

Striving to Build Community
August 31, 2008

If any of you, like me, are movie fans, you may have heard about the release this past Friday, on the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, of the documentary film, *Trouble the Water*. *Trouble the Water* follows the lives of New Orleans residents Kimberly and Scott Roberts, as they struggle through the battering of Katrina itself, as well as the heartbreak of its aftermath.

Of how Kimberly Roberts in particular endured the storm, the *New York Times* review of the film states, “Ms. Roberts didn’t wait out the storm from her home in the Lower Ninth Ward; she chased it. Roaming her neighborhood on foot and bicycle, she videotaped the gathering dark clouds and her stranded neighbors with a newly bought camera, watching with mounting concern as the drizzle grew into a deluge.” The

review continues, “As her sightlines roughly shift from one fugitive image to the next—wary adults, giggly children, nervous dogs, a stop sign that will soon be almost entirely under water—you can feel the pressure of the moment.”

Now, though I myself haven’t yet seen the film, having been to New Orleans a few times post-Katrina, having been to the Lower Ninth Ward, now largely empty, having met and worked with some of Katrina’s survivors, and hearing now of New Orleanians evacuating as Gustav makes its way to shore, just reading about Ms. Roberts’ determination to document the storm, I do feel, indeed, these three years later, the pressure of the moment.

And though I haven’t yet seen the film, I also feel the power—the prophetic power—of the film’s title, *Trouble the Water*. If it sounds familiar, it may be because you’ve sung or heard the African American spiritual, “Wade in the Water.”

“Wade in the water, children,” the song says, “God’s gonna trouble the water.”

Now I’ve known this song most of my life, but its true significance didn’t hit me until several years ago, when I attended a concert in which this song was sung, and it was noted that the instruction for the children (whether children of people or children of God) to wade in the water was quite literal: When escaping from slavery in the middle of the night, with no light but starlight, with no certainty of what will lie ahead, wade in the water. It will make the dogs chasing after you lose your scent.

Of course, the song, “Wade in the Water,” itself in turn alludes to a people fleeing from slavery even further back in time, the time, in the Hebrew Bible, when the Israelites are delivered from Egypt. Though one scholar notes that the actual biblical line about troubling the water comes not from

the Old Testament, specifically the Red Sea parting, but the New, that connection between modern American slavery and ancient Hebrew slavery is made both frequently and profoundly in African American spirituals and narratives. Both times of exodus from slavery were times of what Martin Luther King, Jr. would call “redemptive suffering,” a suffering that takes a people to a greater place, a truer freedom—a time, in Bishop Desmond Tutu’s words, when the people “had to travel through the desert,” when “they had to bear the responsibilities and difficulties of freedom,” to persevere, even when many of them thought they might be better off going back to “the days of bondage and the fleshpots of Egypt.”

Of those days—*years*—of the Israelites escaping from slavery and crossing the desert, when Tutu says, “Some of us will not see the day of our liberation physically,” he reminds us that Moses himself, “leading that band all dressed in red,”

did not make it to Israel. He, and many others, did not get to rest in freedom here on earth.

Similarly, like Moses, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. never got to rest in freedom on this earth, never got to “see the day of our liberation physically.” The night before his own death, his assassination, he himself prophesied, speaking before the striking sanitation workers of Memphis, “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now.” He goes on,

I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Lord, I pray that Martin Luther King the Third was right when he said last Thursday that both his father and his mother would be smiling down from heaven that night—smiling down, on the 45th anniversary of Dr. King's Having a Dream, at the sight of an African-American man accepting his party's nomination to be the next president of the United States of America. I pray, as uncertain as I am about the afterlife, or heaven, or about some being called the Lord, that somehow, someway, Martin Luther King, Jr. was witness to that night.

What I *don't* have to pray for, or hope for, or wish for, is the fact that Congressman John Lewis, who had been the youngest speaker at the Washington DC rally, back in 1963, who had crossed the bridge in Selma, who had ridden on the Freedom Rides, was there. He was there, and others who had filled the lawn of the national mall, who had stood at the feet

of the Lincoln Memorial, who had heard King's refrain, "free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last!" they were there, too.

Were you there? Were you there, in your living room, watching this historical event? They say more Americans viewed Barack Obama's acceptance speech than watched the Opening Ceremonies in Beijing, or the Academy Awards, or even the last three episodes of American Idol. There is hope for this country yet!

