

“Make Way for Heroes”

Last Sunday night a phone call was waiting for me when I came home. It was my friend Patrick Brown, Director of the Burlington Multicultural Center and proprietor of the Caribbean Corner on North Winooski Avenue between the Radio Bean and the Other Place. Recently Patrick was in our pulpit “Calling in the Ancestors” as part of our Kwanzaa celebration.

I picked up his excitement on my answering machine. He wanted to remind me of the Martin Luther King program taking place this afternoon at City Hall. Coming from a tradition that celebrates the octave of any important feast or holiday, I knew that we were still within range of King’s birthday. Patrick’s excitement was due to his finally snagging Derrick Bell after repeated invitations for this special occasion.

It didn’t surprise me that Patrick would be successful in bringing yet another celebrity to Burlington. Hadn’t he managed to get Nobel Laureate Archbishop Tutu a few years ago, packing the UVM Patrick Gym to capacity?

As you may have read in Friday’s *Free Press*, Derrick Bell came to fame as the first tenured black law professor at Harvard Law School. Then he became even more celebrated by getting himself dismissed in 1992 from this prestigious position for a noble cause. He refused to end his two-year leave in protest of the absence of minority women on the law faculty.

The title of Bell’s presentation this afternoon is, “Was Martin Luther King a Twentieth Century God?” I find his title about as provocative as “Was Jesus a First Century God?” The question reminds me of an awakening of my own that occurred at least 25 years ago, an historical moment in my faith journey.

The question of whether or not Jesus was divine was being entertained several blocks down on Church Street, 136 to be exact, in what was then a bookstore across from City Hall. It’s now a bar, Red Square. I’ve told this story more than once. I remember saying to a friend who worked with me at the store, “You know, I really don’t care if Jesus was divine or not. Even if he were divine, he certainly wouldn’t want people killing each other over the issue.” It also occurred to me at the time that focusing so much on the question that Jesus may or may not have asked, “Who do men say that I am?” could be a distraction or an escape from trying to discover the divine spark, the inherent worth and dignity within ourselves and others.

Maybe if I hadn’t spent years studying church councils in which theologians spent several centuries debating the question of the divinity of Jesus, I might not have felt so strongly or been somewhat surprised at myself for saying, “I really don’t care.” It was part of my feminist awakening, the realization that all the major religions were founded by men—Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed. On top of this I found myself in agreement with the ethicist Sharon Welch who once said that a characteristic of patriarchy is fear of ambiguity, uncertainty and a certain amount of chaos. This observation rang bells for me. Maybe this patriarchal characteristic is what drove the church fathers: needing to come up with a clear, *de fide definita*, definition of who Jesus was—one person with two natures, one human and one divine, consubstantial with the father and the holy spirit. But even after the defining Council of Nicea in 325, there was

further controversy, this time about whether Mary could really be called the Mother of God, Theotokos. It was decided that she could in 451 at the Council of Chalcedon.

Why do I find a connection between Derrick Bell's question, "Was Martin Luther King a Twentieth Century God?" and "Was Jesus a First Century God?" For the interesting reason that just as different parties claimed the legacy of Jesus in the First Century up until the present day, different parties are claiming the legacy of Martin Luther King today.

There are conservative politicians and religious leaders. Among them is Bishop Keith Butler, the head of a mega evangelical church of 21,000 congregants in Smithfield, Michigan. Bishop Butler claims that if King were alive today, he would not condone gay marriage or affirmative action! On the other side, Rev. James Forbes, former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, strongly supports the Freedom to Marry as well as affirmative action. He counters Bishop Butler's interpretation of King's legacy by saying that if the spirit of love is not at the heart of your activism, then it is designed to put others down.

Forbes reminded Butler that in the '50s and '60s people were using scripture to argue against intermarriage between the races. This was just as much an abuse of the core message of Jesus as prohibiting the freedom to marry for gays. He also reminded Butler that Bayard Rustin, one of King's best strategists, was gay.

James Forbes said of Martin Luther King something that could just as well be said of Jesus. He was bigger than his tradition; he was "out of the box." Neither King nor Jesus could be contained in one tradition. King solicited advice from Gandhi, a Hindu. Jesus scandalized his followers by socializing with Samaritans, women and outcasts. Both leaders were killed for defending the most vulnerable, for threatening the established order.

So was Martin Luther King a Twentieth Century God any more than Jesus was a First Century God? Some might consider it blasphemous to divinize King in the same breath with Jesus. Still, there are similarities between the two men. They both were killed in their 30's. They challenged the status quo. People in opposite parties claim their legacies.

I wonder sometimes when we divinize human beings: Is it a way of absolutizing their authority, a way of giving over our own autonomy, the burden of our own freedom, independence, sovereignty? Then again, it's not uncommon to project onto our God one's own prejudice and limited perspective, to exploit their divine authority in support of our position, our politics, our religion.

This is not to say that heroic people have not been a source of inspiration and courage to me throughout my life. I need the example of Jesus and King, of Mother Jones and Ety Hillesum, I need these people to transform what is fearful in my life. I need their boldness of heart to challenge me when I'm being sluggish and self-centered.

What I find especially helpful is to learn about the frailties of my heroes, my "sheroes," to learn that despite their flawed humanity they lead heroic lives. Anyone who has read about Dorothy Day can be encouraged by her early bohemian life, her years of drifting, of failed relationships, one of which ended in an abortion. Yet, when she died in 1980 at the age of 83, she was described as "the most influential, interesting and significant

figure” in the history of American Catholicism. (Ellsberg, p. 519).

