

Tutu, King and the Gentle Engine of Delight
January 2nd, 2022
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North Universalist Chapel

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, January 16th and the title of this morning's reflection is Tutu, King and the Gentle Engine of Delight. It's about the tender joy of possibility.

I would like to begin this morning with a truncated quotation to be followed by a game of call-and-response.

The quotation comes to us from Mpho Tutu. Her father is known to us, the Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He died recently, the day after Christmas. He was 90 years old and young. Desmond Tutu was an incredible man and at his passing, there was a worldwide outpouring of love. Love rained down. A mighty, gentle rain fell down from every corner of the sky on the nation of South Africa, where he and his soul-twin, Nelson Mandela, slowly changed the whole wide world.

The Washington Post reported that two weeks ago, on Sunday, January the 2nd, "The ashes of the revered anti-apartheid leader...were interred...in a private ceremony in St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town." The day before, on New Year's Day, there was a state funeral. Unsurprisingly, that service attracted a larger crowd. One could attend in person but it was also televised and live-streamed. People from all over the world tuned in and during this public service, Mpho Tutu, Archbishop Desmond's beloved daughter, spoke beautifully. Quoting her father, she said, "The love the world has shown has warmed the cockles of our hearts."

That's the opening quotation. Now, let's turn to the little game of call-and-response.

You know how this works, right? Harry Belafonte taught me how to play. I learned from an old record that I used to play a lot when I was a kid. He was live at Carnegie Hall in April of 1959. I think my parents got it when the album first came out. Harry got everybody going. He'd call out and they'd respond. He'd call out, "Daaay-oh!!" at that very top of his lungs and, echoing him, the crowd responded. He'd call out, "Daa-aa-aa-oh!!" and they echoed whatever he did. I pretended that I was in the crowd. That's how I learned. That's how Harry taught me how to play the little game of call-and-response.

There is a hymn that we sometimes sing called "Love Will Guide Us." Many of you know it. "Love will guide/peace has tried us/hope inside us" and so on. In the second verse, we sing,

If you cannot sing like angels
If you cannot speak before thousands
You can give from deep within you
You can change the world with your love

Harry Belafonte could do these things. He could sing like an angel. He could speak before thousands. But you don't have to do these things. You don't have to sing it like Harry to change the whole world with your love.

This morning, we won't sing. It's enough to speak the words. I will call them out and, whatever I say, you'll repeat it. Ok? Are you ready? Are you all set? Here we go! I'll start with just one word but then, I'll expand it. It'll be fun. So, shout out good and loud. Make people around you think that you're strange. Let's pretend that we were all at the Harry Belafonte concert back in the day. Ok. So, here's the first word. Then, you can respond. Repeat after me.

What?

What makes you?

What makes you think?

What makes you think that you can?

What makes you think that you can change?

What makes you think that you can change the world?

It's a powerful question, right? It's an interesting one. "What makes you think that you can change the world?" What kind of arrogance is this? What kind of hubris? Little, old you?

It's a crazy question and it needs a crazy answer: "I know you can." I have greatest confidence in you. Deep in my heart, I know—and I know for sure—that you absolutely can change the whole wide world. I am much less confident about myself. It's so much easier to potential in others. It's harder to see in the mirror. We always question. We doubt ourselves somehow. That's why the wording of the call-and-response game is as it is. It doesn't ask, "What makes you KNOW that you can change the world?" That's crazy talk. It asks, "What makes you THINK that you can?" That's crazy, too, but it's mysterious. Mystery does beautiful things for us...because we don't have to know that we can do the great and challenging things in life. Oftentimes, it's more than enough just to think that we can.

It's a good mantra for us. We should repeat this to ourselves, over and over again until we believe it. "I think I can... I think I can..." It's like the children's story by Watty Piper, the one about the locomotive engine. "Chug, chug, chug..." and "puff, puff, puff!"

