

“MANIFEST DESTINY: DEALING WITH OUR LEGACY”

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March 31 and April 1, 2007

CALL TO GATHER: Mind Without Fear – Rabindranath Tagore

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action---
Into that heaven of freedom, [...] let my country awake.*

FIRST READING: Excerpt from an Address to Congress, 1817 – Col. James Swan

“America is a very fine country of an immense, almost of an incalculable extent [and] ... [t]he far greater portion of her domains remain still in a state of primitive nature, uncultivated and unprofitable...although a land that invites the hand of the labourer, whose industry would make her flourish with every abundance desirable by man; a land that would give support and happiness to millions and millions of families to the latest posterity.

This fit, this bounty, this felicity to the human race, rest at the disposal of the United States of America: it is a deposit from Providence confided to their hands for the benefit of mankind, and it is the duty of America to discharge this trust with care, with activity, and with integrity.”

SECOND READING : Tao Te Ching #61, Stephen Mitchell translation

*When a country obtains great power,
it becomes like the sea:
all streams run downward into it.
The more powerful it grows,
the greater the need for humility.
Humility means trusting the Tao,*

thus never needing to be defensive.

*A great nation is like a great man:
When he makes a mistake, he realizes it.
Having realized it, he admits it.
Having admitted it, he corrects it.
He considers those who point out his faults
as his most benevolent teachers.
He thinks of his enemy
as the shadow that he himself casts.*

*If a nation is centered in the Tao,
if it nourishes its own people
and doesn't meddle in the affairs of others,
it will be a light to all nations in the world.*

SERMON:

Despite the gloominess outside this weekend, we know that spring is finally here. It is a time that I never fully appreciated before moving to the Midwest (believe me, the arrival of spring is a very different thing in California). And, I would love nothing more than to give you a joy-filled message today – an Ode to Spring as it were - but my heart is very heavy – and has been for quite some time. It has been a great irony for me of late that as the joy of new season is beginning to burst forth --- as I am almost daily awakened by the sound of birds out our bedroom window and as we experience joy over the warmth of the new life we're beginning to see all around --- I am also painfully, acutely aware that as our earth is blooming in its creative, life- renewing force, our nation has just passed the fourth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. And in these spring mornings, after being beckoned out of my sleep by the charming sound of those morning birds, NPR faithfully brings me back to the reality of the day. Another day, they report, of casualties: 40 dead and injured one day, 150 the next. On each of the nearly 1,500 days of this conflict, we hear those reports and we cringe inside (or perhaps some just turn away) because the reality is almost too much to absorb. What's so hard to hold onto is that each new car bombing, each new roadside blast, each new market explosion, each one reflects REAL people – over 3,500 deaths of American and allied soldiers, approaching 35,000 wounded coalition forces – those numbers are told frequently. But we dare not ignore the estimates of twice and even three times those numbers of Iraqi dead and wounded. It's very hard to find reliable statistics of enemy deaths. As General Tommy Franks famously said a few years back, "We don't do body counts." Well, General Franks may not have thought that counting was important but I imagine the devastated families and loved ones probably disagree with his thinking.

When we get past the overwhelm that comes from those kinds of statistics we can think on the fact that each digit represents a real person, a real family, people who love their parents and partners and children – people who held dreams of their future, who worried over their kids' education, who laughed around the breakfast table and who have

fallen asleep at night hoping each of their loved ones would be safe ---- just like us. The statistics are just representations of people with lives and loves and dreams like ours.

And, for those who opposed the war from the start, there seems to be little or no comfort to be had in the fact that the country over these long months and growing casualties has turned away in its support of this war. The Pew Research Center reports that in spring of 2003, 90% of Americans thought the war was going well and supported the U.S. actions there. As of last month, the number had plummeted to 30%¹. Little comfort to be found there...it does nothing to bring us closer to a real solution for the ravaged lives and property wrought in these four years.

But it does leave me pondering the mentality of those pundits and politicians whom we've heard in the media over these several months who have spoken as if the only interests about which we need to be concerned in all this are those of the United States. As if whatever it takes to make the U.S. more secure, more profitable, more powerful – **those** things are, by definition, constitute the best plan to follow.

