

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Free Your Mind

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery
 None but ourselves can free our minds

These are singer and songwriter Bob Marley's words from *Redemption Song*,¹ written after his cancer diagnosis. Within a year, he was dead at the age of 36. *Redemption Song* is his farewell — the last song on his final album; his final message to us. There's no sign of his iconic reggae in the acoustic tune — this was something different, and he meant for us to sit up and take notice. Across more than forty years, he calls to us to sing songs of freedom, and to believe in the future. He invites us to free our minds.

Recently, pursuant to nothing, someone said to me, “You know, don't think of an elephant.” Right. And now I'll say it to you:

Don't think of an elephant.

Are we all thinking about an elephant now? It's so powerful, isn't it? Our minds are not good at not-doing. And especially in these times so fraught with uncertainty, our minds are not always our allies. In fact, our minds become dangerous neighborhoods to be wandering around in. We start by thinking of an elephant and it's all downhill from there.

Writing for *Forbes* magazine, Alice G. Walton writes, “People get stuck in their heads all the time.... It turns out we spend almost 47 percent² of our waking hours thinking about something other than what we're doing.... Although it's lovely to ponder life, ... the majority of our thoughts are not so [lovely].... When

¹ Bob Marley, “Redemption Song,” *Uprising*, 1980. Marley was “paraphrasing orator Marcus Garvey, whose views on uniting all those of African descent were a strong influence on Rastafarian principles.” Please see americansongwriter.com/behind-song-bob-marley-redemption-song/

² 46.9%

we're not focusing on anything in particular, ... when [our minds wander] in *any* direction from what [we're] doing, [the brain defaults to worry]...."³

Harvard psychologists Matthew A. Killingsworth and Daniel T. Gilbert write, "A human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind. The ability to think about what is not happening is a cognitive achievement that comes at an emotional cost." Not for the better, we "spend a lot of time thinking about what isn't going on around [us:] contemplating events that happened in the past, might happen in the future, or might never happen at all." One of Killingsworth and Gilbert's doctoral students put it succinctly: "This study shows that our mental lives are pervaded, to a remarkable degree, by the non-present."

And here's the worst of it: "How often our minds leave the present and where they tend to go is a better predictor of happiness than the activities in which we're engaged."⁴

This is Vermont poet and playwright David Budbill's *This Shining Moment in the Now*.

When I work outdoors all day, every day, as I do now, in the fall,
getting ready for winter, tearing up the garden, digging potatoes,
gathering the squash, cutting firewood, making kindling, repairing
bridges over the brook, clearing trails in the woods, doing the last of
the fall mowing, pruning apple trees, taking down the screens,
putting up the storm windows, ... — all these things
as preparation for the coming cold ...
when I am every day all day all body and no mind, when I am
physically, wholly and completely, in this world with the birds,
the deer, the sky, the wind, the trees ...
when day after day I think of nothing but what the next chore is,
when I go from clearing woods roads, to sharpening a chain saw,
to changing oil in a mower, to stacking wood, when I am
all body and no mind ...
when I am only here and now and nowhere else — then, and only
then, do I see the crippling power of the mind, the curse of thought,
and I pause and wonder why I so seldom find
this shining moment in the now.⁵

³ Walton, *op cit*

⁴ Please see news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2010/11/wandering-mind-not-a-happy-mind/

⁵ David Budbill, "This Shining Moment in the Now," from *While We've Still Got Feet*

There's the curse and there's the remedy; it's a spiritual practice. Either we need to remove or resolve the cause of whatever unwholesome thoughts we're entertaining — *Time's up!* — or we need to think different thoughts. To free our minds — to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery — we need to get out of our heads and back to the present.

My friend Lizzie's response to virtually every complicated, unresolved, unpleasant everything is to say, Bless and release! Bless and release: When I find it irritating, I know I'm hooked; I'm not done brooding about it. And then that confounding question from *A Course in Miracles* surfaces in my mind: Would you rather be happy, or would you rather be right?

There's an impressive list of things we can do, activities we can pursue, to change our minds. David Budbill commends us to physical labor. We can also meditate, exercise, dance, sing, laugh, give someone a hand.... Basically, to free your mind, you have to stop doing what you're doing and do something very different. If you can get moving, great. If you can get out of the house, fabulous. If you can get to some green space, all the better. Of all the ways to free our minds, though, one of the very best is to get ourselves around some other humans.

Someone said, "Your network is your net worth."⁶ Keeping good company is really important. We are far more influenced by the people with whom we surround ourselves than we'd like to imagine. At least one study concluded that we are the average of the five people with whom we spend the most time. Give that a beat! And yes, I think our animal companions should count.

Someone else said, "Every relationship should push you to be the best version of yourself." How about that? What if we freed our minds by surrounding ourselves with people who inspire us and call us to higher ways?

The Puritanical idea that it's better to hide your feelings than talk about them pervades our society. Unfortunately, this means that a lot of feelings can just spin around in our heads. The *New York Times'* David Brooks writes, "When [we] examine [ourselves] from too close, [we] often end up ruminating or oversimplifying. Rumination is like ... middle-of-the-night thinking — when the rest of the world is hidden by darkness and the mind descends into a spiral of endless reaction to itself. [We think] repetitive thoughts, but don't take action."

