

Sermon Unwrap: Waking Up

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Tomorrow is Patriots' Day. I never heard of Patriots' Day until a few months ago. How could you live in Massachusetts for over a year and never hear of Patriots' Day?" you may ask. Well, it's one of the great mysteries of life, but I'll bet Ginger would tell you it does not surprise her. Sometimes something like Patriots' Day has to dress up and sing and dance in front of my nose for me to notice.

But once I noticed its existence, I was intrigued, so I set out to learn about it.

I learned that the biggest celebration of Patriots' Day is the Boston Marathon, which has been run every Patriots' Day since April 19, 1897.

The Boston Red Sox have been scheduled to play at home in Fenway Park on Patriots' Day every year since 1959.

But the real meat and meaning of the holiday is in honoring those patriots who were in the opening scenes of the Revolutionary War, right over here in Boston.

Imagine the scene: the British troops, lining up in the dark of night on the water's edge on the Western end of Boston Common. Paul Revere leaves Boston on horseback, riding northwest to warn the militia in Lexington and Concord, that the British were coming. Shots fired that day marked the beginning of the Revolutionary War, which won our independence from the British.

The history that underlies Patriots Day marks a point of pride for many in the Boston area, where re-enactments of the battles occur annually in Lexington and Concord.

In the morning, mounted re-enactors with state police escorts retrace the Midnight Rides of Paul Revere and William Dawes, calling out warnings the whole way.

"Those of us who live here and grow up here take pride that the American Revolution began here," says Gordon Edes, Red Sox team historian. "Talk about an organic beginning to war. You had militiamen coming from all of the neighboring towns coming to Concord and Lexington lining up and facing the strongest empire in the world at the time, the British army."

I really love it that there is this sense of history, this sense of pride, here in New England. I was born in Vermont, and my ancestors on both sides have lived in the New England states for many generations, since at least the early 1700s. So I feel it in my blood, in my heritage.

It was also taught at school. I don't know if this is still true, but back in the day, school was considered the primary way of passing on the culture of good citizenship, of what it means to be an American. We learned the tall tales of Paul Bunyan and the legend of Davy Crockett. We sang from a common songbook the folk songs and patriotic songs that still come back to me word for word. We pledged allegiance every morning to the flag, and memorized the Gettysburg Address.

Some might say that this civic classroom instruction was sometimes a mixed bag. That we were taught to glorify war and nationalism a little too much. We learned all the military songs. And the Green Beret song. Anyone remember that? "Put silver wings on my son's chest...make him one of America's best..." But I have to tell you that song still brings tears to my eyes.

Because we weren't just being taught to love our country, we were also taught the ideals this country stands for. Voting rights. Separation of powers. Representative government. Freedom from random search and seizure. A new deal, where old people have security in their retirement years, food and shelter and health care. A minimum wage.

And not just for Americans. For everyone who came here. We were the country of immigrants.

I remember learning about how the Statue of Liberty came to be in New York Harbor. The copper statue was a gift from the people of France to the people of the United States.

The idea was conceived on the brink of the French Revolution. The statue's designer, French sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, hoped that by calling attention to the recent achievements of the United States in abolishing slavery and extending the ideal of freedom to all its citizens, the French people would be inspired to call for their own democracy in the face of a repressive monarchy. After the French people succeeded in establishing their own democracy, the statue was built, and shipped in pieces from France to be assembled in the New York Harbor, the "Gateway to America." The statue was dedicated on October 28, 1886. Its name is ***Liberty Enlightening the World***.

"Lady Liberty" is modeled on the Roman Goddess of Freedom, patron of the downtrodden and of emancipated slaves. The sculptor loaded her with symbols meant to inspire lovers of freedom: a broken chain at her feet, holding a tablet etched with the date of the Declaration of Independence, a peaceful expression on her face, and bearing aloft a torch, representing progress.

The statue was built with money raised in France and in the United States. Artists were asked to contribute works to auction off for the effort. According to Wikipedia, poet Emma Lazarus was asked to donate an original work. At first she declined, stating she could not write a poem about a statue. At the time, she was also involved in aiding refugees to New York who had fled anti-Semitic pogroms in Eastern Europe. After experiencing the plight of these immigrants, who had been forced to live in conditions the wealthy Lazarus could only imagine, she was inspired to write the poem, "The New Colossus," that ended up being attached to the base of the Statue of Liberty.

Do you remember it? Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore...Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

For the past year and a half, we have watched our country become something we never imagined. Angry, hurtful, uncaring. Exclusionary. We have watched the rule of law erode, cronyism and vulture capitalism become openly practiced at the highest levels. "If they can't afford health care, let them die. If their home country is war torn and unsafe, let them stay there and die. Lock them up. Throw away the key."

