being with my friends and feeling healthy and alive.

There were a lot of references in that song, ones that are easy to recognize. There was the Nazareth reference, of course, complete with the trouble at the inn. In the second verse, there is a reference to the Devil. In the third, they mention Moses and Luke... They even talk about the Judgement Day. Yet, according to Robbie Robertson himself, the song is a first-person, traveler's account of a trip to Nazareth, Pennsylvania (which is close Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, by the way...9 miles). This particular, location, it seems—Nazareth, Pennsylvania—is, according to Robbie Robertson, quite significant. It means a lot to him and he tells us why.

Robertson explains the he wrote "The Weight" on a 1951 Martin D-28 guitar (I looked it up himself because I'm a geek. I checked and it's true). And here's the key: Nazareth, Pennsylvania is the home of the Martin Guitars company and Robbie Robertson was on a kind of rock and roll pilgrimage. He explains that

The colorful characters in "The Weight" were based on real people that members of The Band knew... [Levon Helm explains all of this in his autobiography.] In particular, [a character named] "young Anna Lee" [who is mentioned in the third verse] is Helm's longtime friend Anna Lee Amsden, and, according to her, [another character named] "Carmen" was from Helm's hometown, Turkey Scratch, Arkansas.

So, I don't know what to think of all of this. We are left wondering aren't we?

What I do know is that the spirit that makes my heart break whole, wide open has to do with the beauty of that music and the way that they sounded together—that music as The Band performed it in their farewell performance in 1976, in that concert called The Last Waltz that Martin Scorsese made a movie out of. Levon and Mavis and Pops and Rick Danko singing the good hearts out. Some joy, some hopefulness, some optimism, some positivity rises up me...stronger than the things that weigh us down. They sang (and we sing too) about the weights that sent us free.

In Gravity and Grace, Simone Weil writes, "ALL THE natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception." In this spirit, in the spirit of grace, we mark a difficult anniversary. On Wednesday, March 3rd, we recognize that thirty years have passed since the beating of Rodney King. One might ask, "Are we any closer to the garden?" In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, I believe that we are. What happened thirty years ago was a truly terrible thing. As the Los Angeles police chief said at the time of the beating,

We believe the officers used excessive force taking [Rodney King] into custody. In our review, we find that officers struck him with batons between fifty-three and fifty-six times.

Who knows how many times that man was struck and kicked and punched...but there are things far more powerful than the violence of uniformed men. Bono and B.B. King sing about it.

I was there when they crucified my Lord
I held the scabbard while the soldier drew his sword
I rolled the dice when they pierced his side
But I've seen love conquer the Great Divide

Love will guide us. Love rises up in us...like grace. Grace rises up.

So, on Wednesday, March 3rd in 2021, at 10:00am, North Chapel will ring its Revere Bell between fifty-three and fifty-six times to honor not the beating of Rodney King, but to honor the peaceful way forward for which is stood. It was spectacularly unpopular at the time, but Rodney King always longed for peace. He did not believe in adding more fuel to the fires that already rage. He believed that we are all brothers and sisters and that we need not threaten those who live in one's own house. "America is my house," he said. Bells will ring to honor that. May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5243592>