

FREE TO BE YOU AND ME

March 2019 - Rev. Linda Goonewardene

Clap It Up! Good Morning, Family! How's the Family feelin'? It's all right. How's your motivation? It's sky high. Gonna give it up, give it up, give it away!

Every day at Integrity House began with Morning Meeting [after waking up, dressing up, cleaning up, and eating up breakfast]. When I worked in downtown Newark, New Jersey, unless there was hugely inclement weather, we went outside into Lincoln Park. There we clapped it up surrounded by huge trees, morning traffic, and the occasional drug user. It was a motivational ritual that I cherished with clapping, call-and-response, and various topics. We clapped for news of the day, sports, weather, horoscopes, short term and long term goals, and the word of the day. Residential addiction treatments, and especially the modality of Therapeutic Communities, are designed to bring structure and regularity to the daily schedules of people who need rehabilitation or the experience of daily, substance-free living.

When I interned in the Women's Unit, there was a white woman called Debbie, not her real name, who had the same word every morning. She was mandated to six months of treatment by the Drug Court Treatment Program. Every morning during the Word of the Day, I tried to yell a different word: serenity, balance, kindness, truth, gentle, and so on; the possibilities were endless. Debbie's word was

freedom for 180 morning meetings. At the time I understood her word as being free of Integrity House and residential treatment; she wanted to get back to her kids and her life in south Jersey. As a white woman, I suspected Debbie wanted to go back to a world where she was in the majority again, unlike treatment and jails which have racialized people in vast numbers out of proportion to their percentage of the general population. My friend, Lisa Boulay shared this quote, "When you've always experienced privilege, equality feels like oppression." Debbie's daily word: freedom was about getting out of the prison of addiction, which included mandated treatment far away from her loved ones. Her privilege as a white middle class woman led to her discomfort in being housed and treated with people from whom she had been socialized into seeing as less valuable as herself. "When you've always experienced privilege, equality feels like oppression." I don't know who said that, yet it rings true for today's talk on freedom and struggle.

In examining freedom, we need to look at where freedom does not exist. The title of today's talk comes from a television program that was seen as groundbreaking because it addressed the sexism that existed in society and how it begins at birth and is reinforced throughout childhood. Watching the show in 1974, as a young teenager, I was inspired and entertained by its values of individuality, tolerance, and comfort with one's identity. It spoke to parts of my existence: young, female and North American; yet it ignored my socio-economic and multi-ethnic status. When we look at what we are free to do, think, and/or believe, we begin to see what we do not control, such as our birth and, mostly our death; our family of our origin [Who here chose their parents or grandparents?]; what about our

geographical beginnings and where we live now?; then there are ways the world defines us according to various categories: age, gender identity, ethnicity, income, neighbourhood, and so on.

Growing up in the west end of Ottawa, I did not see others like myself of mixed European and Asian heritage. Surrounded by people of Anglo-European backgrounds, I learned to pass by leaning on the German heritage of my mother and the English heritage of my father and the place of my birth. As a child I remember being fascinated by the life of Harriet Tubman, who was born into slavery in the American colony of Maryland, escaped to Philadelphia, and then became a conductor on the Underground Railroad. She brought people to freedom in the northern colonies and eventually British North America; fugitive slaves referred to what was to become Upper Canada as Heaven or Canaan. Recently I came across this statement from Harriet, "I had crossed the line. I was free, but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land." Clearly things were not as straightforward as I had been led to believe in my childhood history books.

One of the reasons I am glad to live in Ottawa is the access we have to rich cultural opportunities. In February I was able to attend two launches at the national Library and Archives of significant books that expand our understanding of this society in which we live. The first book, written by Cecil Foster, is "They Call Me George: The Untold Story of Black Train Porters and the Birth of Modern Canada". This book became a link for me to the Harriet Tubman of my youth. Cecil describes what happened to people who struggled with and managed to escaped slavery and reach the land of freedom.

Unlike the rather dull history of Canada that I was taught in school, Cecil assesses people and events according to his lens of multiculturalism and social justice. I learned how Governor John Graves Simcoe, who had been the 18th century war rival of President George Washington, was also his political opposite in defining freedom in their respective lands. The president supported gradual freedom for people according to their perceived social and mental abilities. Specifically he explained slavery to an English visitor by saying, "when we profess, as our fundamental principle, that liberty is the inalienable right of every man, we do not include madmen or idiots; liberty in their hands would be a scourge." Governor Simcoe, on the other hand, believed in equality or the right to freedom for all people and it was a priority in his politics. He said, "the moment that I assume the government of Upper Canada, under no modification will I assent to a law that discriminates, by dishonest policy, between the natives of Africa, America, or Europe". Cecil writes that "Upper Canada became the second state, after Denmark, to abolish slavery on May 16, 1792, and the first British colony to outlaw slavery. The Act of George III, Chapter 27, which permitted the admission of slaves into a colony was repealed." What this meant in real person terms was that no slave could be brought into the province, any current slave was limited to a contract of nine years, and children of slaves were declared free @ 25 years of age, until then they were to remain with their mothers. Freedom was gradual, yet possible, and so legal slavery disappeared.