⁶ Tim Sanders, *Yahoo!*

Talking out whatever's going on can literally move it along. A study at Harvard concluded that one of the times we're happiest is when we're engaged in conversation. Psychologist Todd Essig says, "Introspection is a closed system. Patterns of growth only emerge by opening [up].... From the earliest exchanges between [parents and infants], ... we come to know ourselves in [relationship], in dialogue, with others."⁷

As usual when I'm reflecting on a sermon, I went down a rabbit hole and found another study that took the directive to "talk it out" to another whole level. I love this; basically, it concluded that, while we're socialized not to be too nosy and not to over-share, we all feel better when we dive a little deeper with each other. You know that feeling when someone asks you a question that's slightly inappropriate — it's just a little too personal? It surprises you, but then you're actually relieved to answer, because it takes the conversation to another level. In an article about small talk, author Gretchen Ruben writes, "I can't use this strategy myself, because I don't have the necessary gumption, but my husband is a master. Over and over, I hear him ask a question that seems slightly too prying, or too cheeky, and I feel a wifely annoyance, but then I see that the person [with] whom he's talking isn't offended — if anything, [they seem] flattered by his interest."⁸

And yet one more study: This one, conducted at the University of Chicago, found that, despite everything the grown-ups warned us about, talking to strangers is a powerful remedy for freeing our minds. Participants were asked to talk to a total stranger on the train or bus. The conclusion was that their mood brightened, as did the mood of the stranger. The take-away? If you're not sure that others want to make a connection — even a fleeting one — you can let that go. We all want to connect — introverts as well as extroverts. Don't go way out of bounds — this isn't about creeping out the other person. Start with hello; go from there; feel better.

Leveling up, find ways to help. Helping others helps us; people who volunteer are less depressed, have greater wellbeing, and live longer. Helping shoehorns us out of our own schtick and compels us to focus elsewhere. And we're back at the point: A wandering mind is an unhappy mind. Free your mind!

⁷ Walton, *op cit*

⁸ Walton, *op cit*

I'll close with one of my favorite stories, told in three voices: the director of a drug rehab program, an elderly woman at a community center, and a recovering addict.⁹

The director of a drug rehab program:

“These boys moving around like waiters at a fancy restaurant, flirting up these old ladies, putting on their sweaters, reminding them of their [Bingo] numbers.... These guys were heavy.... years of crime, dope, doing time. They're in a program called Prodigal. Last shot for rehabilitation. Miss this one, you're done; no more programs. And I bring them over here to this senior citizens' center to give them a chance to make that last step home by looking out for someone beside themselves. Because maybe this [place is] a last shot for some of the old folks, too. Last shot for companionship, last shot before dying alone. Both groups on the edge — why not bring them together?”

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The elderly woman:

“I come to this center for company, I suppose, older women like [me]. But I meet these boys here. Very interesting, very different [from what] I expected. This young man who walks me home, he's a very nice boy. His mother ... should be proud of how he acts with me. I know he's done wrong. Look, they did it to me. One kid [in the street] went for my diamond ring and wedding band.... But you know what? I wasn't angry. Maybe he never had any parents — who knows what happened when he was very young...?”

“But this boy ... he walks me home. He helps me with my groceries. He says, ‘Wear lipstick, a nice dress. You're very pretty. You should get married again, a nice lady like you. That man in the center, he wants to get married again.’

“‘He's not good enough for me,’ I say.

“‘You're right,’ he says. ‘Marry me!’

“‘You're good enough,’ I say....

“I don't know what he sees in me, to be so nice. All I know, he walks me home. We talk and joke. I learn things about how things are in the world now, which I don't know much anymore. And I don't get the feeling that I'm just a little

⁹ Ram Das and Paul Gorman, *How Can I Help?*, pp. 232-235

old ... lady.... You know how many other people I don't feel like a little old lady with? ... Nobody.”

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And the recovering addict:

“Try to shake having been a junkie and done time.... Everywhere you go, ... that's who you are. But this woman, it's like she doesn't care. I told her how I robbed things.... She says, ‘Your mother must have been very upset. Let's get groceries....’ Nobody ever treated me like I had anything to give. Just to take. So that's all I ever did: take....

“Never knew my folks, started in when I was nine, four juvenile [lock-ups], two escapes, on the street at twelve, [dealing] heroin.... [I] got caught....

“This woman, she shows me something.... She's brave, living all alone, being old. She doesn't recognize just how much she understands about life.... Nobody [asks] her questions anymore now, so she forgets how much she knows. I ask her questions. I'm curious. She's interesting. We learn things together just looking around on the street. We have a good time. And I done a lot of time.

“... I'm twenty-five and I feel old.... So old people, I understand their situation a little. They're scared; I been scared. They live alone, like in a cell; I lived alone, in a cell. So ... this woman ... I'm not who I always thought I was ... being with her, walking her home.... Her too, probably.... I've done enough time. I've done enough taking. Time to be free.”

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Beloved spiritual companions,

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery

None but ourselves can free our minds.

When we are only here and now and nowhere else —
then, and only then, do we see the crippling power of the wandering mind.

May we turn our attention

to that 47% of our waking hours:

say hello, talk it out, find ways to help,
and seek this shining moment in the now.¹⁰

May we walk one another home.

May we free our minds.

¹⁰ paraphrasing Budbill, *op cit*