And there is hope for this liberal religious movement called Unitarian Universalism, for, no matter what our individual *political* leanings, if we truly live into our liberal *religious* values, if we affirm and promote, as our second principle states, justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; if we affirm and promote, as our fifth principle states, the right of conscience and the use of the democratic

process, then from the days of African Americans literally wading through water to escape slavery, to the days of African Americans and their allies meeting extreme physical violence with nonviolence in order to get a seat at a diner, or on a bus, to these days of an African-American man possibly being not merely selected by a few, but elected by the many to the highest office that our country knows, we have something extraordinary to celebrate.

This is a celebration not of the Democrats alone, for, with the Republican nomination of a woman as its vice presidential candidate, we can also celebrate the continued chipping away at that glass ceiling of sexism that has been created and perpetuated in our nation. Neither one is a partisan celebration. This is not so much about the Republicans or the Democrats. Most importantly, this is about democracy—true democracy—itself. How many of you want to celebrate that?

Hallelujah. Now, with that celebration in your hearts, and with me having taken you from the hurricane beaten streets of New Orleans, to the star-guided exodus from slavery within in our southern states, to the thirst-ridden crossing of the desert to reach the promised land of Israel, to the prophetic leadership of a preacher who had a dream, and up to the present moment where a black man is running for president of our country, I now want to take you... here.

I want to take you here, to our own religious movement, and to talk to you about another kind of storm—the storm that Starr King School for the Ministry President Rebecca Parker speaks of when she recalls driving through Pennsylvania and discovering, essentially too late, that she was driving not through the *aftermath*, but the eye, of a storm. Clambering for high, dry ground, “No longer were we lodged in our familiar vehicle;” she says, “the cold water of the storm

poured down on us, baptizing us into the present—a present from which we had been insulated by both our car and our misjudgments of the country we were traveling through....”

Parker concludes, “This is what it is like to be white in America. It is to travel well ensconced in a secure vehicle; to see signs of what is happening in the world outside the compartment one is traveling in and not realize these signs have any contemporary meaning.”

Wildflower friends, in the most positive way, I know we want our community to be a safe and secure vehicle, a safe and secure community. We want it to be a shelter from the storm. But do we want to be so ensconced in our safety, in our sanctuary, that we hesitate, that we procrastinate, that we *avoid* striving for justice, equity, and compassion in the lives of our neighbors, both those we know, and those we do not know? Do we simply toe the line of resigned tradition that

Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in our country, and leave it at that? Or do we listen to the words of Unitarian Universalist minister John Crestwell when he says that “moving from a racially homogeneous church to a heterogeneous faith is in our mouths, our hands, and our feet,” and so get talking and working and walking?

Now, when I’ve talked on the issue of creating racial diversity in our community in the past, I’ve heard people ask, with great, good intention, “How do we draw more people of color into our church?” But today, rather than ask that question, I would like to ask instead, how do we get out of our “familiar vehicle” and get “baptized in the present”? If, as John Crestwell says, change is in our mouths and hands and feet, then what are we going to say? What are we going to do? Where are we going to go? “Change,” notes Rev. Crestwell, “will

not come in this movement by some natural process, but through our works and deeds.”

So here are some deeds—just some—I offer for your consideration. First, let me ask you again, are you feeling hopeful about a renewed sense of democracy in our country? Then how about signing up to help register voters? Are you feeling the ghost of Katrina as Hurricane Gustav nears our shores? Then get ready to go out and volunteer to help those in need. Are you concerned about hunger in our community? How about supporting our own Bill Walker as he works with a group of churches in SE Austin and explores creating a partnership between Wildflower Church and one of those churches that has a working food pantry? Do you worry about public education, or health care, or fair employment in our community? Then how about joining the Wildflower exploratory team as we advocate our church joining Austin

Interfaith to do passionate and effective community organizing?

How about, in other words, we not just wait for others to come to us, but we proactively go out and say, “I want to be in relationship with you,” and so see what change happens both in our community, and in our hearts and minds?

Finally, if we do want to see more diversity within these walls, then use your mouths, use your hands, use your feet in this way: walk up to a friend of yours, or a neighbor, shake his or her hand, and say, “I would love for you to come to my church with me some day.” Don’t be afraid to reach out. Don’t be afraid to rock the boat. Don’t be afraid to trouble the water. For remember, justice shall roll down like water, and peace like an ever flowing stream—*if* we, the people, make it so.

Amen.