

THE OTHER WORLD'S THOUGHT

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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*Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens, still with me abide.*

Thus begins one of my favorite hymns, and we almost never sing it. It's a song for the vespers hour, and we don't have vespers services here at All Souls – at least not yet. But since we're fast approaching the shortest day of the year, when the sun seems to set mere moments after it rises, I thought we could get away with singing it this morning. Besides, the song is about more than meteorological darkness.

*When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, oh abide with me.*

The dark time of the year turns out to be a good time to bear witness to dark times in other ways. It's when we observe Human Rights Sunday, which happens to arrive just before Hanukkah and Christmas. Both holidays – widely observed as celebrations today – originally emerged from situations of withering persecution and devastation. In dark times, you can more clearly see where the light comes from.

The faceplate of poet Carolyn Forché's book, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, contains a three-line poem by Bertolt Brecht titled "Motto." Brecht writes:

In the dark times, will there also be singing?
Yes, there will be singing.
About the dark times.

In her book, Forché collects poems from 145 poets who themselves endured conditions of extremity during the twentieth century: political persecution, torture, rape, imprisonment, assassination, and so on. "Many poets did not survive," Forché says in her introduction, "but their works remain with us as poetic witness to the dark times in which they lived."

In the 1970's, Forché traveled to El Salvador as part of Amnesty International. There she witnessed the unfolding civil war and its pervasive human rights abuses. Upon her return, she published a widely-acclaimed book of poems titled, *The Country Between Us*. It includes the poem that served as our reading for this service – a poem

titled, “The Colonel,” about her encounter with a Salvadoran colonel who made fun of people concerned about human rights.

Some people today still make fun of the idea of human rights – or at least make light of them, or try to ignore them. This lack of seriousness about human rights isn’t surprising, given that human rights are a relatively recent attempt by human beings to impose civilization upon the human penchant for barbarism.

Seventy-one years ago this coming Tuesday, on December 10, 1948, delegates to the fledgling United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The declaration was a beacon of light in a very dark time. Over the previous three decades, the people of the world had suffered two devastating world wars; the second had laid bare the horrors of the Holocaust. The UDHR was an attempt to articulate the rights all of us ought to have by virtue of our common humanity.

Urged on by the Eleanor Roosevelt, the delegates declared that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and the security of person. No one should be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of their country. Everyone has the right to education, to found a family, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable working conditions, to rest and leisure, to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and their family. And so on. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights commits us to treating each other with dignity.

Its adoption is a moment in human history well worth commemorating, even celebrating. Out of the devastations of history emerged a new vision of possibility. The vision remains unclear at times, and far from fully realized, but at least we now know what civilization at its most fulsome looks like.

One of the best parables I know about this transition appears in W.E.B. DuBois’s essay titled “The Coming of John,” first published in 1903. DuBois is best known to most Americans as author of *The Souls of Black Folk* and co-founder of the NAACP.

His essay – it’s the length of a long *New Yorker* article – tells about two young men named John, both from a town in southeastern Georgia. As DuBois tells the story, one John was John Jones, a black fellow who was often awkward and never on time. Yet his broad, good-natured smile conveyed a good nature and genuine satisfaction with the world.

The white folk thought black John was a good boy – fine plow-hand, good in the rice fields, always respectful. But they shook their heads when his mother wanted to send him off to school. “It’ll spoil him, – ruin him,” they said. But fully half of the town’s black folk followed John proudly to the station with his little trunk and many bundles. Then, as the train bore him away, their talk turned to what would happen when John came back: parties, speakings in the church, a new schoolhouse, perhaps with John as

teacher, maybe a big wedding. All of this would happen, and more, they said — when John comes. When John comes.

The white folk also had a John — a fair-haired, smooth-faced boy who had played many a long summer's day with his dark-skinned counterpart. "Yes, sir! John is at Princeton, sir," said the Judge every morning as he marched down to the post office. "Showing the Yankees what a Southern gentleman can do." The Judge's dream was that his son would return and settle, and be the mayor of the town and representative to the legislature, as he himself had done many years before. Du Bois writes:

Thus, in the far-away Southern village the world lay awaiting, half consciously, the coming of the two young men, and dreamed in an inarticulate way of new things that would be done and new thoughts that all would think. And yet it was singular that few thought of two Johns, — for the black folk thought of one John, and he was black; and the white folk thought of another John, and he was white. And neither world thought the other world's thought, save with vague unrest.

Seven years later, both Johns returned. Each had changed, as had their views of the town. The white town gladly welcomed home their tall and headstrong favorite son, but the young man did not veil his contempt for the little town, and plainly had his heart set on New York.

The other John also recoiled from the narrow life of his native town. He noticed oppression that had not seemed oppression before. DuBois writes, "He felt angry when men did not call him 'Mister;' he clenched his hands at the 'Jim Crow' cars, and chafed at the color-line that hemmed in him and his. A tinge of sarcasm crept into his speech, and a vague bitterness into his life; and he sat long hours wondering and planning a way around these crooked things."

The Judge did allow the black John to reopen the Negro school, after John agreed that he would not — in the Judge's words — "try to put fool ideas of rising and equality into these folks' heads, and make them discontented and unhappy." But John was already discontented and unhappy, a fact which bewildered his people. This once jovial man had become silent and gloomy.

When John spoke at the church, he tried to explain. He talked about the new century and the need for new ideas about education and the spread of wealth, about the destiny of black folks and the humanity of everyone. But all the people could hear was the disdain in John's voice for the little world they held sacred.

After the meeting, John left the church and walked down by the sea. His sister followed him. Du Bois writes:

Long they stood together, peering over the gray unresting water.

“John,” she said, “does it make everyone — unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?”

He paused and smiled. “I’m afraid it does,” he said.

“And John, are you glad you studied?”

“Yes,” came the answer, slowly but positively.

The final scene of the story is as incisively conceived and powerfully wrought as any I know. Black John courageously saves his sister from being raped by white John, for which he is lynched. Joyce Carol Oates rightly included the essay in her collection of the fifty-five best essays of the twentieth century.

On my reading, DuBois’ most blistering indictment gets issued in one line. Speaking of the two worlds, the black world and the white world, DuBois says: “And neither world thought the other world’s thought, save with vague unrest.” When people don’t think each other’s thoughts, DuBois goes on to suggest, nothing changes, and bad things keep happening.

But when education enables people – whether oppressed or oppressor – to learn about own their lives and the world of others, something different becomes possible. When one person learns about another person’s pain, when one people learns about another people’s suffering, when one world thinks the other world’s thought – then sometimes what’s past can lead to a different future. As Carolyn Forché suggests with her image of the colonel’s collection of ears pressed to the ground, it depends on whether anyone is listening.

Forché closes the introduction to her book *Against Forgetting* by quoting a question posed by the poet Robert Desnos, “You who are living, what have you done with these treasures?”

Once in a while, in the dark time of the year, we pause to remind ourselves of the treasures that emerge from dark times. If we listen, we learn what we ourselves must do to make this world more truthful, more beautiful, more peaceful, and more just. We also remind ourselves that there will be singing — even in the dark times.

Singing soothes broken minds and comforts broken hearts. It makes suffering somehow bearable and hope somehow possible. It welcomes the glimmer of a brighter dawn. It enables us to go out into the transcendent beauty of this glorious day knowing the work that is ours to do. Yes, there will be singing.