

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Losing Our Heroes”

October 1, 2017 Eileen Casey-Campbell

Reading

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All that we have been separately
and all that we will become together
is stretched out before and behind us
like stars scattered across a canvas of sky.
We stand at the precipice, arms locked
together like tandem skydivers
working up the courage to jump.
Tell me, friends:
What have we got to lose?
Our fear of failure?
Our mistrust of our own talents?
What have we got to lose?
A poverty of the spirit?
The lie that we are alone?
What wonders await us in the space
between the first leap
and the moment our feet, our wheels
however we move our bodies
across this precious earth
touch down softly on unknown soil?
What have we got to lose
that we can't replace with some
previously unimaginable joy?
Blessed are you, Spirit of Life
who has sustained us, enlivened us
and enabled us to reach this moment.*
Give us courage in our leaping,
and gratitude in our landing.
And share with us in the joy of a long
and fruitful ministry together.

Sermon

We got a new priest when I was in the eighth grade. I went to the Catholic school in my little hometown, and he came to work for the school and its associated parish. Let's call him Father Matt. He was one of those young, post-Vatican II priests who was so hip, he went by--not just his first name--but a *nickname*. He was a Cool Priest. Capital C. Capital P. And I thought he really was pretty cool. He was from Seattle. He cared about social justice, and tried to get our congregation to care about it too. He started a community support center for teen moms. He talked about LGBT people *as people*, with our youth group.

He spoke Spanish, *and* he convinced the parishioners that we needed a Spanish-language mass. Some people argued that we had no Spanish-speaking congregants, so mass in Spanish should be unnecessary. He calmly pointed out that perhaps we had no Spanish-speaking congregants *because* we had no Spanish-language services. The first Spanish mass was packed, mostly with migrant workers from local farms. They built relationships with Father Matt and with the members of the church.

I need to impress upon those lifetime or long-time Unitarian Universalists among us how incredibly rare and radical this all felt. As the child of a progressive (second wave feminist, civil rights marcher, reproductive rights defender, LGBT-friendly) Catholic who was raising me to be hopeful about the direction of the church, it's easy to see how Father Matt became a hero of mine, quickly.

Here's the trouble with heroes, though: Ostensibly, they are figures we look up to, people we want to become more like. In reality, we tend to create our heroes, and sometimes our gods, in our own image. Father Matt was the perfect storm of that force in me. He wasn't someone who showed me my own potential or helped me, through the power and love of community, to transform. He didn't really know me at all. And if I'm being honest, I didn't really know him. He looked, to me, like a shallow incarnation of someone I had already myself imagined becoming.

Every morning, in the cafeteria-slash-auditorium-slash-gymnasium of my little Catholic school, Father Matt led us in a prayer for "God to call priests to the church." The Catholic Church then, and now, has had the experience of a mass exodus of people wanting to join the priesthood. To my middle-school mind, Father Matt's prayer was one of many little steps on the inevitable road to opening the doors of ordination to female-identifying people, to married people, to openly queer people.

And then.

And then a Catholic congregation in Western New York took it upon themselves to ordain several women. And Father Matt preached a sermon that went, more or less, like this: There is a place for women in the church and among the clergy is not. it. The duty of women is to learn their place (I swear to you, those words were spoken) and accept it.

I can't tell you what else he said, because in that moment, I walked out of the congregation that had married my parents, baptized me, and educated me and never went back.

Heroes are hard to hold on to.

My story calls to mind one of the ongoing struggles of this congregation. The long-held Unitarian hero, Ralph Waldo Emerson, is honored in the name of this very room. We heard his beautiful and profound words sung earlier in this service:

I hear a sky-born music still.
It sounds from all things old, it sounds from all things young;
From all that's fair, from all that's foul, peals out a cheerful song.

Here is something he also wrote, "I think it cannot be maintained by any candid person that the African race have ever occupied or do promise ever to occupy any very high place in the human family. Their present condition is the strongest proof that they cannot. The Irish cannot; the American Indian cannot; the Chinese cannot. Before the energy of the Caucasian race all the other races have quelled and done obeisance." He wrote that in his journals, but, lest you think it was merely a quiet and personal racism (as if that might somehow exonerate him), know that he was not hesitant in expressing similar sentiments in his published work. He published a whole treatise on the qualities of the English people, of whom he considered his fellow Americans an extension, after living in England for some time.

Of the English, Emerson said, "No race of better men exists." Of that imperial power whose conquered territories spanned the entire globe, whose brutal colonial rule came from behind the force of the world's most powerful navy, he wrote, "They have no Indian taste for a tomahawk-dance, no French taste for a badge or proclamation. The Englishman is peaceably minding his business and earning his day's wages." These lines are hard to hear, but it's important that we use this space and this time for truth-telling. It's important that we look honestly at the heroes we hold.

