

Does Marching Matter?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world;
it’s the only thing that ever has.”*

--Margaret Mead

Readings

from “Holy the Firm” by Annie Dillard

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place?
There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart
on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting
ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our
innocent fathers are all dead – as if innocence had ever been – and our children
busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen
wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of
pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved.
But there is no one but us. There never has been.

from the *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 30 (Brian Browne Walker translation)

Those who wish to use Tao to influence others
don’t rely on force or weapons or military strategies.
Force rebounds.
Weapons turn on their wielders.
Battles are inevitably followed by famines.

Just do what needs to be done, and then stop.
Attain your purpose, but don’t press your advantage.
Be resolute, but don’t boast.
Succeed, but don’t crow.
Accomplish, but don’t overpower.

Overdoing things invites decay,
and this is against Tao.
Whatever is against Tao soon ceases to be.

Sermon

Rev. Lennox Yearwood, Jr., president of the Hip Hop Caucus, community activist, prominent climate activist, named one of the 100 most powerful African Americans by Ebony magazine in 2010 and one of 10 Game Changers in the Green Movement by the Huffington Post... was on his way to the Earth Day March for Science last week in Washington, D.C..

There was a light rain as with an umbrella he, along with others, approached a crosswalk at Constitution Avenue and 14th Street. An officer was directing traffic. The “walk” sign flashed on, and the group started to cross. Partway across the officer told everyone to get out of the crosswalk. Rev. Yearwood was half way across already, so decided to get out of the crosswalk by getting to the other side of the street. A decision many might have reasonably made.

But... at this point the officer ran up to Yearwood, grabbed him, slammed him up against a food truck and demanded I.D.. Then the officer said he had to detain Yearwood because he “might be on drugs.” It wasn’t until Yearwood opened his jacket to get his I.D. thereby revealing his clerical collar and Science March V.I.P. badge that the officer’s tone began to soften. Yearwood writes:

At that moment the officer’s demeanor changed, as his perception of me changed slightly. It was as though until that moment he didn’t believe I was “supposed” to be there.

Even so, the officer still ran Yearwood’s I.D., of course revealing nothing. Meanwhile, the most disappointing part of the interaction for Yearwood was that of the many others around (none of them of color), only one person stopped to see if he was all right – a young woman, as Yearwood describes her, with pink hair.

(Needless to say, I don’t think any of this would have happened to me in the same situation...)

Well, “Marching While Black” was the title of Yearwood’s blog post in the Huffington Post from which I’ve taken this story. At the end of the post he writes:

Still, I’ll be marching again next weekend at the People’s Climate March in D.C.. Can’t stop, won’t stop, as we say in Hip Hop, because too many lives depend on us solving climate change and revitalizing vulnerable communities.

Now, among much else, we see in this story the ways in which the issues and crises of our times are deeply interwoven. And we see how any preconceptions we might have as to who would be interested, even passionate, about which issue might be wildly off the mark.

And in the midst of all that and more, we also hear from Lennox Yearwood his determination, no matter what, to march again... and no doubt again... and again.

As many of us did yesterday, whether in Washington or Boston or elsewhere.

But does marching matter? Can marching bring about social change?

Which opens us to the larger question: How *does* change in the direction of human rights, justice, peace, and earth care happen?

Well, as I've reflected this week on such questions, my thoughts turned to wondering whether some of what we know or have experienced about personal change might also apply to social change.

To begin with, we in fact do know from experience that we humans can and do change – if not our nature, then certainly our behavior. We see it all the time – and sometimes manage it ourselves.

It is not always – or ever – easy, but we do see it. And sometimes manage it ourselves.

Someone gives up smoking or stops drinking. Or starts and actually continues an exercise program. Or we change our diet in a more healthful direction.

Or we learn not to react so quickly with anger or irritation, or at least not to act on those feelings when they arise.

Or we decide to turn down the thermostat or drive less or buy a more energy efficient car.

Okay then, how do we do any of these things?

Multiple strategies. It seems to me that first, though, comes noticing that the way we've been going hasn't been working, whether this is about diet and exercise or about the ways in which we interact with people we love or with the world more generally.

From this noticing grows the desire to change. This may begin with reasoning ourselves in the direction of what we know is better for us and better for those around us or better for the wider world. And then we just decide to change and then exert some will power to begin changing – will power, which we actually do have.

Along the way we might add meditation, or some form of deep reflection, to plumb the depths of our motivations and habitual responses, and to create new ones.

Finally, along the way we might lean on the companionship and help of a community of supportive others, sometimes others engaged in the same work of change, whether a 12-step group, a meditation circle, or just a few friends. For we know that we can't always do these things alone.

But whatever strategies we employ, turns out that one way or another what we are doing when we learn new habits, new behaviors of one kind or another, is creating new neural pathways in our brain. This further means that every time we continue with the new behavior we are, so to speak, deepening the groove of those new neural pathways, maybe overwriting the old ones. This is good news!

And here's some additional good news. Sometimes, maybe more than sometimes, it takes a surprisingly short time to develop a new habit. In mere weeks or months we can come a long way. And though the deeper the groove of the old pattern, the longer it might take to create the new, the main point here is that it can be done. We can and do change for the better.