This country is often derided in international circles for holding a world view that seems to think REAL history (at least the truly exciting and important stuff) only began.....with Columbus's voyage!

And, so, I began to think about our historical self-story. The messages we learned in school about this country's founding and future. The underlying stories that encouraged the administration's marketing people to expect a 90% approval rating for terms like "shock and awe" and our leaders' describing our "decisive battlefield force." Lots of people found that language very fitting four years ago.

Of course, our nation has a history of successfully using "decisive force" (as in provoking Japan's surrender via the horrors Hiroshima and Nagasaki) for what appeared to be the betterment of the world. Similarly, many believed it was Reagan's devotion to military build up that caused the Soviets to end the Cold War.

In the most recent issue of the Sun Magazine², Andrew Bacevich notes "We have imbibed for decades this notion that the U.S. is leading a march toward freedom, that history has a direction and a purpose, and that we have a responsibility to see it through to the end, when all countries will be free." I don't disagree but I would also note that it goes much farther back than decades. Mr. Bacevich's comment sounds an awful lot like Colonel Swan's words in our opening reading from 1817. These are our national perceptions; these are the stories that Americans have told themselves about themselves.

In this post-modern world, we have come to understand that individual people are very much shaped by their stories. Humans are meaning making creatures; and each of us is continuously writing and re-writing the stories of our lives as we gather up our current learnings and our new awarenesses. We have the confusing and constant task of living our lives and simultaneously trying to make sense of the living. And so in our minds we are always interpreting and reinterpreting the events of our world based on our past understandings and then writing new stories about the implications of what we think we now know.....and then what that means about what we might become.

¹ *Trends in Public Opinion about the War in Iraq, 2003-2007* by Scott Keeter, March 15, 2007. Pew Research Center Publications available online at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/431/trends-in-public-opinion-about-the-war-in-iraq-2003-2007> . Accessed March 28, 2007.

² The Sun Magazine, Issue 374, March 2007, pp 5-10

I believe that in large part, the foundational self-story of our nation is the same. Whether or not our personal experience reflects it, there is an underlying and unassailable belief that from the moment this land was “discovered” there lay ahead glory and greatness for those who love freedom and for those who are industrious enough or courageous enough or creative enough to accept the challenge. Such narratives, for good or for ill, have undeniably formed us as a nation.

The concept of the United States being a country set apart for special favor and unending greatness has pervaded our national psyche for centuries. Our exceptionalism is well captured in this intriguing and linguistically impressive term *Manifest Destiny* with its unmistakable religious overtones.

Many trace the phrase back journalist, John L. O’Sullivan as he wrote in favor of annexing Texas and the lands beyond. His article the *Great Nation of Futurity*³ ends with “*This is our high destiny, and ...we must accomplish it.... For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen...*” In his mind, and in the mind of many at that time, an omniscient, omnipotent, eternal God was clearly beckoning the United States to expand westward, to Texas, then Oregon, ever onward, to accomplish the spread of democracy, to provide space and resources for the rapidly burgeoning population, and to safeguard national security.

And we know this sense of destined empire building did not stop in Texas, or Oregon, regardless of which indigenous people were already inhabiting the desired territory. But the literature of the time reveals that the leaders did not see these actions as unjust or greedy; they were merely responding to a moral ideal, a higher call.



If you will, please page back in your Order of Service to the copy of the picture entitled *American Progress*. This picture made popular in the 1870’s and it depicts this sentiment so very well. Take a moment to contemplate the image as I share actual excerpts from the literature provided to market this lithograph. Quoting:

“*In the foreground, the central and principal figure, a beautiful and charming Female, is floating westward through the air bearing on her forehead the “Star of Empire....” On the right of the picture is a city, steamships...schools and churches over which beams of light are streaming and filling the air – indicative of civilization. The general tone of the picture on the left declares darkness, waste and confusion. From the city proceed the three great continental lines of railway.... Next to these are the transportation wagons, overland stage... gold seekers ...pioneer emigrant. ... Fleeing from “Progress”... are Indians, buffaloes, wild horses,... and other game, moving... ever*

³ Available on line at <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=AGD1642-0006-46>. Accessed March 25, 2007.

