

Sermon Black and White and Red All Over

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Reflection *Black and White and Red All Over*

I pray for peace. I pray for it with a heart stained with the blood of my ancestors' violence and the unanswered guilt of a nation. "No poem play or song can fully right a wrong inflicted or endured." (The Cure At Troy by Seamus Heaney) But I pray nonetheless because my heart aches. I do not pray for freedom, because as a dominant white American, freedom is *my responsibility*. Robert Heinlein once said, "You can have peace. Or you can have freedom. Don't ever count on having both at once."

Robert A. Heinlein, Time Enough for Love (1973).

I don't count on either. Peace will be a gift. Freedom has to be earned. The first place we need to earn freedom is in our hearts, the next place is in our guts.

On Martin Luther King, Jr. Sundays, we talk and sing about freedom from oppression and government of suppression – but in reality we are talking about two things; fear and love. Love and fear. The now of fear and the hope of love to banish all fear. That is how we earn freedom.

There are times when I feel the acute irony of standing here before you on such a morning as this; standing and talking about racism and violence. I am the embodiment of the least statistically likely victim of violence. (I'm older, I'm female, I'm living in a suburb, and I'm white.) Oh, I could be assaulted tomorrow, but chances are it will be someone much younger; and if not much younger, then male; and if not male, then someone living poor in an urban area; and if not someone living poor in an urban area, then someone of color. In, this country, one of the deadliest of first world nations, Black Americans are almost eight times as likely to be homicide victims as whites. Black Americans are killed at twelve times the rate of others in all the world's most developed countries. Twelve times the rate of others killed in the world's 31 developed countries.

<http://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/black-americans-are-killed-at-12-times-the-rate-of-people-in-other-developed-countries/>

Black Americans Are Killed At 12 Times the Rate Of People In Other Developed Countries by Nate Silver

This cold stark reality is a rebuke to our way of life. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said "the absence of freedom is the presence of death."

Martin Luther King, Jr., Address at the Fiftieth Annual NAACP Convention, 17 July 1959, New York.

This presence of death is the absence of freedom. And this is why black lives matter; because *this* presence of death is the absence of *our* freedom. And if our hearts do not ache to hear this reality, then we do not deserve either freedom or peace.

How can I, a white woman living relatively secure in my dominant American culture, speak truth to violence? I have never had to hide under my bed in fear in my own home. I do not have to fear for the safety of my child at school or in church or on the street. That alone separates me from tens of millions of people in this country. How can I speak to this violence? The answer is I must. I must respond to the call of the voice. I yearn for peace. But I have to learn what the opposite of peace means for this nation. And upon learning this reality, I must burn to change it.

I love what we are and who we are and what we stand for. But there are times I also hate what we are, what we make of ourselves.

We are a people who make fear a reality. We make violence a sensible, defensible option because we want to be able to slay our devils. How many of you read the letter to the editor in the Boston Globe a few weeks ago from a man whose seatmate on the train was loudly and angrily voicing his anti-gun opinions in a cellphone conversation.

“I found myself amazed at the irony of the situation. While you were spewing your venom, I sat quietly next to you with my National Rifle Association membership card in my wallet and my 9mm pistol in its holster. ... If a bad guy with a gun had decided to walk onto that train and start shooting people, I would have been prepared and able to use my gun to defend my own life and the lives of everyone else on that train, including yours. Although you may hate me, a gun owner, I would risk my life for you. ... Your liberal self-righteousness and ignorance may have made you feel superior and comfortable, but during that 40-minute train ride to Boston, my gun kept you safe.”

Boston Globe, Letter to the Editor January 09, 2016
A. Linden
Dighton

We make fear a reality. What would a madman look like to this writer? Would he have his hand on his gun when someone who looked like a madman to him entered the carriage? What would acting suspiciously look like to this writer? I know that if I entered the carriage, he would feel safe. But what if my youth or gender or clothing or attitude made him feel I was a threat? We make our fear a reality.

My point is, someone young, male, black and bursting with attitude shouldn't have to be afraid of being shot. When he rides a train. When he knocks on the door of a stranger looking for help. When he drives through an unfamiliar neighborhood. When he drives through his own neighborhood. When he walks down his own streets. And when he is shot, he should receive justice. He is less likely to receive justice; especially if the shooter believes that he or she is in a position of authority. With no justice, there is no freedom. There is no freedom for any of us. The absence of our freedom is the presence of our death.

We make fear a reality. When our judicial system elevates fear to a reason to kill, we make fear more powerful than reason. When fear is more powerful than reason, our courts – our entire system of justice – is useless. It is no longer the great leveler; it is no longer the final recourse for the powerless against the powerful. We have made the gun the equalizer instead of our courts. I am not anti-gun so much as I am anti-fear.

I believe in this country, I believe that our constitution and our judicial system are the best the world has to offer. But nothing about us will have any integrity, or meaning, or purpose unless we work to make them a living, working reality. To do this, we have to extricate our fear from our ideals.

“Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around;” no injunction, no hatred, no racism, no injustice, no jail cell. That's what this song is about. We don't just use injustice as a weapon against the innocent; we use justice as a weapon against the innocent.

“You can only protect your liberties in this world by protecting the other man's freedom. You can only be free if I am free.”

Clarence Darrow Address to the court in People v. Lloyd (1920)

“The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish truth. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extremists of justice?”

Martin Luther King, Jr. "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community"

[from Seamus Heaney reading, *The Cure at Troy*]

“History says, Don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.”

The tidal wave will not happen unless we – all of us – make it happen. Nothing will happen unless and until we let go of history and let love rise up. Love for others, love for the stranger. It has to start here.

The absence of love is the absence of justice. The absence of justice is the absence of freedom. The absence of freedom is the presence of death.

Let us pray for peace, let us live for love.