The Little Engine That Could is a story about determination. It's about a happy-hearted train that had a purpose. It was full of good gifts for the children on the far side of the mountain.

There were toy animals—giraffes..., teddy bears...[and] a baby elephant. ...there were dolls...with blue eyes and yellow curls, dolls with brown eyes and bobbed heads and the funniest, little clown you ever saw. And there were [train] cars full of toy engines, tops, jack knives, picture puzzles, books...

It was so exciting. There were enough gifts for a make-shift Christmas morning in the off-season but there was more.

There were big, golden oranges, red-cheeked apples, bottles of creamy milk for their breakfasts, fresh spinach for their dinners, peppermint drops and lollipops for after-meal treats.

It was going to be so much fun but somewhere along the way, something terrible happened. The happy-hearted train broke down. It couldn't move another inch.

A shiny, new engine came along. The clown and the dolls and the toy animals waved it down and asked for help. But the shiny, new train refused them and moved on.

Then, a freight-engine came along and once again, they waved it down and once again, the train refused them and moved on.

Then, a third train came along but that engine was too tired. It was very sad but they didn't give up.

Finally, a fourth engine came along. It was a little engine and blue. The little, blue engine heard the toys ask for safe passage up and over and said, "Well, I'm not very big and I've never been over the mountain." Brave, little Blue reflected on the challenge and made a choice. It said, "I think I can... I think I can..." and with a little puff-puffing and with a little chug-chugging, all were on their happy-hearted way once again. Brave, little Blue, the mountain climber. She was so determined—from the nadir of the valley to the summit and beyond. You can't help but be moved by her...driven the little, blue engine that could.

Desmond Tutu was just like this train—humble and determined. He carried us over the mountain even though he'd never done it himself. That why we love him and why he lives on in us, even now...especially now. What kind of power is that? Is it hubris or is it faith?

Desmond Tutu stood on the shoulders of Martin Luther King. King was inspired by the peace and disobedience of Henry David Thoreau. There is a lineage of wisdom and commitment to peace and justice. There is a lineage of those who are driven by the engine of delight. Are we on that train? Should we be? Can you and I be just as committed and just as driven as they were?

Tutu was a joyful song. He sang out from the mountaintop. His call resounded through the valley and we responded...sympathetically. His wisdom sounds an echo in the soul. How can we keep from singing the song of freedom? Desmond Tutu did not have 'confidence' and did not have 'hubris'. He wasn't brazen. He had a faith that gave him courage and that was all he needed. He was spiritually ripped—chasing down oppression, searching for what he could find of peace and solace, of sanctuary.

His journey is a part of the hero's journey that the artists try to capture...that painters paint and that the poets write and rhyme about. A poet writes,

I pulled off into a forest with the crickets clicking in the ferns
Like a wheel of fortune, I heard my fate turn, turn turn
And I went running down a white sand road
I was running like a white-assed deer
Running to lose the blues to the innocence in here
These are the clouds of Michelangelo
Muscular with gods and sungold
Shine on your witness...¹

¹ Joni Mitchell, *Refuge of the Roads*

That ripped-ness of his, that spiritual muscularity, was born of bravest witness. He was so clear-eyed and so sharp-sighted. He faced monumental challenge and said, Apartheid is as evil, as immoral, as un-Christian, in my view, as Nazism. And in my view, the Reagan administration's support and collaboration with it is equally immoral, evil and totally un-Christian, without remainder.

Archbishop Tutu knew that one cannot compromise in one's witness of the holy, in one's recognition of the worth and dignity of every human being.

This First Principle of ours is powerful. It doesn't reduce to relativism or paralysis. It's not a means by which we can imagine that everyone and everything is ok. It is the force that drives us to call on the better angels of our nature. It is the still, small voice that preserves the belief in the best in us becoming possible. It's not poetic and it's not romantic. It's a real and risky fight. It calls us into conflict and into consensus indifferently. It calls us in both ways, for joy and justice are one and the same.

