

Free Your Mind: the Courage to Imagine and Create Citizenry October 23, 2011

A new day. Sometimes we eagerly await new days for the changes we hope they will bring. Sometimes new days surprise us with really unexpected changes. For instance, I remember one day, I think I was in seventh grade, maybe eighth. It was winter, there was snow on the ground, and while students at my school had the day off, staff members, including my mother, who was the school receptionist, were at work. I don't remember what I was doing that day, but at some point I received the news that my mom was in the hospital, with a concussion. It turns out that while she and another staff member were taking a lunch-time walk, they came across a couple of students sledding down a hill between the two soccer fields at our school. One of the students invited mom to get on the sled and--here's the new day part--she did!

But mom didn't see the little jump they'd made out of packed snow, and so half way down the hill, off she went, flying into the air, and landing on the back of her head. Off to the hospital she went. Upon getting there to visit her, I remember her asking me the same question, about the weather, several times. It must have been a big bump. The one on the hill and the one on her head.

But, that bump, that unintentional flying through the air, I want to emphasize, is not the center of this story. The center of this story is that *my* mom, my *mom*, got on that sled in the first place! (An interesting subplot was the fact that the student who got her to go on the sled was the goalie of the girls' varsity soccer team, whom I had a crush on, and I was left wondering how *mom* had gotten so lucky to go sledding with her. But that's another story.) Mom, my mom, age 55 or so, had said yes to something I'd never seen her do. And before that little jump had surprised her half way down the hill, she'd been whooshing down, the winter wind against her cheeks, a blur of snowy white flashing by, and she had been, for a moment, free.

Aside from concern for her head, and a little jealousy about time spent with the goalie, I was, above all, impressed. And I don't just mean intellectually impressed, like, "I'm impressed." I mean a liberating, breathtaking moment of risk was impressed from then on into my memory and into my understanding of who my mother was.

That was thirty or so years ago. And then last weekend comes along. I'm at the Wildflower women's retreat, at Mo Ranch. We're done doing our Saturday morning programming, and there's some free time to spend either on your own or joining in on some planned activities. Coming back to my

room from lunch, I run into my friend Lucy, who's along on the retreat for the first time, and she's in a rush to get down to the water. If you've ever been to Mo Ranch, then you know that at the water, there is a giant slide, something that looks like a section of an old roller coaster, that runs right into the river. So much like a roller coaster is this slide that it has tracks, and in order to ride down it, you have to sit on a little wooden cart with wheels. Whoosh you go, down the slide, hopefully leaning back just right, so that when you-and-the-cart hit the water, you skid across its surface for maybe 10 or 15 yards, until finally down into the water you and the cart go. *I already knew* this because I'd been watching Unitarian Universalist teenagers from summer camp riding this very slide for the past several summers.

But now here was Lucy, mom of three, pushing fifty, chomping at the bit to go, and then going. And not only Lucy, but watching and wondering and calculating and then triumphant and sliding and skimming across the water was Lois Smith, and later Melissa Butler, and the next day, for one final round, Donnis Doyle came down. These women, all mothers, by the way, ranged in age from their mid-forties to their mid-sixties. All were braver than me.

OK, I will justify my not going down the slide by reminding you all that my efforts at swimming look something like a combination of the Titanic and the Tasmanian Devil. But just so you also know, there is an agreement between me and these women-of-the-slide that they get to toss me into the next body of water we meet, and I will not resist--too much. But again: that's another story.

The real story, told from this bystander's point of view, is the story of imagination, the story of courage, the story of freedom. Necessarily, it is also the story of risk. For making manifest what we imagine, conjuring the courage to act, living into moments of freedom, demands risk. The story of the slide is also is the story of transcendence, a kind of freedom itself, in that assumptions about who can, and is excited, to do things like slide down big scary water slides, are transcended by all who are participants and all who are witnesses. I want to give a shout out here, too, to Carol Knight, whom I believe is the first of the Wildflower women retreaters to slide this slide, a couple of years ago. Any others?

So now, think about this. Here among us, we know we have at least four or five imaginative, courageous women living on the path, or slide, of freedom--a handful of people who listened to their imaginations and their

hearts and followed suit. As Donnis said that Sunday morning, “I don’t want to live with regrets,” so down she went.

How might we take beneficent advantage of these women’s courage? What if, for example, we were to encourage them to go on a kind of traveling circus slide show, entertaining witnesses across the world who would laugh and cheer, and then go home with the vision of these adventurers, these risk-takers, these aquatic freedom riders impressed into their memories?

Well, maybe a traveling show of Wildflower Women Water Warriors isn’t really the most practical way to go. But don’t knock it, either. After all, the late Catholic priest, writer, and theologian Henri Nouwen was so struck by the trapeze artists he saw in a traveling circus show, that he eventually, as a middle aged adult, climbed a circus ladder and experienced for himself the rush and thrill and freedom of flying through the air, letting go of his swing, and being caught on the other end by a trapeze artist faithfully swooping in to take him by the hand. This faith-filled experience became a central theme and metaphor for the remainder of Nouwen’s life and of his writing. So you never know how your allegedly minor or trivial or playful act of adventure may influence others.

And that being so, what if we were to take it up a notch? What if we took our imagination and our courage out into the most hurting parts of the world? There is not much trivial or minor or really very playful in the words of Paul Robeson, who states, “I shall take my voice wherever there are those who want to hear the melody of freedom or the words that might inspire hope and courage in the face of despair and fear.” No. Not much playfulness. But there is no doubt, either, that Robeson is telling us, “I’m taking this show on the road.” Furthermore, while Robeson hopes to inspire courage in others, it’s also clear he carries it within himself. When he says, “The song of freedom must prevail,” there is a sense he is not only saying, “I’m taking this show on the road,” but also, “just you try and stop me.”

