

EVERYTHING MUST CHANGE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Later this afternoon, my wife Holly and I are scheduled to attend the 4:30 PM showing of the movie *Sully*, the new Clint Eastwood movie starring Tom Hanks about the so-called “Miracle on the Hudson.” I have the tickets, and I can’t wait. In [Joe Morgenstern’s review](#) on Friday in the *Wall Street Journal*, he said it may be the best aviation movie ever. And as some of you know, I’ve had a passion for flying ever since I was very young.

If I hadn’t grown up Mennonite, and thus pacifist, I might have joined the Air Force. Instead, my parents let me take flying lessons in exchange for spending my senior year in high school at Lancaster Mennonite School in Pennsylvania. I received my private pilot’s license the day before I received my high school diploma.

One of the most important lessons I learned about flying — and about life — came on a solo cross-country flight midway through my training. My instructor sent me north from Lancaster to a radio beacon known as the Ravine VOR. The beacon is nestled among a series of ridges and ravines that turn the air above into a churning maelstrom of mayhem. A neophyte flyer caught in the turbulence feels like a tennis ball in a clothes dryer.

If I could have pulled the plane over and waited until the turbulence subsided, I would’ve done so. But you can’t park a plane in midair. My initial fear was that the airplane would come apart at the rivets, which it didn’t — no danger of that. The real question was whether I would come apart. More than one prospective pilot returned from Ravine VOR and parked the plane for good. In my case, I discovered something my instructor knew beforehand but I didn’t: like my trusty Cessna 150, I could also withstand the turbulence.

As a city and as a nation, one lesson we learned on 9/11 is that we can withstand the turbulence. In the aftermath of the attacks, we mourned the dead, comforted the bereft, and rebuilt the ruins. We became more compassionate toward our neighbors, more loyal as New Yorkers, and more steadfast as Americans. It was, as Dickens says, the best of times and the worst of times.

When turbulence hits, whether in the form of a minor disappointment or a major disaster, we learn what we are made of. We learn that we are stronger than we had ever imagined. We learn whom we can count on. We learn that we can make it through. After all, when turbulence hits, there’s no going around. There’s only through. And if we’re going to get from where we are to where we need to be, we have to stay the course.

Each of us can look at our own lives and see patches of turbulence — experiences of being disillusioned, or disappointed, or left behind, or shut out, or betrayed, or even attacked. We can look at our nation and world and see the same — places where the shear forces of sexism, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and perhaps most of all greed, have thrown human dignity and well-being into a devastating maelstrom. All told, there’s enough turbulence around to disorient us — to challenge our sense of who we are and where we’re headed. As we approach

the conferring of the Forrest Church Award on Thursday evening, my purpose this morning is to clarify our compass heading concerning the role of race in our nation.

When the United States of America initially took flight as a nation, its political, legal, and economic institutions were purpose-built to privilege white males of European descent and subordinate everyone else. In this sense, racism was the original sin of our nation, even as sexism was the original sin of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The challenge ever since has been to stay the course toward redemption from these original sins, despite inevitable and at times intractable turmoil. Institutions built for one purpose often have to be dismantled before they can be rebuilt for a different purpose. There's no going around this turmoil. There's only through.

Why is the journey to redemption from our racist past so difficult? Why would it not be? As much as anything else, the Civil War was about the South's economic reliance upon slavery, buttressed by a religious view that people of European descent were better than everyone else in the eyes of God. And when economic expediency and religious orthodoxy unite to define political necessity, change turns out to be — for the dominant culture at least — a cataclysm.

After all, people in the dominant culture, even if they agree that change might be needed, can always find a reason why any given way isn't the right way to achieve it. During the Civil Rights Era, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was sometimes criticized for being too religious, and Malcolm X was criticized for being too political, and the Black Panthers were criticized for being too militant. A lot of white people ended up feeling smugly justified in their passive opposition. It doesn't matter what destination you theoretically head for if you oppose all possible ways of getting there.

Many people in our culture today are wary of — or downright opposed to — the movement that has come to be known as Black Lives Matter. They rightly realize that achieving racial justice in our nation will change the lives of white people as well. And so they quibble, mostly not about the goal of racial justice, but about the means of achieving it. This approach is too religious, they may say, or that group is too political, or this person is too militant. Taken individually, some these criticisms may well be valid. Taken as a whole, however, they are simply another way of the dominant culture refusing to make the journey.

