

Journey of the Spirit: March 27

The Small Work in the Great Work

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In his book, *On the Rez*, Ian Frazier tells a story about South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation. Their girls' basketball team played an away game in Lead, South Dakota. It was one of those times when the host gym was dense with anti-Indian hostility. Lead fans waved food stamps, yelling fake-Indian war cries and epithets like "squaw" and "gut-eater." Usually, the Pine Ridge girls made their entrances according to height, led by the tallest seniors. When they hesitated to face the hostile crowd, a fourteen-year-old freshman named SuAnne offered to go first. She surprised her teammates and silenced the crowd by performing the Lakota shawl dance and then singing in Lakota – "graceful and modest and show-offy all at the same time." She managed to reverse the crowd's hostility – until they even cheered and applauded.

Here's another story of daring, of the meeting of our passion and the world's great hunger for justice: Thirty years ago, to march in the streets of this city, or any city, as a gay man or a lesbian, openly, must have taken wild courage, incredible courage, outrageous imagination. Those who were there will tell us, "Well, courage yes. And certainly imagination. But there was more..." They will tell us that once you have glimpsed the world as it might be, as it ought to be, as it's going to be (however that vision appears to you), it is impossible to live anymore compliant and complacent in the world as it is.

To march was a dangerous risk-but not to was a risk of another kind-of living half-dead, with no name, unremembered, in the dark, surviving on scraps and crumbs and the outright threats and pious ultimatums of the hate-filled present moment. Why not risk all that, and walk out into the sun in the summer and walk around in the world as it ought to be, thereby bringing it to bear? Why not march and carry on, act out, act up, as if your life depended on it? (Bishop John Shelby Spong calls it "solar ethics" – to commit to living as the very sun itself lives, that is, to do what you were created to do, to shine and shine without regard for recognition or permanence or reward, to love and simply be for the sake of loving and living and being.)

And so you come out and walk out and march, the way a flower comes out and blooms, because it has no other calling. It has no other work. I have seen and you have seen and maybe you have been among those who have had to march in terror, on pain of dire consequences. People have marched with paper bags on their heads, to guard their lives and livelihoods – teachers, police officers, neighbors, tenants, daycare providers, clergy. People took such risks, but still they were there and they still are, and we are so grateful. To march was dangerous. It still is. Not to march was dangerous – it still is now, and more so; let there be no question. This is no time for quietism.

For now, I'm going to leave these incredible stories about speaking truth to power, about making of your very self (physically, spiritually) a sacrifice, an offering to a world that doesn't even know it's hungry till it's fed on love, passion, and courage. I don't know what kind of child, or woman-child, SuAnne really was, but clearly she had lived and breathed a mission, a way of being and seeing in the world, for a long time.

I am interested in what Seamus Heaney calls the meeting point of hope and history, where what has happened is met by what we make of it. What has happened is met midstream by people who are – among the multitude of things we are – spiritual beings and all that that implies of

creativity, imagination, crazy wisdom, ancient wisdom, passionate compassion, selfless courage, and radical reverence for life. And love – for one another absolutely, and that love that rises out of us, for something larger than ourselves, call it what you will. I am interested in the place, the places, where history is met by the hope of the human soul, life's longing for itself. I am interested in hope on this side of the grave – for me there is no other kind – and in that tidal wave of justice that could rise up if only we would let it.

Six months after 9/11, our Unitarian church had a little evening forum. People were invited simply to share with one another how they were feeling. That was the only agenda and assignment, that small yet huge question; and at least for the first of the two hours, we hoped to live within its discipline. We hoped not to barrel right away into all those noisy Unitarian Universalist opinions, all those articles they're reading in *The Nation* and the *Progressive*, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, those websites that they've found, the commentaries that they've heard on NPR (some of which they've no doubt written), the positions they're defending so ably on the op-ed page, and of course the persistently wobbly but heartfelt agenda of the underfunded Social Action Committee. We knew we'd get to all that eventually, but we didn't want to go there right away. Instead we hoped to cast a different kind of circle, within and out of which people could rise to **the holy occasion of hearing one another, of beholding one another**. It was a gathering for prayer.

It was a lucky night. The circle held. When anybody wandered off or lost their way in the dry sands of rhetoric or opinion, the circle gently called them back, so thirsty were these people to connect with one another and with something antecedent in themselves, something original, essential, deep. There were maybe 20 people – high school students, an 82-year-old member, and everybody in between. It was not long before they left off speaking about September 11, that particular, precise disaster, and began to talk instead and cogently about September 10th, the mutilated world we'd known before but maybe had not seen so clearly, which is in fact the world we live in now, the world of Frederick Buechner's "great hunger," this insatiable, desperate hunger for transformation, which begs not just for our flickering attention, but for our sustained, directed passion.

