

Sermon: Bold. Brave. Loving.

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Much of what I've learned about using what's inside me to make the world a better place comes from my father - who is often brave and willing to be clumsy in his efforts to transform the world.

My parents met as house parents at a residential treatment facility for neglected children. Mom responsible for the girls, Dad responsible for the boys. Part of my father's marriage proposal to my mother included his plans for education, career, family, and a life of meaning and service. As a first generation immigrant and the first generation of his family to attend college, this path, he said, was what he would be doing with his life. Would she join him?

Turns out my mother, also the child of an immigrant, also had plans – a calling in fact. As a teenager, she had met a nurse who worked as a missionary in Africa – this nurse was single, traveled the world, took care of people and, in the eyes of a teenager, was fabulous. She wanted to be like this missionary - and have a good marriage and happy children. Wanted to take a chance on becoming more than the world told her she could be.

Well....(point to self)...spoiler alert.

The then 22 year old young man who would become my father and one of my fiercest advocates, had turned to the then 23 year old young woman who would become my mother and one of the most powerful women I know, and said yes - if that's what she wanted to do with her life he wouldn't get in her way. She should feel free to be liberated – to have a career and marriage and

children. Go ahead and do that. So - it wasn't so much that he would help carry the suitcases on this journey, but that he wouldn't interfere with her buying her own ticket.

When I checked out this proposal story with Dad, he said "First, having this conversation with your mother was less of a marriage proposal and more of a contract negotiation. And her position was clear. It was 'Here's the deal, Buddy, take it or leave it.' and he said, at 22, he didn't think her liberation would really impact him very much - or impact her ability to get dinner on the table and or to make sure that the children were educated and cared for.

It wasn't really about him, he thought.

To be fair, it was 1963 - this was the perspective of a fairly "woke" man. Just one generation before, his own father, had counted his wife's need to clean houses to support the family as evidence of his failure as a husband and as a man.

So, just one generation later, things had already changed and Dad encouraged his wife to pursue her own goals - mostly because, he thought, who was he to get in her way? He recalls a dinner party at that time where a friend asked him, with all sincerity "So, what do you think of women's liberation?" To which Dad replied "Well...everyone should be liberated."

Everyone should be liberated. Feel free. Who are we to get in the way?

As they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, simple but not easy.

That spirit of fierceness and determination, that non - negotiable commitment to a world we can envision for ourselves, and the reality about what it will take to achieve that vision - is resonating

a lot with me these days. The Climate Change activists are telling us we will and must be free from fossil fuels. Non negotiable. The Movement for Black Lives is not waiting to be liberated from institutionalized violence but is actively claiming the same life and liberty guaranteed to everyone. There is simply no other choice. Queer and Trans Youth have become visible and vocal in recent years with a boldness and bravery that is breathtaking.

Everyone should be liberated. Feel free - who are we to get in the way?

As I've watched the community within these walls mobilize for these and so many other imperative, non-negotiable calls for freedom, I have been inspired - I've wanted to join you all in doing more than staying out of the way. One way I've attempted to be useful in the Movement for Black Lives is to ensure that people of color are among the candidates for the positions I can fill at work. I recruit excellent candidates of color the same way I recruit any other candidate - through friends of friends and colleagues of colleagues....because I'm most comfortable hiring someone has already worked for someone I know. Those friends of friends and colleagues of colleagues are almost exclusively white. So my largely unsuccessful searches for excellent candidates of color are in largely white communities - because that, frankly, is where I've been most comfortable looking.

Inspired or not, it turns out that my position is a lot like Dad's at age 22 - people of color should feel free to have equal opportunity - to have equal access to hiring - feel free unless, I'm the one responsible for creating that access even on a small personal local scale, unless that access requires me to be uncomfortable. So while I'm willing to say "Who am I to stand in the way" I'm becoming aware that doing what I've always done, is

actually standing directly in the way.

Rev Joseph Cherry tells us if we have any hope of transforming ourselves and the world we must be bold enough to step into our discomfort, Brave enough to be clumsy there, and Loving enough to forgive ourselves and others. I wondered how this 22 year old who said “Feel free to be liberated, it’s not really about me” evolved into the advocate and accomplice I now know him to be. Were there mental shifts toward a broader vision and then broader consciousness? Ah ha revelations and awakenings? How did he get from there to here - and what bread crumbs did he leave for us to follow?

Fast forward just 3 years. He’s 25 years old. His wife is in labor with their first child at the same hospital where she works as a nurse. At a time when men were smoking cigars in the waiting room, his wife’s relationship with the hospital staff makes it possible for him to be among the first fathers to be present in the delivery room because this child is as much his as hers. Bold. Brave. Loving. Simple – by today’s standards, almost obvious - but not easy.

Fast Forward another 5 years. It’s 1968 – in some white families, a woman working out of the home in any capacity is a choice, a conversation, a strategy – working out of the home considered, in some ways, the epitome of feminism – while women of color were then and have always been in the workplace – race itself dictating whether work is liberation or obligation.