Meanwhile, she was a thorn in the side of the institutional church throughout her life. Her radical commitment to the poor led her to open “houses of hospitality.” Eventually, her movement inspired the growth of over 30 such houses across the country.

For close to 50 years, Dorothy Day lived alongside the poor. Those who joined her were not the type of “reformers who live in one world while hoping to change another...the houses of hospitality are meant to be communities in which the so-called helpers merge with those who, in the conventional sense, would be regarded as needing help.” (Coles, p.111)

Because she was acutely aware of the forces that kept people in poverty, her charity took on a political as well as a personal form. Her solidarity with the poor caused her to be branded a subversive and she was repeatedly harassed by the F.B.I. In her struggle for justice and peace, she was shot at and jailed.

Criticism did not disturb this woman. On the other hand, she hated being pedestaled, being put on a pedestal. She often said, “When they call you a saint, it means basically that you’re not to be taken seriously.” To her, this was a way of having her challenge dismissed. “Dorothy can do that; she’s a saint!” (Ellsberg, p. 519). She did not appreciate the implication that hard decisions were easy, rather than agonizing, for her. She paid dearly for being true to her call. As she said, “Neither revolutions nor faith is won without keen suffering.” (Ellsberg, p. 519).

Once when I was in a seminar with a rabbi, the subject of Dorothy Day came up between us. I discovered that my admiration bordering on envy of this woman was something we both shared. He said among rabbis they called it “Catholic Worker Envy.” It testified that her kind of faith was “outside of the box.” Like that of other heroes of mine, it went beyond her tradition.

Another time, when I was bemoaning the fact that I was not Dorothy Day, a good friend of mine said, “Roddy, face it: You can’t cook! If you’re going to run a soup kitchen, you have to learn how to make soup.”

I often wonder if there isn’t a fine line between being threatened, overshadowed by another person’s goodness, by their heroism and being inspired and challenged by it. What makes the difference? Could the difference lie in the recognition of one’s own charism, call, inherent goodness? Is a faith community a place to which people are drawn to be challenged to discover their own charism, their own unique calling?

I was inspired by the responses that I received to my invitation in our newsletter. In preparation for this sermon, I welcomed your reflections on the subject of heroism. You gave yourselves away in how you responded. One of you quoted a favorite author: “Heroism is courage in the service of others.” It was a case of projection. I happen to know the hours this person spends in the service of others. Another person shared this reflection: “Perhaps true heroics may be silent: Not taking a drink when you know you should not; staying with a spouse and family when the call to wander is strong; sticking to an unpleasant task because your deserting it would cause distress for others; spending time listening to a boring, hopeless person and hearing his or her problems again and again; giving your time to some cause in which you believe...and so on.” The note concluded, “Not too spectacular, but perhaps truly heroic!” I say make way for

heroes!

The beauty of your responses as well as the privilege of sharing so many of your lives reminds me of the familiar story of “The Rabbi’s Gift.” A monastery had fallen on hard times. There were only five monks left in the mother house, all over 70. One day as the abbot was agonizing over the inevitable death of his order, it occurred to him to seek the advice of a rabbi who frequently came to pray in a hermitage nearby.

Sadly, the rabbi could only commiserate with the old abbot, saying, “I know how it is. The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue any more.” So the abbot and the rabbi just wept together. As he was leaving, the abbot pleaded. “Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice?” The rabbi only shook his head and said how sorry he was that he had no advice to give. “The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the abbot returned, the monks gathered eagerly around him wanting to know what the rabbi had said. The abbot told them the sad news. “We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving—it was something strange and cryptic—he said that the Messiah is one of us. I don’t know what he could have meant.”

As time went by, the monks began to wonder if there was any possible significance to the rabbi’s words, “The Messiah is one of us.” Could he possibly have meant one of us monks? If so, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He’s been our leader for more than a generation. Then again, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that he is a man of light.

Certainly, he couldn’t have meant Brother Elred. He’s far too crotchety. Then again, even though he’s a thorn in people’s sides, he’s virtually always right. Surely, he didn’t mean Brother Philip. He is so passive, a real nobody. But then strangely enough he has a knack for always being there when you need him. He just appears mysteriously by your side. Maybe Philip is the Messiah?

One sure thing, the rabbi didn’t mean me. Not possibly. I’m only an ordinary person. But, supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah. Oh, God, not me. I couldn’t possibly be that much for others. Could I?

The more they thought in this way, the more the monks began to treat each other with extraordinary reverence on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. Then there was the off *off* chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah and they began to treat themselves with extraordinary reverence. Ultimately, this extraordinary reverence generated an aura about this community that began to attract other members until, thanks to the rabbi’s gift, the monastery had become a thriving place, a vibrant center of light and spirituality.

Maybe there’s a more important question than “Was Martin Luther King a Twentieth Century God,” or even “Was Jesus the Son of God?” The question is, “Which one of you is a Twenty-First Century Messiah?” Suppose you are, despite your being crotchety, passive, a real nobody? Let’s not let frailties get in the way of recognizing our own and others’ inherent worth and dignity. Let’s just begin to treat ourselves and each other with extravagant reverence and see what happens.