Which may make some people a little uncomfortable. Why’s he got to rock the boat? Why’s he got to go making waves? Similarly, why do all those young people have to occupy Wall Street, or City Hall right here in Austin? Why? Because Robeson knew he had to, and the people know they have to. Robeson understood, along with Frederick Douglass before him, that, “those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground...rain without thunder and lightning...the ocean without the awful roar of its waters.” And Robeson knew, as did Douglass, as do the Occupiers that, “power

concedes nothing without a demand.” So Robeson made his demands. And yes, power fought back. Because of his outspoken beliefs about racism and imperialism, Robeson was tracked by both the FBI and the CIA, and he was eventually blacklisted from Hollywood. But even at the end of his life, Robeson prevailed in his convictions, and was guided by courage.

Speaking of prevailing, and speaking of *occupying*, you may have heard that folk singer Pete Seeger, at the age of 92, walked thirty New York City blocks on Friday night, in support of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Together with Arlo Guthrie and others, Seeger sang classic protest songs such as “We Shall Overcome,” and chanted “We are the 99%,” as he walked from Symphony Space to Columbus Circle. He also chanted with the others, “We are unstoppable; another world is possible.”

We are unstoppable; another world is possible. Do we believe that? Do we believe it enough to take a few risks? Sure, sometimes when we take risks, we hit upon unseen snow-packed jumps and come crashing down on our heads. But other times, when we allow our imaginations to lead us, and we conjure up our courage, and we let go, we slide down slides and gain speed and force, and in the end we skim across the water, pumping our fists victoriously, knowing that by taking such risks, we have changed our relationship to the world for the better.

So the question arises, as a religious community, how do we take the risk of paying attention to our imaginations? How do we act from a place of courage, and free ourselves from the false belief that we don't have the power to change the world for the better? How do we follow through with our commitment to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice?

The Rev. Victoria Safford says, "To see, simply to look and see, is an ethical act and intentional choice; to see, with open eyes," she says, "is a spiritual practice and thus a risk, for it can open you to ways of knowing the world and loving it that will lead to inevitable consequences." Think here, for instance, of Paul Robeson, carrying his voice, and his *vision*, "wherever there are those who want to hear the melody of freedom...." Think of the Occupiers. Safford continues, "The awakened eye is a conscious eye, a willful eye, and brave, because to see things as they are, each in its own truth, will make you very vulnerable."

Vulnerability is not, if I may use a theological term, a comfy feeling. The Latin root, *vulnus*, which means *wound*, makes that perfectly clear. But how much of our vulnerability, our woundedness, is really about the present moment, and how much of it traces back to our past, or is in anticipation of the future? People often conclude I must not like the water, or that I'm

scared of it, when I am reluctant to get in it. But that's not really the case. Being in the water, literally stepping or jumping into a different element from the routine of land and sky, is, if not completely liberating, at least transformative. But because of past experiences, and because of my own apprehension of how well I will do, it just takes me much, much longer to actually get in than it does for most folks.

In other areas of life, though, I know I don't have that kind of time. *We* don't have that kind of time. Or, we can say we do. But meanwhile, the banks do what they do, foreclosures run rampant, health care remains inaccessible, public education plummets, pipelines get proposed, people get deported, marriage inequality continues, and the world we wish for, for ourselves and for our children, gets passed up for something smaller. Smaller minds, smaller hearts, smaller spirits.

It is time we free our minds. If we profess to favor freedom, then it is time we celebrate agitation. If we believe there is change to be had in the world, then it is time we live into risk. If we see injustice and sorrow in the world, then it is time we see ourselves, in the words of Rev. Safford, as prisms of both reflection and refraction in this world, "reflecting everything exactly as it is, unable to exist dishonestly;" taking into ourselves "the truth

of what [we] see and hear and transforming it somehow, changing its direction, acting on it, rendering it somehow, anew.”

Frederick Douglass wrote that, “the limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.” Whether the issue of the Occupy movement is about the 99% vs. the 1%--an us vs. them paradigm--or whether it is about *all* of us confronting the system we *all* live within; or whether the tyranny each one of us faces in our own lives is the tyranny of outside powers or the tyranny of our own inner fears and anxieties, we are each called, again and again, to make a choice. Shall we simply be consumers of, and thus consumed by, the world we live in, or shall we live as citizens, claiming our power, our agency and, in doing so, prescribing to such tyranny its limits?

In the world of American immigration policies and attitudes, the word *citizenry* is used almost exclusively in its most legalistic meaning. But there are plenty of *legal* citizens in this country who do not practice the “ethical act and intentional choice,” the “spiritual practice” of simply looking and seeing, seeing things as they really are, and transforming life, “changing its direction, acting on it, rendering it somehow, anew.” And there are plenty of non-legal citizens, yes citizens, who live into the world with an “awakened eye, a willful eye, and brave.”

It is *this* kind of citizenry, the citizenry of risk, of imagination, of courage, that is the citizenry of freedom. And it is this kind of citizenry to which we are called to aspire. For it is this kind of citizenry that is and which will bring a new day.

Sometimes we eagerly await new days for the changes we hope they will bring. Sometimes new days surprise us with really unexpected changes. Who will surprise me by showing up tomorrow evening at 6:30 at Occupy Austin to show your support for economic justice? Who will surprise themselves by doing so? Who will resolve, in the spirit of risk, in the joyful, courageous spirit of hopping on the slide, that Wildflower Church is ready to take things up a notch and to grow, despite our own economic hard times, and to deepen and say yes to transformation? Who will say yes to such audacious agitation? Throw me in the water. If this is to be my baptism, so shall it be. So may we build a new way.

Amen.

#1017 We Are Building a New Way