He’s 28 years old, married, now has a 5 year old and a two year old, and has started a graduate program, so the family lives in university owned housing specifically for students with children. It’s an apartment block of 12 families with 18 children under the age of six. Most of the women are home with the children during

the day and out of the home at night - leading guerilla theater groups against the Vietnam War, taking classes for their own degrees, or in my mother's case, working the overnight shift at the hospital to keep her nursing skills up to date so she can continue her career once the kids start school. While most fathers are also away in the evening...who is watching the children??..... there are a few men who can study at home. Dad is among them.

Each night, after the children are in bed, the families leave the doors to their apartments open to the center stairwell. Dad and the other men who can study at home take turns studying in the stairwell - responding throughout the night to children's calls for water or bathroom or mama, to diaper changes and night terrors.

There was one woman on the floor who is a recent widow – and, when she's at an evening class her young son often cries at night for his dad. As Mom said “Your dad spent a lot of time at night with that kid. That kind of support was probably the only way she was going to be able to get her degree – because none of us could afford sitters. She certainly couldn't. And I like to imagine that it was helpful to her son to be around those good men at that time.”

While Mom tells this story as an example of Dad's partnership in her commitment to her calling, she says “I don't think your Dad saw it as feminism or supporting women's rights. It just needed to be done. I wanted to work - most of the women worked - and someone had to watch the children. He could study at home. So he did. It was just that simple.”

So I asked Dad if he sat in the hallway as part of his commitment to his marriage and his wife's calling “Ummm....it wasn't like that. I never thought of sitting in the hallway as any kind of

accommodation. If I sat in the hallway, so would someone else - male, female, who cares - and we never had to hire a sitter for any of those families. Everyone on the hallway benefited. It wasn't about a movement - it was more like "this is just what we do to support everyone's freedom and to make sure the kids are taken care of. It was what was needed to be done."

From "Everyone should be liberated – feel free" to "This is what we do to support everyone's freedom" and "it was what was needed to be done." Dad, at 22, had the values that told him that everyone should be liberated but hadn't yet recognized that his efforts were needed to make that difference in the world. He found along the way, that, if he believed that women had some right to determine their own lives, that belief would require him to play a role. Between 22 and 28 he learned that that difference - between having his values and living his values - felt fine - even normal. Hmm.

I attended an anti-racism workshop earlier this year held by Black Lives Matter Cambridge. When the leader was asked how white allies could support the work, she said "come early to set up. Stay late to tear down. Make copies for hand outs. Order some food for a training and have it delivered or bring some food over. Watch the kids during trainings or help pay for sitters. Donate. We don't need you to do the work. We need you to support what is."

South African President and Freedom Fighter Nelson Mandela said, "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

Fast forward another 4 years - there is no girls' soccer program in the small town where we live so Dad fights my way onto the local

boys team - where I am the only girl. The coaches played me every game because the whole “shock and awe” factor of a girl with a soccer ball meant that, as soon as I got the ball, I pretty much had a straight shot at the goal. Dad then went to the local school board to advocate for a girls’ soccer program at the high school level - 5 years before I would be eligible - because, he said, he wanted me to have the same opportunities my brother had. With the help of some fierce female allies on that school board, the program passed and still exists today. From “Everyone should be liberated – feel free” to “This is what we do to support everyone’s freedom” to advocacy and building allies so I’d have the same opportunities my brother had.

5 years - 5 years before I went to high school he was creating opportunities for me. What if I starting searching for excellent candidates of color even 5 months before I needed them? There was a woman in a position of power who helped Dad get the girls’ soccer program through the school board. What if, rather than starting in white communities, I searched for candidates of color among powerful communities of color?

I was beginning to find the bread crumbs...that maybe supporting these urgent non-negotiable calls for freedom isn’t about reading facebook posts until we have some great ah ha moment of awakening and then we know how to engage - that we start by listening for what is needed – that we are needed to support what is, needed to be present in the delivery room, needed to sit in the stairwell, needed to set up, tear down and take care of the kids. Sometimes bold. Sometimes brave. Always loving. And sometimes what’s needed is really basic – food, child care, presence - and sometimes much more complicated - like advocacy 5 years in advance.

So another bread crumb seems to be that you find out what's needed, find out how to be of use – by being in relationship especially with people who are already doing what needs to be done - who call on you to do what they know you can do - these relationships which often change us from being bystanders hanging out in the metaphorical waiting room – waiting for the world we envision to be delivered, to being at the bedside in the delivery room.

In February of this year, Black Lives Matter Boston core activist Karelene Griffiths Sekou stood right here in this pulpit and said “...joining in solidarity with the liberation of other people, (it) isn't an act of charity, it isn't that you're serving those people over there who need you, it is first a self-liberatory and an evolutionary project for white people. The ways to do that are to join forces with those of us who....have no other choice. If we are to live, and to exist it means that we will and we must resist.”

In closing....a brief post script....like the missionary nurse who showed her her calling, Mom's last position before she retired was to help design and teach the first ever Bachelors of Nursing degree in the Carribean – a program that still grows leaders among women of color from 5 countries – women of color who went on to be heads of hospital, directors of intensive care – women who create opportunities for other women. Like the missionary that inspired her, she spent years traveling the world and taking care of people. She was - and is - fabulous. And Dad not only encouraged her to buy the ticket - he helped carry the suitcases.

Blessed be and amen.