As Amy Goodman reminds us, "In 1988, Archbishop Tutu risked jail by organizing a boycott of regional elections in South Africa." Tutu said, I urge Black people in this diocese not to vote in the October elections. And I hope that white Anglicans will join their Black fellow Anglicans in that action. I am aware of the penalties attaching to this call [he said]. I am not defying the government. I am obeying God.

How high are the mountains that we need to climb these days? How high are the mountains of earth and stone and how high, the mountains of political disjuncture? How high are the mountains of social oppression and how high, the mountains of maladjustment to climate change? How high are the mountains of despair? And where is the crack of light that, defying gravity, brings us hope?

The best in us is always possible, in life and far beyond it. I am reminded of a passage from the writing of Aaron Sorkin. Sorkin is the creative force behind *The West Wing* TV show. In an episode called "Game On" (which was about the reelection campaigns), a character named Will Bailey is determined. Will Bailey is the democratic campaign manager for Horton Wilde, an Orange County, California candidate for the House of Representatives.

He was an impressive candidate, a sea-change candidate for Orange County. Unfortunately for the campaign manager and really unfortunately for the candidate, Horton Wilde died just before the election. Will Bailey, however, did not give up the campaign. It went on without the candidate. It seemed absurd to some. It seemed like a joke but it was not. The candidate died but the ideas that drove the candidacy did not. The ideas went on without him saying, "I think I can... I think I can..." So it was that a dead man was running for office.

June Wheeler, a fictional staff reporter for the San Jose Mercury News, she broke the pretense. She called it out. At an otherwise normal press conference that with Will Bailey behind the podium, she said,

Mr. Bailey, we're all sitting here pretending this is a regular press conference, and you're very engaging up there, but your candidate died. So, why isn't this all a little preposterous?

It was an excellent question and Will Bailey met it head on. He said, Chuck Webb is a seven-term Congressman who, as chairman of not one but two Commerce sub-committees, has taken money from companies he regulates. He's on the board of the [National Rifle Association] and once challenged another Congressman to a fistfight on the floor, over an amendment to make stalkers submit to background checks before buying AR-15s, AK-57s, Street Sweepers, Mac-10s, Mac-11s. He's joined protests designed to frighten pregnant women.

The reporter then asked Will Bailey, "What's your point?"

And Will Bailey answered her question. He responded poignantly. He said, "There are worse things in the world than no longer being alive."

We could, if we wanted to wallow, we could let despair win the day. We could indulge remorseful energy. Surely, it has its place. In the words of William Shakespeare, we could "sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the deaths of kings" but the world would go on without us. On the other hand, we could turn and face the mountains we have to climb with a positive attitude, whispering to ourselves, "I think we can. I think we can." And this is a great honor when we are driven by the engines of delight—our intentions turned toward joy and justice, our hands held out in hope...reaching to connect with those from whom we've been estranged.

In a speech entitled *The Case for Optimism*, Al Gore was looking up. He set his sights high on the environmental mountain that stands before us all. He said that sometimes,

"Things take longer to happen than you think they will, and then they happen much faster than you thought they could." I really think that is where we are [these days].

He recognized the political challenge attending the issue of climate change. He applauded those who were brave and honest enough to stray from politics. We must do this in order to make the changes that are necessary to save the planet and ourselves. He tells the story of Debbie Dooley. She's pretty awesome.

Debbie lives in Georgia. She's politically engaged. She is the chair of the Atlanta Tea Party which, needles to say, leans strongly to the right. She was approached by political operatives who had curious views on climate change. They tried to enroll her in strategies that would benefit the fossil fuel industry. They tried to enlist her in an effort to make solar power more expensive but, according to Gore, ...she had just put solar panels on her roof and she didn't understand the request. (Laughter) And so she went and formed an alliance with the Sierra Club and they formed a new organization called the Green Tea Party. And they defeated the proposal.

