

Promises and Dreams: Imagining a New Way

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There is a lot of history on my mind this week.

Tomorrow is the annual celebration of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday.

On Wednesday, the United States will inaugurate its 46th president.

Thursday is the 49th anniversary of the debut of All In the Family on CBS.

Friday is the anniversary of the famous Roe v. Wade supreme court decision guaranteeing the right to be free from governmental intrusion when making medical decisions about one's reproductive health.

Also, we've now gone 10 days without a violent attempt at a coup. Although today is young and I've heard news that more seditious riots are planned around the country for later today. Probably after folks get home from church.

As we imagine what lays before us as a nation and a congregation, it is worth examining what the original plan was of each institution.

Our nation was founded by people who wanted to be in charge of their own business, to make their own laws, and to not be subject to the whims of a distant monarch.

This congregation was founded by people who wanted to gather together to share their ideas, and to improve themselves and their community by their efforts.

The first group – the colonizers – believed themselves to be superior human beings to the indigenous folks they found on this continent, and to the others they imported and enslaved to do the work they would not do.

They founded their government structures with that idea front and center, even if it was never openly acknowledged.

This congregation was created in the model of James Freeman Clarke's very 19th century Unitarian understanding of the possibility for human improvement "onward and upward forever." It has sought to continually improve the lives of its members and of the community in which it exists. We, and the world, can always be improved, is the underlying concept, and this is a group dedicated to that effort.

Allow me a brief historical interlude for a moment.

In 1886, Clarke preached a sermon called "Vexed Questions in Theology." This sermon turned the dominant interpretation of Calvinism's five theological tenets of the 1) Total Depravity of human nature, 2) Unconditional Election (God Chooses you, not the other

way), 3) Limited Atonement (salvation for the chosen, not everyone), 4) Irresistible Grace (you cannot say no to salvation), and the 5) Preservation of the Saints (once you're saved, you cannot be lost.)”

Clarke upended contemporary Christian theology with these words:

“We believe in the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Leadership of Jesus, Salvation by Character, and the Progress of Mankind, onward and upward forever.”¹

You can imagine that Clarke's re-imagining of the nature of God, humans, and salvation caused something of a stir at the time. Clergy and theologians of the day denounced his heresy and condemned his efforts in stark terms.

Such is the way with all new ideas.

I have been reading anew this week the 2016 book “The Third Reconstruction” by Rev. Dr. William Barber, II, of North Carolina's now famous Moral Monday movement and the nationwide Poor People's Campaign.

One of the repeating messages in this book is the idea that organizers for justice must gather into what he called “fusion coalitions” of diverse groups who all share some very basic goals. By building these coalitions, he said, the extremists who seek to suppress black votes and pass laws that hurt people who are poor or otherwise marginalized, will be unable to divide and conquer the progressive groups.

The second message that rang so very true for me in this book, and perhaps lingered longer than any other was this: “Resistance is your confirmation.”²

Bishop Barber referenced the clarion words of Frederick Douglass “power concedes nothing without demand,” which were part of a speech by Douglass in 1857 in Canandaigua, New York. The full quote reads

“Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.”³

It seems as though we may currently be learning the limits of a tyrant.

But I digress.

¹ <https://uudb.org/articles/jamesfreemanclarke.html>

² Barber, Reverend Doctor Williams J., II, and Wilson-Hartgrove, Jonathan; *The Third Reconstruction*, 2016 Beacon Press, Boston. P. 55

³ <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress/>

“Power concedes nothing without a demand.”

“Resistance is your confirmation.”

The two are inextricably linked.

In the work for progress, in the work for justice, there are rarely mile markers by which we can measure our progress: “Mile 72: you’ve come 12 miles this year. Good job! Keep going!”

In the work for justice, we can measure our progress by the amount of backlash it engenders.

Let’s take a look now at the progress we’ve seen in the United States in the past generation. 60 years ago was 1960. Think about all that has transpired since that time in terms of social justice. Brown v. Board of Education. Loving vs. Virginia. Roe v. Wade. Emmit Till. Integration. Busing. Marriage equality. The Voting Rights Act. The demographic makeup of the United States is shifting so that we will be a majority-minority population within a few decades, at the most.

Now let’s think of what the US looked like in 1960 – white male heteropatriarchy was the rule. Women were regularly prohibited from getting a mortgage or credit card without a husband or male relative to co-sign. The Beatles had not yet come to the US. Female virginity was the dominant myth in American culture. Lynchings were too common. Separate water fountains, restrooms, and seats on buses and in movie theaters were the rule, and to cross that line was to court violence or even death.

Bishop Barber referenced the non-violence resistance practiced by Mahatma Gandhi, who was credited with saying “First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you. Then they fight you. Then you win.”

