

The Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible

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6 November 2016
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CHALICE LIGHTING

Why do UU's light a flaming chalice?
It's the cup of life.

A cup of blessings overflowing.
A cup of water to quench our spirits' thirst.
A cup of wine for celebration and dedication.

The light of reason
The kindling of revolution
The warmth of community

Oil for anointing, and healing.

The Chalice was created by a Dutch Artist during WWII, as a symbol of safe haven for those escaping Nazi persecution

Out of chaos, fear, and horror,
thus was the symbol crafted, a generation ago.

So may it be for us,
in these days of uncertainty, sorrow, and rage.

A light to warm our souls and guide us home.

OPENING WORDS

By Ursula K. Le Guin

Storytelling is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary. We will not know our own injustice if we cannot imagine justice. We will not be free if we do not imagine freedom. We cannot demand that anyone try to attain justice and freedom who has not had a chance to imagine them as attainable.

HYMN: Gather the Spirit # 347

LESSON FOR ALL AGES

There were two frogs who lived on a farm. The two frogs were best friends, but one was very happy and active, and the other was very lazy. He didn't like to leave his lily pad much. The curious one loved to explore. On warm days, he hunted for bugs by the pond—he used his long tongue. On really hot days, he hopped into the cool barn where he found lots of bugs to eat!

Sometimes, the curious frog was able to convince his lazy friend to come explore with him. One day, they hopped into the barn together, where they saw a big pail filled with a mysterious white liquid. Guess what it was?...

They decided to jump in to check it out. The liquid was more slippery than water. The sides of the pail were shiny and very high. They couldn't climb out the sides of the pail, because they kept slipping back down. The lazy frog was hopeless, he said that there was no point in trying to get out. So he laid back, he was sure they would drown.

The curious frog kept kicking and swimming. He said, I'm not sure how, but I know we'll make it out alive, so I'm going to keep kicking until I can't kick anymore.

The lazy frog saw how determined his friend was, and this inspired him to help, so he started to kick and swim. So they kicked and kicked and kicked and kicked and swam around and around and around and around until they were so tired they couldn't kick anymore. It was then that they realized that the white liquid had turned to a bright yellow ball and they were sitting on top of it!

Does anyone know what the white liquid was? It was cream.

You see, if you mix and stir cream for long enough you get butter. The frogs had kicked so hard and so long together, that they turned the cream into butter.

And they were able to jump right out of the pail!

The lazy frog thanked his brother for showing him that, sometimes when you are in trouble, you don't always know exactly what is going on at the time.

You might think you have no chance of overcoming a great obstacle.

But when we listen to each other,
when we believe in each other
and we work together, anything is possible.

READING

LET US MAKE THIS EARTH A HEAVEN

By Tess Baumberger

Let us make this earth a heaven, right here, right now.
Who knows what existences death will bring?

Let us create a heaven here on earth
where love and truth and justice reign.

Let us welcome all at our Pearly Gates, our Freedom Table,
amid singing and great rejoicing, black, white, yellow, red, and all our lovely colors,
straight, gay, transgendered, bisexual, and all the ways
of loving each other's bodies.

Blind, deaf, mute, healthy, sick, variously-abled, young, old, fat, thin, gentle, cranky,
joyous, sorrowing.

Let no one feel excluded, let no one feel alone.

May the rich let loose their wealth to rain upon the poor.
May the poor share their wisdom with those too used to money.

May we come to venerate the Earth, our mother,
and tend her with wisdom and compassion.

May we make our earth an Eden, a paradise.

May no one wish to leave her.

May hate and warfare cease to clash in causes
too old and tired to name;

religion, nationalism,
the false false god of gold, deep-rooted ethnic hatreds.

May these all disperse and wane, may we see each others' true selves.

May we all dwell together in peace and joy and understanding.

Let us make a heaven here on earth, before it is too late.

Let us make this earth a heaven, for each others' sake.

The Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible

How do we build a heaven right here on earth, when it feels like we are standing at a great precipice, about to tumble down into the fiery depths?

How do we build those bridges we need to cross the expansive chasm that separates us from them, across the divisions that separate us: Poor from rich, women from men, black from white, conservative from liberal, democrat from republican.