But — and I say this as a member of the dominant culture — this is the journey we must make as a nation, and there's no pulling off to the side, and there's no going around. There is only through. And it will continue to be a turbulent journey.

Six weeks ago, after three police officers in Baltimore had been acquitted in the death of Freddie Gray (whose death the medical examiner had ruled a homicide), and after all remaining charges against the other officers awaiting trial had been dropped, Charles Blow wrote a column in the *New York Times* titled "[Incandescent with Rage](#)."

He begins, "No one need ask me anymore about how to heal the racial divide in America. No one need inquire about the path forward beyond racial strife. You will not be put at ease by my response." He goes on to quote James Baldwin, who once said, "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time."

Blow continues, "I am now incandescent with rage and at my wits' end about how to responsibly aim it and morally marshal it. I am at the screaming place." He asks, "How are the people without the power, the people against whom the power is being exercised, supposed to alter the perversion of that power if the abusers are not held accountable?" He concludes:

“America is edging ever closer to telling people like me that the eye of justice isn’t blind but jaundiced, and I say back to America, that is incredibly dangerous.”

On April 12, 1963, the African-American jazz and blues singer Nina Simone performed a solo concert at Carnegie Hall — the same day Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights protesters were arrested and locked up in Birmingham, Alabama. Simone had grown up determined to become the first famous African-American female classical pianist, for which she had both the talent and the initial training. After a year-and-a-half at Julliard, she applied to the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, which denied her entry because of her color. Needing money, she began playing in cocktail bars.

Over time, her prodigious talent brought her into contact with people like James Baldwin and Langston Hughes. She became ever clearer that her music needed to serve a larger purpose: the freedom of her people. In the months following her Carnegie Hall debut, the civil rights worker Medgar Evers was murdered in Mississippi and then four black girls were killed in the bombing of Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Well known for her fiery impetuosity, Simone wrote in her diary after the bombing, “I had it in my mind to go out and kill someone. I didn’t yet know who, but someone I could identify as being in the way of my people.”

For the most part, civil rights leaders held the violence in check — despite the fact that, as James Baldwin said after the bombing, the only time in American history that nonviolence has been admired “is when the Negroes practice it.” Simone’s husband, who also served as her manager, urged her to put her rage into music, which she did, writing a song called “Mississippi Goddam” in an hour. It soon became an anthem of the civil rights movement.

Simone’s anger appears early in the song. It begins:

*Alabama's gotten me so upset
Tennessee made me lose my rest
And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam*

She goes on to identify the source of her frustration. She sings:

*You keep on saying “Go slow!”
“Go slow!”
But that's just the trouble
“do it slow”
Desegregation
“do it slow”
Mass participation
“do it slow”
Reunification
“do it slow”
Do things gradually
“do it slow”
But bring more tragedy
“do it slow”*

The journey from our slave-based past as a nation to a racially-just future is a long one, and yes, there will be turbulence — rage and loss, sorrow and sacrifice. But as Simone says, not making the journey will bring even more tragedy. And going slow is usually just an excuse for going nowhere.

As a congregation, we are committed to the journey toward racial justice. On Thursday evening in this sanctuary, the Forrest Church Award for Humanitarian Service will be conferred by UUA President Peter Morales upon the three women who founded the Black Lives Matter network. I hope you will join us for this historic event. Among other things, it's one of the ways we demonstrate that we're on this journey, come what may.

After all, there's no such thing as standing still — whether you're in the air or on the ground. As the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus once pointed out, we are time-bound creatures living in a time-bound universe. None of us can stay the same. As time passes, everything changes.

My favorite Nina Simone recording makes this point beautifully. It's a wistful and elegiac Bernard Ighner song titled "[Everything Must Change](#)." Simone sings:

*Everything must change
Nothing stays the same
Everyone will change
No one, no one stays the same
The young become the old
And mysteries do unfold
For that's the way of time
No one, and nothing goes unchanged*

In light of this enduring reality, the question each moment poses to us, both as individuals and as a nation, is whether we pledge allegiance to what's past or to what's possible. Here in this sanctuary, we gather each week to renew our experience of being connected to everything: all that is present in our lives and our world, as well as all that is past and all that is possible — the experience I call the experience of God.

In so doing, we commit ourselves to gathering up the burdens of the past and the gifts of the present and then continuing the journey onward, toward what is possible. Along the way, everything will change. And somehow, together, we will make it through the turbulence. We will find our way to where we belong.