It is my belief here that Gandhi was trying to emphasize that it was the *fighting* that was the cause for the oppressor’s failure. Committed to nonviolence as he was, to engage in fighting, of course, would be the failure. But that has not been how those words have been interpreted through the years.

As the Moral Monday coalition was in its earliest formation, and trying to organize disparate groups of marginalized people, the extremist powers in control in North Carolina at the time were following Gandhi’s game plan unawares.

Bishop Barber wrote:

“In keeping with the Gandhian formula, most political pundits and party strategists ignored us. Occasionally we would see mean-spirited cartoons, most of them poking fun at me personally. If we had been in this for external rewards, it would have been an exercise in daily frustration. The pay was nonexistent, the accolades absent, the mockery mean, and the encouragements few and far between. But we knew what we were doing was right. And we had each other.”⁴

Sir Isaac Newton taught us a lot about the laws of matter and physics and mass and motion.

⁴ Barber, Wilson-Hartgrove, *ibid.* p. 60-61

It is my belief that human beings, as creations of the same universe as the rocks and trees and oceans, all made from the building blocks of hydrocarbons, that we are more subject to those same laws of physics in our relationships with one another than we might first imagine.

Newton explored the idea of inertia and concluded that an object at rest will stay at rest unless acted on by some outside force.

This concept transfers easily to the worlds of politics, justice, and parenting.

Newton also considered the effects of resistance on movement, and people began to understand about friction. Friction can slow a moving object down to the point where it stops moving altogether. Again, this translates easily to the world of politics, justice, and parenting.

And so, the work for justice cannot rest, lest friction slow it down and cause it to stop.

The trickiest part of exploring this avenue of thought is to know that the oppressors are thinking the same thing. They believe they are right. They believe that the progress we have made is causing great harm to the system that they love, and that works just fine for them. They believe that justice is a zero-sum game, and that for one side to win, the other must lose.

But like I have said before, justice, like love, and dignity, is not finite, like a pie to be sliced up and gone once everybody gets some.

Parents, let me know if I am off base here. When you have a child, you cannot imagine your heart being more full than it is in that moment. You could never love anything more than you love this new person. When you have a second child, this process is repeated, am I right? Again, your heart swells to bursting with love and emotion.

Now, do you love your first child less than you love the second child? Do you only have so much love to go around so now you have to ration it?

Of course not. Your heart expands its capacity to accommodate this new amazing reality.

Such is the case for justice and for dignity and for rights. Indeed, it can be said that a rising tide lifts all ships, and like when one shop in a town unionizes and its workers get better wages and benefits, other shops in that town begin paying their people better so they don't lose them to the union outfit. Everyone benefits. It is not a zero-sum game.

If the amount of resistance we are getting is confirmation of the work we've been doing, it seems that we're making lots of progress, no matter how slow and uphill it feels in the moment.

Sometimes, to find out what works, we first must try everything that doesn't work.

Then, maybe, we can accept what it is that we must do.

Maybe

We humans are a stubborn lot.

Often, we insist on trying things that don't work repeatedly, hoping things will come out different. Albert Einstein described this practice of repeating the same behavior and expecting a different outcome as insanity.

Some lessons are more difficult to learn than others.

Sometimes the challenge is internal. We must learn how to be open to the impossible.

Imagination is not limited to the arts. Imagination is what allows us to learn new things in science and technology. When we search for new ways to do a task, or seek to find ways to protect crops from disease, or animals from extinction, we must approach the task with an open mind, prepared to be wrong, and many times.

We must practice learning to believe impossible things.

Henry Ford is erroneously credited with saying "if I asked what my customers wanted, they'd have said 'a faster horse.'" While the attribution is erroneous, the lesson is not. Imagination requires us to be willing to accept that impossible things can happen.

We are on the cusp of a huge political event. For the first time in modern US history, we are not having a peaceful transfer of power from one presidential administration to the next. The events of the past month have played out as they did in part because of a lack of imagination on a variety of levels.

Somehow, nobody imagined the violence would do what it did. Nobody imagined that insurrectionists would storm the halls of Congress. Nobody imagined that they would kill a police officer.

And yes, there was collusion and collaboration and deliberate actions that made the whole thing so much worse.

But there was also a failure within the system to imagine that that kind of betrayal of oath and responsibility was possible.

The people charged with keeping this safe, for whatever reason, were unable to get their brains to think of the one outcome that happened.

Our ability to imagine impossible things is vital not just to our progress, but also to our survival.

Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said: 'one can't believe impossible things.'

'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'

May we ever seek to imagine and believe in impossible things. For our progress. For our survival.

Amen.