

“A Republic If You Can Keep It”

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UFWC

When we arrived in Pennsylvania Ralph and I decided to switch cars. His Mazda3 would be easier for me to parallel park than my Maxima. In the process of switching cars, he stripped off my bumper stickers from the Nissan and I had to put new ones on the Mazda. One of the stripped off statements for which I did not have a spare was one stating, “If You Are Not Outraged, You Are Not Paying Attention!” I’ve sported that sticker for years. It is no less true now than it was when I put it on the car, if anything it is more true. My outrage meter has topped off so many times I’ve lost count. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned over the years, it is that there is no knight in shining armor on a white horse that is going to gallop up the state house or capitol steps and make things right. There is no great leader who will rid us of evil-doers and correct the ills of our society. The reality is, we are the change we want to see happen. We are the leaders we have been waiting for. If we don’t get active, the list of outrages will continue to mount. A fellow on line activist to date has assembled a list of 288 such outrages, be they illegal or unethical undertakings by the current administration—and the list grows by the day. This past week alone we have witnessed the reports of the destruction of CIA interrogation evidence possibly including the torturing of prisoners in our custody, the revelations that Iran is no where near as threatening to us as the administration had been painting them, and moves to continue to fund the war, no strings attached to the money.

Yes, the outrage meter is in full bore. What is a citizen to do?

Since moving here I have been regularly attending the Religious Council which is made up of clergy and laity from all of the religious institutions in the greater West Chester area. I am starting to meet and get to know some of them. I’ve also attended the early planning meeting of UUPLAN which is intended to be a network of UU congregations and individuals to pay attention to and be active in trying to influence legislation that is in process in the PA statehouse. And just a week and a half ago I attended the first planning meeting to create a Pennsylvania network of liberal and progressive clergy and activists intending to lift up the values that we cherish in the public sphere. The Washington DC organization Faith in Public Life is assisting us in this effort.

Why do I do all of this? There was a question in the evaluation form that we Interim ministers had to answer every six months or so. It wasn’t asked until a couple of years ago. The question was this:

Has the leadership encouraged and has the interim minister attended to the self-care and spiritual practice which are essential to a rich, insightful, effective, and inspiring ministry?

The question threw me for a loop the first time I read it. Spiritual practice. Hmmm. I thought about it for a while — quite a while, until I realized that my spiritual practice was my activism. It may sound odd, but that is the fact. Activism feeds my soul. It is the only thing I can do to ward off the despair I would feel if all I did was read the news and then try to do my pastoral job. The funny thing is that I’ve become more of a radical since I became a minister than I was beforehand. Perhaps it is because I cannot preach or teach or do anything else with my back to the world. Perhaps it is because the tradition that has called me here is a prophetic one. Perhaps it is basically the best way I can think of to justify my existence. In any case, you have an activist for a minister. I think you have probably figured that out by now. What that will mean in over the long haul will be revealed over time—to both of us.

I have been working on behalf of reproductive choice and justice, for GBLT rights and against war for many years now. Most of my efforts have been focused in those directions. But for the past

several years now, about 5 or 6 in fact, my sphere of concern has grown greatly. As I have introduced myself to the groups mentioned above I have included the words that I am an unrepentant liberal progressive and that my current fear is for our Constitution and the rule of law surviving for the next generation. Several years ago I went to the local clergy meeting and one of my colleagues, a Baptist pulled out his new Palm pilot. He was thrilled that he had loaded the text of the Bible on it. As it happened I had also obtained a new Palm. I revealed to him that I had the text of the United States Constitution on mine. Over the years it has taken on a greater importance in my thoughts and deeds, especially in the last six years. As I look back I can see how the seeds of awareness were planted in my consciousness. Now, it is a significant part of who I am and what I do.

Almost 20 years ago, during my seminary years Maria Harris, of whom I have spoken previously, taught a course on what she called "the Null Curriculum." It was her theory that there are three levels of teaching that happen in school and in life, the explicit—that which is obviously contained in the lesson, the implicit—that which is implied indirectly from the material, and the null—that which is intentionally left out. The course model that she brought to us was a program put together by a foundation called *Facing History and Ourselves, Holocaust and Human Behavior*.¹ History and Social Studies teachers in Brookline, MA were concerned over how the Holocaust was and was not being taught in public schools so they put together their own program, got funding and a fabulous organization emerged. From their web site:

Since 1976, Facing History and Ourselves has offered in-depth professional development services; curricular resources; and ongoing support to educators and students in the areas of history, social studies, and language arts. We are dedicated to helping teachers around the world lead their students in a critical examination of history, with particular focus on genocide and mass violence.