Right now, two days before the election, it might feel like there's not enough bricks and steel and pavement in the whole world to build that bridge.

How do we find hope and a way forward?

As part of my M.Div program, I volunteered with an organization called Maine Inside Out. MIO is a nonprofit that works with kids inside of Long Creek Youth Development Center, Southern Maine's juvenile detention center.

I never expected to find a model for hope in a prison, but I did.

It was through my work in a prison that I discovered the incredible power that stories have to unite us across our differences and provide hope and a vision for a way forward.

The first time I approach Long Creek. I am immediately struck by the brick and barbed wire monstrosity before me. I swear that at that exact moment the sun retreats from the sky, yielding to a front of storm clouds on the horizon that seem to perfectly match the stark grey of the chain link fence before me.

I use the next 50 steps or so to compose myself, inhaling and exhaling deeply with each stride.

The lobby is painted a drab shade of light blue that still manages to perpetuate the grey theme under flickering fluorescent lighting. In fact, the only pop of color my eyes are down to in the entire room comes from the red dye # 40 in the Doritos that stain the fingers and lips of a man sitting behind the large desk in the center of the room.

I sheepishly tell him that I am a volunteer with Maine Inside Out, there for orientation. "Have a seat," is all I get. I nod and manage to mouth a throaty thank you.

Thirty minutes and 276 ceiling tiles later I am directed to a doorway on the opposite end of the room.

Through the door, I see the tall powerful figure of man. Intimidated, I cautiously approach the him, only to see him turn and face me with a smile that illuminates the entire lobby. He shakes my hand with a firm friendly grip, "You must be Israel; we're so glad to have you here!"

As he walks me back to the office, he tells me how much he appreciates the service that Maine Inside Out provides for the residents at Long creek.

When I was approaching Long creek, I had a very particular story in mind, it was a story of despair. A story of stark imposing facades, storm clouds, and a windowless prison.

What is a prison in this story?

An oubliette, literally meaning forgotten place, was a form of prison cell, originating in the middle ages, which was accessible only from a hatch or a hole in a high ceiling. There is no escaping from an oubliette.

Once you fall down that hatch, you don't come out.

It was a place people were sent to become invisible, outcast. It was a place of utter despair, a place with no hope whatsoever. In my mind a prison might as well be an oubliette, for it feels like a forgotten place. There are no building bridges from an oubliette, or so I thought.

But it's that trap door, that clumsy as I am, I so easy to fall into. When I open up the newspaper and I read about the latest thing a politician has said about women or Muslims. When I turn on the television and see footage of the latest shooting of an unarmed black teenage boy. It's too easy to feel like we will never have our bridge, like we will never build our beloved community.

Faced with so many of the challenges we face, it is too easy to believe the story that we are trapped in a dungeon with no way out. But just like I learned going into Long Creek, there is more to the story than the stark hopeless scene on the surface. There are people working to envision, enact, and embody new stories.

MIO, the organization I volunteered with showed me the power of those stories. They go into a prison and they make the forgotten, the invisible become visible. They bring the stories of oppression and despair into the public forum where we have to deal with them.

Picture a room full of high school boys. One is a the child of a Somali refugee. He grew up, constantly being told that he and his family were terrorists, and criminals. He grew up with the story that he somehow did not belong in this society, he was a threat to its very existence. He grew up thinking he was an

enemy of the state. So when he was 16, he was arrested for getting into a fight with a shop owner.

Or picture another kid in the room. He grew up in a working class Franco-American family in Waterville. His parents were constantly stressed about money, because they couldn't find work, and because they were so stressed they mistreated him. He didn't like going to school because he was so embarrassed of his family, and he grew up thinking he was worthless. So he found substances as an escape from his reality.

Both of these kids grew up with the story that they are not lovable, valuable, members of a community. So that's what Maine Inside Out does, they build a community of love and support for kids like him in the most unlikely of places. By using silly theatre games, they build relationships and trust with each other across differences.

With time, this eventually leads to the sharing of each others stories, by reenacting events related to serious issues like substance abuse, racism, or violence. The simple act of sharing with each other allows these kids to realize that they are not alone, that they are not invisible, that they have a voice, that they are lovable, that their lives matter.