What, then, about social change?

Well, it seems to me there are indeed parallels to our experience with personal change.

How, for example, did we get from a deeply homophobic society to gay marriage as the law of the land in, what, fifty years or so?

Some say it began with what became known as the Stonewall Riots in 1969, the forceful protest that ensued when police invaded the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village in New York City to harass and arrest the gay patrons. It was an event that sparked demonstrations around the country which, many say, was the beginning of the modern movement for LGBTQ rights.

For then, as over the next decades gay and lesbian people became more visible, discrimination became more visible to the general population – more and more people *noticed*. And minds and hearts began to change – not everyone’s, but enough to begin to make larger change possible.

My own evolution during these decades ran in parallel – from growing up homophobic in a homophobic culture, to realizations in my head that discrimination against gays and lesbians was wrong, to transformations of my heart as I came to know actual gay and lesbian people (and to discover I’d known some all along...).

And on it went, as I and the culture changed profoundly: through the lens of human rights – noticing what was wrong, unjust – and through our own experiences of LGBTQ acquaintances, friends, co-workers, public figures, celebrities... also through the visible marches and rallies, and through the hard work of lobbying, legislating, and law suits.

Multiple strategies

We still have a road to travel of course. Just, for example, ask any one of our youth about harassment of LGBTQ classmates in school; which is why once again there was on April 21 a National Day of Silence, another sort of social change strategy, this “student-led national event organized in thousands of schools, bringing awareness to the silencing effects of anti-LGBTQ name-calling, bullying and harassment in schools.”

But we have come a long, long way. And just as with personal change, we have come this way through a variety of strategies, changing, so to speak, the collective neural pathways of our culture.

Racial justice? Dismantling institutional racism, institutional habits as we might name them rooted in centuries of white supremacy? Why, we can well ask, is this taking so long? Why, even in our own Unitarian Universalist movement with a proud heritage of activism for human rights and civil rights, has the plague of institutional racism once again raised its head? For as some of you have perhaps been following, the Unitarian Universalist Association, our national denominational association, has been roiled recently in the wake of a denominational hiring decision that gave preference to an older white male minister over a qualified young woman of color. The ensuing controversy led to the resignation of several leaders of the UUA, including the president of our association, Rev. Peter Morales (himself, ironically, Latino).

Well, the reality is that we collectively (of course not just UUs) have not fully come to terms with the ways in which the legacies of slavery, discrimination, and white privilege are centuries long and deeply rooted.

Yes, we have made undeniable progress in our nation when it comes to racism and civil rights. Yes, marches and rallies have been a piece of the progress, along with lawyers and legislation, all of which slowly (all too slowly) also have changed hearts and minds and the culture. But we do have a ways to go.

As for climate change, the one issue that gets undeniably worse with every day and every year of inadequate action... and which, as you know, I talk and write – and march – about frequently.

This morning I’ll just say, with Rev. Lennox Yearwood, as you heard earlier:

Can’t stop, won’t stop, as we say in Hip Hop, because too many lives depend on us solving climate change and revitalizing vulnerable communities.

Well, I have two last thoughts for today.

First, the critical reminder of how gradual, and sometimes visible sometimes not, change and activism, which may include marches and rallies that for a long time seem to make no difference whatsoever, eventually can give rise to what only appears to be sudden change – transformation.

Just think of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. It seemed to happen all of a sudden in 1989. But it followed years, decades, of organizing and protest, including eventually mass rallies and marches, within most of those countries that for a long time seemed to have no effect. But the tipping point finally arrived. Just as, in our country, gay marriage seemed “suddenly” (in the long view) to become the law of the land.

So we must not be discouraged when it seems that change comes slowly or not at all. Whether in regard to racial justice or climate justice or whatever the issue. In any case, as Annie Dillard reminded us in that first reading, however imperfect and broken we deem ourselves to be, there is and always has been only us. Only us to keep at it, with hope even wild confidence that the tipping point for the good may be quite a bit closer at hand than we may believe or be able to see.

(And in any case, how else would we want to live?)

And the only way to keep at it, so it seems to me, is in ways small and large to follow the path of the Tao, knowing that violence only and almost without fail begets violence. This, even though following the Tao means the hard and long work of listening, learning, speaking up and speaking out, lobbying, and yes sometimes marching – “can’t stop, won’t stop.”

Finally, this:

The other night at the last session of our “Building Your Own Theology” class, we each shared the personal credos we had written as a final assignment. I was moved to observe that one way or another each in her or his own way had affirmed that we live in a context larger than a single solitary self, and that matters of material gain, fame and fortune, were not – beyond having enough to survive – what our lives are most truly about. For one way or another, each one of us affirmed that we wanted to ground our lives in spirit and love, and wanted to be part of shaping a culture and a world grounded more in spirit and love... than in dollars and cents.

Then, in our conversation we arrived at the shared affirmation that what we each do, how we each are in every interaction... matters, ripples into the wider world. I would add whether by our simple presence for a friend, by our words of reassurance, comfort, kindness, or encouragement, or by our speaking up and speaking out, or by our marching for what we believe – whether metaphorically or step by step on Boston Common or the National Mall.

So it will always be.