They Call Me George relates the struggle for equality that was committed by the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. It was an accepted practice that all railway porters were called George, after George Pullman, the entrepreneur who developed Pullman service on

trains. A porter offered head-to-toe pampering of passengers that was designed to replicate the services available in Southern great houses and antebellum America. Being one of George's Boys or simply George underlined the paternalistic role whites assumed toward Black men and the insidious ways that racial oppression continued despite political equality. By limiting employment in this position to Black men, the Canadian National Rail and the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees inadvertently contributed to the growth of a movement to end workplace segregation and gain equality in Canada. As Coretta Scott King once said, "My story is a freedom song of struggle. It is about finding one's purpose, how to overcome fear and to stand up for causes bigger than one's self."

There is a cartoon by Anders Nilson, which has two birds talking to each other: The first bird asks the second bird about various newspapers and magazines, such as the New York Times, Washington Post, People, Sports Illustrated, and so on for 12 of the 16 panels. Finally the second bird says, "I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about." The first bird says, "Well what do you read then? Where do you get your news, your culture? I mean, what the heck do they use to line the bottom of your cages?" They stare blankly at each other. "Cages?" responds the second bird. Hmm, what cages are we living in and how free are we?

This time of year, I try to wake up early in the morning to watch the sunrise from the ninth floor of my condo building. In reading and writing about freedom, I am reminded of this quote by Norman Borlaug, Nobel Peace Prize winner and creator of the World Food Prize: "Without food, men can live at most but a few weeks; without [food] all

other components of social justice are meaningless." Having a roof over my head, having fresh water whenever I turn on my taps are all reminder of the freedoms I have in my life due to privilege and struggle in my life. Here I would disagree with Langston Hughes who wrote, "In all my life, I have never been free. I have never been able to do anything with freedom, except in my field of writing." Freedom exists in big and little ways. As a child, when things were difficult, I would think about concentration camps, which were part of my collective German heritage of shame; then my problem would not feel so small and my sense of freedom was enlarged.

The second book, launched at the national Library and Archives was written by Monique Begin about her political career, as one of the first five female Members of Parliament. It is called, "Ladies, Upstairs! My Life in Politics and After". She opens her story with this line: "As far back as I can recall, I have always felt different: belonging to two worlds, constantly finding myself at odds with my surroundings." Who doesn't relate to that line? We grow up in the world of our parents or family of origin and then interact with the larger world of our neighbourhood, school, friends, and employment. Applying the lenses of freedom and struggle to Monique's life, we see her privileges of a White European background that is filled with the struggles of immigrant families and being female. It is a fascinating story that she is free to tell as someone who has retired from politics.

What does freedom and struggle have to do with being a Unitarian Universalist? The fourth principle mentions a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Rosa Parks said that she "would like to be remembered as a person who wanted to be free... so

other people would also be free." We belong to religious traditions that have been involved with the struggle for freedom over the centuries in a variety of issues: peace, equality, and anti-oppression. Professor M. Shawn Copeland wrote, "If slavery was the greatest evil, freedom was the greatest good and women and men struggled, sacrificed, and endured much to attain it....Yet, from the anguish (of [our/African American] people) rose distinctive religious expression, exquisite music and song, powerful rhetoric and literature, practical invention and creative art." Alanis Morissette's song today was one she wrote, in part, about her struggles with disordered eating. She speaks about this song as a prayer that came from her during a dark time.

The struggle for freedom can involve life or death situations. One of my favourite Universalist ancestors was John Hus, a Catholic priest in Prague in the 1400's. His heresies consisted of conducting worship in the language of the people, not Latin and sharing the chalice of wine with everyone instead of reserving it for the clergy. He was burned at the stake in 1415, but his followers were known by the chalice, which they embroidered into their capes. Before he died, he stated that "you may kill me but you can't kill my ideas; they will rise like the phoenix from my ashes". And so they did: to this day we continue in our heretical religious ways. As Viktor Frankl wrote, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

Every day we have the opportunity to acknowledge our privilege in a world filled with injustice; every day we have the freedom to

struggle for what we learn is right. Coretta Scott King reminds us that "struggle is a never ending process. Freedom is never really won, [as] you earn it and win it in every generation." And Frederick Douglas stated that "those who profess to favour freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are [those] who want crops without plowing up the ground. " When we continue on our way today, we continue to struggle for freedom in many ways: sharing our chalice capes with the world, plowing up the ground, living out our search for truth and meaning by speaking up, singing our songs, being the lion and the mouse, clapping it up, and sharing our multiple visions of freedom for ourselves and others.