Westward, the Indians with their squaws, papooses... turn their despairing faces... as they flee the wondrous vision. The "Star" is too much for them....⁴

As this marketing material conveys, the Euro-Americans saw themselves advancing on Darwin's path of human evolution where only the fittest earned the right to survive. The settlers' language, clothes, religion, technology and especially their weapons made their superiority seem self evident.

That view lasted quite a long time. In my own youth, the images and language conveyed in our text books showed valiant settlers who braved threats to life and limb to traverse this country, to "tame the land" and live their dreams. Of necessity, we were told, there were wars with the Indians – the wild and uncivilized natives who stood in the way of the forward movement of progress. The textbooks showed lamentably common illustrations of warriors breaking into the homes of innocent (often unprotected female) settlers with tomahawks uplifted and blood thirst in their eyes.

Narratives such as these live on unless they are consciously, repeatedly, intentionally deconstructed. It is not entirely surprising that even in modern times when college students are asked to list descriptors for the indigenous peoples of the United States, the word "savage" still frequently appears in the list.

Current scholarship is closer to the truth of what actually occurred a century and a half ago. We can now read letters from historical figures like this one from General William Sherman writing to his brother "The more we can kill this year, the less will have to be killed the next war, for the more I see of these Indians the more convinced I am that all have to be killed or maintained as a species of paupers. Their attempts at civilization are ridiculous."⁵ Quotes such as this (and MANY are readily available from this period) are unthinkable to our 2007 sensibilities...they make us shudder at how accurately such men foretold the future of the first nations' people. It is now believed that there were 12 million people inhabiting the area that was to become the United States. By 1900, from hostilities, loss of livelihood and illness, the number of the Native population had dwindled to 237,000.⁶ An eerie aside: Hitler is said to have had spoken with great admiration for the success of the methods employed by the United States in the extermination of the Natives.⁷

It is my belief that all of us have been impacted by this nation's stories. Inherited stories become the lenses through which we understand and make sense of the world, even as we decry the unspeakable injustices that occurred. We may feel enraged or mortified at the misconceptions that allowed the settlers to disregard the humanity of the native people. If our ancestors were among those oppressed by American expansionism, we may feel bitter anger at the irretrievable losses. As a nation and as individuals, we are inevitably bearers of both national stories and our personal family stories.

I know that I certainly carry the imprint of my family history. A pivotal marker in the Mathews family lore is my father's immigration to this country in 1945 immediately after being freed from a Japanese Prison Camp in the Philippines by MacArthur's troops. My dad had been born in Greece but happened to be doing business in Manila as a young adult and got caught in World War II conflicts there; because of that, he spent three years

⁴ Available online at <http://www.ashp.cuny.edu/progress.htm>. Accessed March 25, 2007.

⁵ Frederick Turner, *Beyond Geography* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994) 232-283.

⁶ History News Network, available online at <http://hnn.us/articles/7302.html>. Accessed March 25, 2007.

⁷ James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 126.

of agonizing internment, forced labor, with very little food, and an extremely uncertain future.

He spoke little about those experiences, except to describe the thrill he felt as whispered rumors rippled through the camp that the war was drawing to a close. And, soon those rumors turned into the glorious rumble of U. S. planes overhead. He knew this was the sound of his freedom approaching, and he vowed to himself that once freed, he would come and live a life of gratitude and service in the **great** country that had gifted his future back to him. (You see – the subject of war is a very complicated one!)

My father died of a heart attack long ago – he was still a young man and I was still a child at the time of his death - but I cherish the sweet memories he left us with. One was his flag-hanging ritual every national holiday. We kids would vie for the honor to be the child selected to assist him in that task! And, once hung, we would pause for a moment and appreciate the fullness of what that flag meant to my dad, and to our family.