For the past year and a half, I have felt like my sense of national identity has been undergoing a complete transformation. I have felt crushed. I have felt dissolved as though by acid. I have felt formless and impotent, encased in a shell of grief and shock as I questioned all that I believed in as a citizen of our country and the world.

I am re-forming. I am re-formed. I am a new, a brand new creature. I am someone who is completely convinced that I cannot be free until all of us are free. Until a black man has no more likelihood of being shot in the course of a traffic stop or criminal investigation than a white man does. Until no one, no one, has to say, #me too. Until women and people of color earn the same as white men for doing the same job. Until children can go to school without worrying about being shot and killed. Until then, I am not free.

But. I am also not the cynical critic that I worried I was becoming. There is, deep in my soul, the strain of remembrance of the ideals I was taught, the ideals that we too often don't live up to but that still draw us onward and upward as we keep trying to live up to them. We the People. To Establish Justice and promote the General Welfare – that Common Good that Ted Lilley talked about some months ago. I am coming out as a true Patriot. One who believes that the ideals this country stands for are worth working, fighting, living for.

Give me your tired, your poor.

Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free. Yes, even the huddled masses already here, the homeless, the desperately poor, the millions trapped in the industrial Prison industry, the school-to-prison pipeline.

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore – not just your doctors and scientists, but your wretched refuse.

Send these! The homeless, the tempest-tossed – send them all. We lift a lamp of hope to the world.

Do we remember the ideals that make up the bedrock of our National identity? Do we remember that lamp, held high beside the golden door of opportunity, the promise of equality and civil rights and life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?

No, I can never again rest smugly comfortable that those ideals are the universal, or even the majority, reality in our United States of America. But I will never let go of the dream they represent. Isn't it the dream we share as Unitarian Universalists? The worth and dignity of all – *all* – people. Democratic process and everyone's voice at the table. Honoring our past, supporting each other, lifting one another's burdens, becoming a Beloved Community.

I will always advocate teaching this dream to our children. Isn't it this dream that motivates and sustains the Parkland students to stand up, amid scorn and ridicule and even threats from some, and call us to live up to those ideals?

This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land. I sorrow that there are so many for whom this is not true. I commit myself to do what I can to make it more true for every citizen, everyone residing within our borders, and everyone who enters our borders looking for freedom, safety, and a way to make a living. Brother and sisterhood, siblinghood from sea to shining sea.

I lift *my* lamp beside the golden door.

And so I commit to

Letting go and opening my mind and heart, to something new;
Letting go and living with the uncertainty of new ways of being in the world;
Letting go so I can grow in ways which may be uncomfortable;
Letting go to make room to help others feel safe.
We the people
Seeking that which unites us
With our arms reaching out wide
For life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness

Here is my prayer for us, as we boldly begin to crack out of our shell and live ever more fully into our promise a people, a people who transform not only our individual lives, but the culture around us:

Teach Us to Remember Our History, by Jude Geiger (adapted)

Though we have come short of the mark, though Spirit of Life, God of Many Names,
Source of Hope,
As we come together each week,
sometimes worn down by struggles of health, of home, or work,
May we be a community that makes space for the sharing of joys and sorrows, angers
and hopes, with grace and forbearance.
In our nation's life, may we remember the bold ideals that inspire the best in us,
even as we remember the Native American lives
lost from the European colonization on what is now our soil.
May we remember our history, our story, our many complex and beautiful and
wonderful and awful stories that have made us what we are,
And that show us the promise of what we can become.
Though we can not make amends for what has come before,
may we learn from those ways, never to repeat them in our lives today.
May we develop new ways of relating to neighbor and stranger,
without violence or coercion, deceit or greed.
Mother of Grace, help us to find a sense of humility where we have privilege,
and strength where we face oppression.
In our struggles we may learn compassion;
and in our power, may we learn temperance.
As a community of faith, may we be a safe harbor
in a world that is often harsh toward difference.
May we rise to the challenge to use our presence as a healing force for justice and
equity.
May we remember who we are, and teach it to our children, and lean in to who we are
becoming,
As people and as a people,

Knowing that
the work of building the beloved community,
is just as pressing as ever before.

Even though we have, collectively or individually, at times betrayed our ideals, though we have broken our vows a thousand times, let us come, again and again, back to our center, back to our ideals, back to our best selves, turning our backs on despair and re-joining the caravan of hope, and love, and community. Let us go on building, as best we can and in any way we can, a land we all want to live in. This land is our land.

Amen and amen.