Facing History's work is based on the premise that we need to—and can—teach civic responsibility, tolerance, and social action to young people, as a way of fostering moral adulthood. If we do not educate students for dignity and equity, then we have failed both them and ourselves.

I would add that if we do not educate our children AND ourselves about history and civic engagement we will doom ourselves to repeat the history that we most revile.

Through the Facing History program we begin to understand that what happened in Germany in the 1930's can happen anywhere, even here. One of the readings in the curriculum was taken from Milton Mayer's book , *They Thought They Were Free*. Chapter 13 "But Then It Was Too Late:"

"What happened here was the gradual habituation of the people, little by little, to being governed by surprise; to receiving decisions deliberated in secret; to believing that the situation was so complicated that the government had to act on information which the people could not understand, or so dangerous that, even if the people could understand it, it could not be released because of national security." . . .

"You see," my colleague went on, "one doesn't see exactly where or how to move. Believe me this is true. Each act, each occasion, is worse than the last, but only a little worse. You wait for the next and the next. You wait for the one great shocking occasion, thinking that others, when such a shock comes, will join with you in resisting somehow. You don't want

to act, or even talk, alone; you don't want to 'go our of your way to make trouble.' And it is not just fear, fear of standing alone, that restrains you; it is also genuine uncertainty.

"Uncertainty is a very important factor, and, instead of decreasing as time goes on, it grows. Outside, in the streets, in the general community, 'everyone' is happy...."

"But the one great shocking occasion, when tens of hundreds of thousands will join with you, never comes. That's the difficulty. If the last and worst act of the whole regime had come immediately after the first and smallest, thousands, yes, millions would have been sufficiently shocked.... But of course this isn't the way it happens. In between come all the hundreds of little steps, some of them imperceptible, each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next. Step C is not so much worse than Step B, and, if you did not make a stand at Step B, why should you at Step C? And so on to Step D."

"And one day, too late, your principles, if you were ever sensible of them, all rush in upon you. The burden of self deception has grown too heavy,... and you see that everything, everything has changed and changed completely under your nose. The world you live in - your nation, your people - is not the world you were born in at all. The forms are all there, all untouched, all reassuring, the houses, the shops, the jobs, the mealtimes, the visits, the concerts, the cinema, the holidays. But the spirit, which you never noticed because you made the lifelong mistake of identifying it with the forms, is changed. Now you live in a world of hate and fear, and the people who hate and fear do not even know it themselves; when everyone is transformed, no one is transformed. Now you live in a system which rules without responsibility even to God. The system itself could not have intended this in the beginning, but in order to sustain itself it was compelled to go all the way."²

Over the last several years we have witnessed events that shocked the conscience—the beginning of a war without a declaration of same; revelations of prisoners being tortured; malicious outing of a CIA operative for political purposes; the scandalous treatment of soldiers at the VA hospitals; revelations about the widespread surveillance through warrant-less wiretaps; The loss of habeas corpus. The lies, the coverups, the continuation of life as if nothing was happening. We would get over one shock and another would happen. Though the ground was laid for such a thing over the past three decades it has taken on a new life over the past 7 years. We survived a contested election in 2000 and had faith in the democratic process. We sailed on for a while and then the nation and the world was shocked by the events of 911. The Patriot Act was produced and passed before people had a chance to read it. Since then, security (a false one) has trumped liberty, greed has triumphed and the rule of law has morphed into something unrecognizable.

Last June, my last sermon to the good people of Chatham, MA was based on a book of fiction written in 1935 by Sinclair Lewis called It Can't Happen Here. Lewis painted a picture of what a fascist takeover would look like in America in the 1930's. It is a truly frightening book. I read it because so many authors are writing about it and the deterioration of our democracy both in books and online in weblogs. I have read several of them and have many more on my pile. Naomi Wolf's recent book The End of America, A Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot is on the list. One of the quotes from her book seems to echo what Mayer wrote 50 years ago, though oddly enough she has yet to read Mayer's account. Here are several quotes taken from her writings:

"At first, Nazi Germany would not have looked, on the surface, so unrecognizable to us: Germans still, for a time, saw an independent judiciary; lawyers — even human rights

lawyers; working journalists — even political satirists; criticism of Nazis in cabarets and theatre; and professors still teaching critical thinking. There were hundreds of newspapers of all political colors; there were feminist organizations, abortion rights activists, sex education institutes, even gay rights organizations. These kinds of civil society organizations would become “co-ordinated” with Nazi ideology, or simply disemboweled - but as the shift was first taking place things looked in many ways, superficially, like an open modern society.”³

“Of course, the United States is not vulnerable to the violent, total closing-down of the system that followed Mussolini's march on Rome or Hitler's roundup of political prisoners. Our democratic habits are too resilient, and our military and judiciary too independent, for any kind of scenario like that.