Sorrow flowed into the room, like a river. Rage, decades old – or new and young and raw, straight out of the awesome youth group – stormed into the circle. Silence made its holy way. And now these were dangerous waters – and as we spoke and heard each other, inevitably we paddled close that night to the deadly shores of cynicism and despondency (which in some communions is a sin). Then someone in the circle, with more presence of mind than the minister could muster in the moment, saved us all from drowning, saying: "You know we cannot do this all at once. But every day offers every one of us little invitations for resistance, and you make your own responses." I wrote it down, right then, because this person is prone to neither social activism nor religious language, of any kind, but it was he who said, "It is a sacred offering, the invitation to resistance, and every day you make your own responses."

He mentioned that story from Pine Ridge, which he'd heard not long before in a Sunday morning service, and he said, "You know, that little girl changed the world out there in South Dakota, and I know it because hearing her story has changed me, and ever since I heard it (and I wish I hadn't heard it), I'm moved to do things which I never would have done. I couldn't see the way. Or wouldn't." He talked about how at his job, in a large corporate setting where he's some kind of manager, he had placed a 4-inch American flag upside down on the outside of his cubicle, because he feels his country is in desperate trouble, that its soul is in trouble, that its soul is sick. "I guess it's like my shawl dance," he said – so humbly, so quietly, but with trembling conviction. And we were grateful and amazed.

I have a friend who traffics in words. She is not a minister, but a psychiatrist in the health clinic at a prestigious women's college. We were sitting once not long after a student she had known, and counseled, committed suicide in the dormitory there. My friend, the doctor, the healer, held the loss very closely in those first few days, not unprofessionally, but deeply, fully – as you or I would have, had this been someone in our care.

At one point (with tears streaming down her face), she looked up in defiance (this is the only word for it) and spoke explicitly of her vocation, as if out of the ashes of that day she were renewing a vow or making a new covenant (and I think she was). She spoke explicitly of her vocation, and of yours and mine. She said, "You know I cannot save them. I am not here to save anybody or to save the world. All I can do – what I am called to do – is to plant myself at the gates of hope. Sometimes they come in; sometimes they walk by. But I stand there every day and I call out till my lungs are sore with calling, and beckon and urge them in toward beautiful life and love."

By grace, by her will, she is planted "at the gates of hope," regardless. There's something for all of us there, I think. Whatever our vocation, we stand, beckoning and calling, singing and shouting, planted at the gates of hope. This world and our people are beautiful and broken, and we are called to raise that up – to bear witness to the possibility of living with the dignity, bravery, and gladness that befits a human being. That may be what it is to "live our mission."

Matthew Fox writes somewhere of the "the small work in the Great Work," the place of your little life and love, daily days and earnest effort as a solitary person within the larger Life and larger Love that some call Holy, some call God, some call History, and others call simply larger than themselves. Like everybody else, we are doing small work within the Great Work of creation, and thus do we aid it and abet it in unfolding. \ We stand where we will stand, on little plots of ground, where we are maybe "called" to stand (though who knows what that means?) – in our congregations, classrooms, offices, factories, in fields of lettuces and apricots, in hospitals, in prisons (on both sides, at various times, of the gates), in streets, in community groups. And it is sacred ground if we would honor it, if we would bring to it a blessing of sacrifice and risk, just as the floor of any gym in South Dakota might suddenly be sanctified by one child, one young woman's dancing and her song (ancient, holy), the interior clarity of her spirit, that spoke there to the hate-filled world, and transformed that place with faith and deep remembering.

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of hope – not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of self-righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through); nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of "Everything is gonna be all right." But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle. And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we're seeing, asking people what they see.

Not long ago I came across a photograph, a picture in a magazine that inspires me and troubles me, and calls me to account in ways that I would rather not be called. It's of a woman with two children lying on a bed, their arms flung across her body carelessly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, the most ordinary, peaceful afternoon, one child blissfully asleep, the other just a little bit awake. The woman is lying on her side with open eyes, with an expression of alert concern, maybe fear, but also, underneath, a certain calm, and deep intensity. It is a beautiful face, for these reasons. This is the caption:

Irene Siegel, a Jewish American, sleeps in the home of a Palestinian family in Beit Jala as part of a human shield campaign to deter Israeli shelling of Palestinian homes. "Magdalene, my Palestinian hostess, looked at me sideways and said softly, 'Are you Jewish?' And I nodded. She threw her arms around me and said, 'You know, I love you, Irene. I love you like a sister.' And I cried. And so did she. And then she talked to me until two in the morning about everything – her fears, her pain, her experiences – everything she had held inside for so long, surrounded as she is by a community who are all suffering the same pain."

As if it were the most natural thing in the world for this American Jew to be lying on that bed, in that village, in this moment, guarding those children with her body, with her heart, with her passion, as if they were her own. This picture, this woman, is asking me a question that I don't want to answer, and yet I know that with our lives we make our answers all the time, to this ravenous, beautiful, mutilated, gorgeous world. However prophetic our words, it is not enough simply to speak. And there is Irene Siegel, troubling me, shattering my illusions and delusions, redefining radically anything I might have thought about the gates of hope, for she raises the bar alarmingly, and honestly. And there are so many other living and breathing reminders of what the small work in the Great Work might reasonably, unreasonably, look like. I am grateful for the deep, awakening trouble that her face and their stories cause me.