Well, we might be tempted to say, Emerson was a product of his time. These were the opinions of everyone in the 1850s. And no doubt they were common opinions, indeed. But if Emerson is just a man of his time, then what will we call Frederick Douglass, a man of the very same time, who--in reference to the system of power which contextualizes them both--spoke this truth instead: "I utterly deny, that we are originally, or naturally, or practically, or in any way, or in any important sense, inferior to anybody on this globe." What do we do with Sojourner Truth, who, 5 years *before* Emerson's essay on the English was published, refused to cede an ounce of her own humanity, challenging a crowd of white women activists with her now-famous poem "Ain't I a woman?"

There is this impulse, though, isn't there? To relegate Emerson and our other UU and national heroes with problematic histories to another time. Washington, Jefferson, Franklin; Taft, Channing, Cummings, and so many others--these men's lives included behaviors and opinions we find

abhorrent today. Should we tear down their statues like those of Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis? Remove their monuments and recast them as villains of history?

Well. Probably yes. But should we--can we--divorce ourselves from them and their choices by doing that?

They were formed by their context, but it is also *their* contexts that have formed us. We might like to confine them to history, in the same way we would *like* to say, “White supremacy is history” and “Sexism is over,” and “Homophobia is old news.” We might like to confine them to villainy the same way we’d *like* to say “Only bad people are racist.” And on and on. Somewhere in us, we know the truth, though. We carry them with us, whether we like it or not.

I left my religion when the figure of my hero collapsed, but it has never really left me. I looked for new heroes, and new gods, to fill the void for a time. I dipped my toe into the pool of Evangelical Christianity, leaning in to the personal god, emotional highs, the breathless devotion. I couldn’t stomach the misogyny, the homophobia, or the marriage of faith with what passed for patriotism. I tried on an angry atheism of the Christopher Hitchens variety. I just couldn’t quite muster up the necessary appreciation for Enlightenment-era individualism, nor could I ever shake my reverence for mystery.

Something guided me in this. Something stuck with me of Father Matt and the whole of my religious inheritance. I carry uncomfortable baggage like guilt and misogyny and deference to power, buried so deep I sometimes forget that it’s there. But I am also formed by the social justice focus of Dorothy Day and the Catholic worker movement, by the fierce-as-hell Sisters of St. Joseph who taught me to read and to poke gently and tirelessly at the edifice of authority, until it starts to crumble. I’m formed by my Catholic mother who asked me everyday to “be fair,” and “be kind.” And I’m even formed by Father Matt, who showed me that people are whole, multitudinous, complicated things. The same tradition that formed Father Matt’s misogyny guided me out the door in rejection of it. He, and we, are remarkable and flawed, both at once.

George R. R. Martin, the author of the fantasy book series-turned-television franchise “Game of Thrones,” has a reputation for destroying his heroes. When a character starts looking like a hero--noble, virtuous, and brave, singularly striving for the Good--they either die or are revealed to be...more than what they seemed. Corrupt in some way. Complicated. He has said this about his resistance to the trope of the Hero:

“The battle between good and evil is a legitimate theme for a Fantasy (or for any work of fiction, for that matter), but in real life that battle is fought chiefly in the individual human heart. Too many contemporary Fantasies take the easy way out by externalizing the struggle, so the heroic protagonists need only smite the evil minions of the dark power to win the day... In real life, the hardest aspect of the battle between good and evil is determining which is which.”

And I think that true our real lives, isn't it? We'd like to either cast everyone, ourselves included, as heroes for the good, or villainous agents of evil. In reality, we each have the capacity for good and for evil, for justice and injustice, holiness and profanity in us. But admitting our heroes are lost to us is so hard, because it means admitting we're not the heroes of our own stories either. We are whole and complicated people who have made (and probably will keep making) great choices and awful choices and--mostly--lots of choices we're not sure about the virtue of.

So when we hear the terrible words of a man we've made a hero out of--like Emerson, for example--I think we're right to recoil and stop holding on to our ideas of his heroism. Stop honoring statues of him, stop calling the space set aside for our most sacred moments after the memory of his name. But I also believe he cannot be divorced from us, from who we are. None of them can. They may not be our heroes anymore, but they are *ours*.

We carry them with us. We carry their racism and their transcendentalism. We carry their democratic vision and their capitalist hierarchy. We carry their poetry and their intolerance.

The question before us, then, is *how* do we carry these figures? How do we hold what they have left us with? Do we make them into heroes, ignoring their full humanity? Do we excuse their repulsive behavior as appropriately contextual? Can we pretend they never were a part of us? For me, I think we must carry them, but carry them lightly. It is our role as the bearers of this tradition to hold the truth of our past--its pain and its promise--as we move toward a better future.

When we stop creating heroes out of people, when we can hold them in their wholeness, we get to be whole too. When we, ourselves, don't have to be the heroes of our own stories, we can step into the fullness of our being. We can awaken to the traditions we carry, those that are leading us into justice and connection, and those that that threaten to lead us astray. We can hold gently these words of a man both phenomenal and deeply flawed,

“It is not only in the rose, it is not only in the bird,
Not only where the rainbow glows, nor in the song of woman heard,
But in the darkest, meanest things there always, always something sings.”