It's important that we think in different ways. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was great at that. He knew the power of connecting with those from whom we are estranged. I am inspired by Desmond Tutu. I try to do this when I can.

Not long after July of 2008. I was in a North Carolina airport. With a pack on my back and my guitar in my hand, I walked over toward the bathrooms. I saw a woman in fatigues and combat boots and she startled me. She was just standing there, quietly with her back against the wall. She was standing on her right leg. Her left boot was on the wall behind her.

She startled me. Maybe because I opposed the wars after 9/11. I was neither shocked nor awed by then. I was mortified. And so, when I saw this woman in fatigues, so obviously military, those were the feelings that came up within me and those were the feelings I expressed. I was stricken with feelings of grief...and she could see that in the gesture of my body. I'm ok about rejecting the wars but not ok about rejecting military woman.

So, I put down my guitar and I unshouldered my backpack. I stood quietly just like she did. I positioned my body in the same way. I looked at her and I smiled and with my eyes, I said, 'I'm sorry.'

I'm sure that it was soon after July of 2008 because bad news was ringing in my ears. There had been a shooting in the Tennessee Valley, at the UU church in Knoxville. A hate-filled man strode into the church and drew a gun in the sanctuary. A man named Greg McKendry deliberately stood in front of the gunman and gave his life protecting the lives of others. A woman named Linda Kraeger died that day as well.

So, all of this—the wars in the Afghanistan, in Iraq and in Knoxville, TN—all of this came up for me when I saw the woman in the airport. I just stood there by the bathrooms and I cried. When I got home, I wrote a song. I called it True Believer. It was written about the meeting place between the woman in fatigues and me. The words were these:

i want to fight the wars of guns and bad ideas
with the one hand over my heart
i want to fight the wars for the ones that i hold dear
...defend the glory for the brave and living free

i want to free this war of oil and masquerade
as a welcomed liberator
i want to be this war but the cause has been unmade
and now the story needs a reason to truly be

i tried to say that i true believed
that deep in my heart i'd had an answer

i tried to kill the war of 1945
by bombing Hiroshima
i tried to kill a war but i nearly burned the sky

by ignoring the different ways of living free

i thought i'd win the wars of Northern Vietnam
and Negro subjugation
i thought i'd spin those wars as little Martin's false alarm
by killing glory when Free At Last was living free

i tried to say that i true believed
that deep in my heart i'd had an answer

i tried to wage the war on liberal-heart ideals
but there was no fear in the Valley
i tried to stage a war in suburban killing fields
with the gun shots in Tennessee on Sunday morn

when will we end the wars of guns and bad ideas
with the one hand over our heart
when will we end the wars for the ones that we hold dear
...defend the glory for the brave and living free

oh, if in my heart, i do not yield
then shall overcome someday

Love rains down on Woodstock just like it does in Cape Town in South Africa. It rains from every corner of the sky. It falls as snow for us and it lands softly on our shoulders. It stands on our broad shoulders as we stand on the shoulders of Tutu, King and Thoreau. They lift us up. They boost us. They carry us to higher ground.

We began this morning with a quote from Desmond Tutu's daughter. Obviously, it belonged to a longer passage. Honoring her family, Mpho Andrea Tutu had this to say:

Daddy would say, "The love the world has shown has warmed the cockle of our hearts." Then [light-heartedly], he would say, "I don't know what a cockle is but whatever it is, it has been warmed."

She said,

We thank you for loving our father [...] grandfather, husband, uncle, brother, brother-in-law. [And] to him who has gathered us here—Daddy, Udada—we say, "Thank you [] for the many ways you showed us love, for the many times you challenged us, for the many times you comforted us.

What a lovely dance he offered his family and the world.

There is footage of him dancing...presumably to the disco version of We Shall Overcome—every step of his, an act of reverence and every breath of his, a prayer...a mantra to be whispered to oneself in times of adversity:

I think I can... I think I can...

May it be so. Blessed be. Ashe and amen.