These are mighty stories. They are part of the fabric of my being. Just as our nation has mighty stories that still influence us in ways we can't even fully describe.

Yet, I believe that we are called to be voices for counter-narratives too. To be truth-tellers and speak up when the national narrative no longer fits – or when we recognize that the long accepted stories are actually detrimental to the country and the world.

But it's not easy to be that voice. It's easier now than it was several months back – but even recently, discussing this topic of our national self-narrative [citing how terms like Manifest Destiny may have been replaced by terms like War on Terror] can be difficult. This concept of our legacy has come up in conversation and I sometimes got a response with a bit of defensiveness. Some don't appreciate being reminded about inherited guilt over past or current actions of our government. And, besides, look at all the good that has come from those ethically dubious beginnings of our country. We still have people risking everything in order to come here. That must mean we're not all bad, right? (One of our members who is well versed in history noted that the U.S. may well go down in history as an empire, but we are the most "benevolent" empire that has thus far existed.)

But, it seems to me that just as in our personal lives our healing comes through embracing what psychologists call our "shadow side" – those things that are part of us but which we'd rather shove under some distant rug - we need to acknowledge the fullness of our nation's stories in order to make space for healing and to avoid the hubris of that permitted the past we now regret. If our current leadership had an appreciation for the sort of humility cited in our Tao Te Ching reading, the events of the past years would have unfolded far differently.

We are a troubled nation in so many ways and we have been victims of our country's arrogance. If our leadership can't or won't do this, we must be voices that encourage opening up our stories to allow room for our nation's shadow side to see the light of day. W.E.B. Dubois remarked "One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over.... The **difficulty**, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth."⁸

⁸ Loewen, 18

In our own desire for truth-telling, we may fancy that if we had been there in the early shadow times of our history, we would have stood up and would have been a voice of resistance, that we would have recognized that all the people who were trampled in our historical stories were flesh and blood – people of dignity and worth – and that neither they nor their resources were expendable or inexhaustible.

Perhaps.....though each of us determines how our faith is lived out each day. Many of us see ourselves as being among the resisters against the dominant narratives that oppress others in our society and around the world. We may believe we would act to prevent the sort of atrocities we've been discussing. But I am intrigued by a question our hallowed Unitarian Universalist theologian, James Luther Adams loved to ask. The depths of his own faith emerged out of the arduous work he did in Germany during and after World War II. Later, back in the States, when people would tell him that they would have helped had they been there, he would ask, and "... what in your past performance would constitute a pattern or framework of resistance?"⁹ In other words, he asks us to reflect on what it is that we are doing today that makes us know that we would not simply stand with the rationalizing, silent many who allowed Nazism, or who allowed the Native culture to be decimated? What today evidences our own "pattern or framework" of resistance to the incredible number of injustices that surround us?

If we as individuals – if we as Unitarian Universalists - have such a thing as a destiny that is manifest for us today, it seems that it is to be faith-filled and **conscious** people.

Faith, to me, is the persistent, tenacious grip on the belief, that we can make a difference. Faith is living mindfully and not reflexively. Faith evidences intentionality in our decisions regarding our choices in life and the impact of those choices on the lives and livelihoods of others. Faith demands that we will not be guilty of discounting the value of others' lives because we do not understand their culture, because they hold different world views or are of a different class. Faith requires the humble awareness that our experiences are not representative of all people and, yet, our faith tells us that we are all inextricably connected. We are all a part of each other.

So what are the ethical guidelines on how one actually lives this faith-filled life? Our faith tells us that is work that only you can do. It is in that grappling with our own higher calling that each one of us discovers and refines our own values and convictions. Through that holy wrestling, our spiritual life burrows deeper within us and THEN it extends out in wider and wider compassion toward others. That sort of faith brings with it the courage to face our own stories squarely, to appreciate the complex messiness contained there, and to believe with all our heart that together we can write a more humane and compassionate story for our tomorrows.

It is THAT faith that knows we can, in fact, together, build a better world!
May it be so.

⁹ George K. Beach, Ed. *The Essential James Luther Adams*, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998), 127.