This is an incredibly powerful thing, and they would emerge from their time at Long Creek as more confident whole people simply because of it. But the effects of these sharing of stories, of this community building does not end there.

Their stories get turned into plays. And the plays don't just contain their stories of oppression, they are also filled with alternate stories, stories that show how things could go differently. These alternate stories are pleas and calls for change, but they also allow these kids to see that the story that brought them to a juvenile detention center does not have to be their only story.

These alternate stories show that the Somali kid labeled a terrorist and a criminal can be a friend, a neighbor, a dad who wants the same things that so many Americans want, a safe playground for his kids to ride the swings, a plot in the community garden, a friendly smile while passing neighbors on the street, and spot to set a plate of home-cooked sambusas at the neighborhood block party.

These plays they create are taken out into the public, and performed for people like you and me to see, to bear witness to. That's where the power of these stories becomes most apparent.

The tool of theatre invites us to recognize ourselves in others and to connect across boundaries, building bridges. Building empathy and solidarity.

To witness this kind of theatre is not to be a passive spectator, because the very act of witnessing it changes your reality, changes your orienting story. To witness these stories is not just to be changed by them, but to want to be the change by them.

Remember the smiling prison guard?

Are you still wondering why he was so happy to see me?

I later found out that this prison guard used to be not quite so smily. This guard stoic, curt, sometimes angry man had been assigned to one of the units where Maine Inside Out held their sessions with the kids, so he had been posted, a silent witness to weeks of trust building and story telling exercises.

At first he was all business, simply there to keep the kids in line, but eventually he became a bit more interested and would even occasionally join the circle to play some of the silly theatre games.

He was stationed to accompany the kids when they went out in the community to perform a play one evening. The play was about creating a new definition of masculinity. In it the participants shared stories of growing up with absent fathers, or in abusive households. They shared how they grew up thinking that, to be a man meant they had to be strong, cold, unfeeling, and forceful, and of course they also presented a new definition of what it means to be a man...

This new definition was kinder, gentler, more nuanced, and more authentically human.

After the performance, members of the audience were invited to share their thoughts, comments, and questions with the performers. The guard sat quietly in the audience until the very end, when he raised his hand.

He told the kids how much the story resonated with his own childhood. And then he told the kids how proud he was of them and thanked them profusely for their courage, creativity, and for showing him that love, expression, and authenticity are not limited by gender.

By the end of his comment, both the guard, all of the kids, and seemingly the whole audience were in tears.

No doubt he was changed by those stories, as many in the audience that night might have been. He not only became one of the biggest supporters of MIO after that, but he also became a freer better person because of those stories, and he went out into the world as a change maker himself.

In this story, it is tempting to see the incarcerated kids as the oppressed and the prison guard as the oppressor. By maintaining the dichotomy of that story we are perpetuating our divisions. We are throwing ourselves and our hope down into the deep dark oubliette of despair.

Why was the guard so happy to see me?

Because he understood the power behind building trust and sharing stories. But he also understood the need to draw that story-telling circle wider and wider. He understood that when we allow space for the stories of oppression to be told and we bear witness to them we realize that they are our stories, because we realize that our liberation is tied up in the liberation of others.

Paulo Friere, the Brazilian activist, artist, and politician who developed the theatre methods used by MIO, called theatre of the oppressed, had this to say about liberation:

“Nobody liberates nobody, nobody liberates themselves alone: human beings liberate themselves in communion.”

When we share and listen to each others stories, we realize that they are our stories, because just like the prison guard we realize that our liberation is tied up in the liberation of others. We realize that we can build a heaven right here on earth.

We realize that we can build those bridges across our differences one brick at a time by sharing our stories with each other.

We realize that we can build the beautiful world our hearts know is possible.

But we must build it together.

BENEDICTION

You are not who you were,
and the person next to you is not who he or she was,
the hour we first came in here

The purpose of this community is to help each other grow.

We do this through encounters with the unknown
in ourselves,
in one another,
in "The Other"
whoever that might be for us,
however hard that might be

because these encounters have many gifts to offer.

So may you go forth from here this morning
not who you were,
but who you could be.

So may we all.