Rather, as other critics are noting, our experiment in democracy could be closed down by a process of erosion.

It is a mistake to think that early in a fascist shift you see the profile of barbed wire against the sky. In the early days, things look normal on the surface; peasants were celebrating harvest festivals in Calabria in 1922; people were shopping and going to the movies in Berlin in 1931. Early on, as WH Auden put it, the horror is always elsewhere - while someone is being tortured, children are skating, ships are sailing: "dogs go on with their doggy life ... How everything turns away/ Quite leisurely from the disaster."

“As Americans turn away quite leisurely, keeping tuned to internet shopping and American Idol, the foundations of democracy are being fatally corroded. Something has changed profoundly that weakens us unprecedentedly: our democratic traditions, independent judiciary and free press do their work today in a context in which we are "at war" in a "long war" - a war without end, on a battlefield described as the globe, in a context that gives the president - without US citizens realizing it yet - the power over US citizens of freedom or long solitary incarceration, on his say-so alone.”⁴

Justice William O. Douglas long ago penned similar thoughts:

“As nightfall does not come all at once, neither does oppression. In both instances, there's a twilight where everything remains seemingly unchanged, and it is in such twilight that we must be aware of the change in the air, however slight, lest we become unwitting victims of the darkness”

Last summer when I preached about the fears I have for our society I tried to find hope and lift it up to the good people in the pews. I tried to express hope that I wasn't convinced of myself. Later that day I engaged in an online conversation with Christopher Hedges who wrote the books War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning, and American Fascism. I asked him where to find the hope. This was his reply:

“Hope must come not with what we can do, but with continued resistance. We must, on the one hand, face the gravity of the moment and not sugar coat it with false hope. It is not good. But to give up is to be defeated, not just in a material sense, but a spiritual sense. For me real spirituality comes with resistance, even when times are bleak. This is what gives

life meaning and integrity. Martin Luther King and Bonhoeffer wrote about this eloquently. To fight, no matter what the odds, is to win, to give hope, so sustain the divine spark which is love and compassion and tolerance.”⁵

Now that I have moved to a mere 25 miles or so from the “Cradle of Liberty” I feel even more called to this work:

“There is a story, often told, that upon exiting the Constitutional Convention Benjamin Franklin was approached by a group of citizens asking what sort of government the delegates had created. His answer was: “A republic, if you can keep it.” The brevity of that response should not cause us to under-value its essential meaning: democratic republics are not merely founded upon the consent of the people, they are also absolutely dependent upon the active and informed involvement of the people for their continued good health.”⁶

I realize that your lives are filled with the normal difficult tasks of making a living, raising a family and keeping up a household. Any of those let alone the combination is a lot of work and requires a lot of time and effort. But from the first visit I made here and the first conversations I had with Search Committee members and then many more of you I have heard from several of you that though you have not been fully engaged in keeping up with the events in the news you want to learn and you want to be involved. I know this path is not for everyone. But I see as part of my ministry being active in the cause of liberty and human relations and those call out to me to invite others into this work. Should any of you wish to engage in the struggle for democracy along with me, I’ll be happy to welcome you on the path. I don’t yet know what that will look like or be, but the invitation is now extended.

One thing I have surely learned along the way, I feel much much better when I know what’s going on and have people I trust who know more than I do helping me find the way. There are hundreds of thousands of concerned citizens watching, acting and working valiantly to keep this republic. I’m only one of them and the more we welcome into this task the better hope we have of achieving it.

¹ <http://www.facinghistory.org/campus/reslib.nsf>

² Mayer, Milton, **They Thought They Were Free**, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955, 1966) pp. 166-171

³ <http://firedoglake.com/2007/11/10/fdl-book-salon-welcomes-naomi-wolf/>

⁴ <http://digbysblog.blogspot.com/2007/04/f-word-by-tristero-naomi-wolf.html>

⁵ <http://firedoglake.com/2007/06/03/fdl-book-salon-welcomes-chris-hedges/#comment-736096>

⁶ <http://www.constitutioncenter.org/explore/ThreePerspectivesontheConstitution/ARepublic,IfYouCanKeepIt.shtml>