

Submission for the 2018 Skinner Sermon Award

Title: Because Somebody Loved Me
Preacher: Rev. Anthony Makar
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Because Somebody Loved Me

Early on in his amazing Ware Lecture, given before a whole host of Unitarian Universalists at the 2015 General Assembly, Cornel West says “unequivocally” that “I am who I am because somebody loved me, somebody cared for me.... Any serious talk about struggle for freedom and struggle for justice has to radically call into question any conception of ourselves being self-made.”

“We didn’t give birth to ourselves,” he says. “Somebody had to inject some love inside of us.”

My question to Cornel West is, *Why start a lecture about activism like this?*

Why emphasize from the start, unequivocally, that we didn’t give birth to ourselves?

And I think I know the answer: because of the way the activism story is usually told.

It’s usually told from an individualistic angle, not a relational one.

This insight came to me around 12 years ago, when I heard the news that the great civil rights hero Rosa Parks had died. I opened up the newspaper to read a tribute to her, entitled, “One Person.” “Until December 1955,” went the article, “a soft-spoken department store seamstress could not have imagined being placed at the forefront of any movement. Rosa Parks, who died Monday at age 92, was destined to become known as the mother of the civil rights movement after refusing to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama bus. Her simple but very brave act would lead to a 13-month boycott of the bus company, a Supreme Court decision barring segregation of the public transit system and the identification of a new national leader: Martin Luther King, Jr. She was the spark that ignited a nonviolent revolution that quickly began burning through the thickets of segregation and Jim Crow laws that had been in existence almost 100 years.”

Now before I say anything else, I bow to the memory of Rosa Parks. May there be more Rosa Parks in this world!

But what is troubling about the way the newspaper told the story is the implication that her activism was basically individualistic. The title says it all: “One Person.” One person taking on the whole world. One person acting alone, coming from out of nowhere. No mention of her ties to any larger, supportive community; no mention of her part in an existing broader effort which trained her and activists like her in what to do and what to say if X, Y, or Z should happen. Nothing at all hinted in the newspaper story about the worship services or prayer meetings or hymn sings she went to, that encouraged and inspired. Nothing at all suggested about the committee meetings and the coalition building and the strategizing and the small gains and the setbacks. Not once: acknowledgment of all the anxiety and uncertainty and the mistakes!

No one was asking the newspaper for a complete Rosa Parks biography! But to fail to mention any of the ways that her activism was relational was and is to reinforce the destructive

impression that love and justice activism requires someone who is almost morally superhuman, which immediately disqualifies me and maybe you too.

Only perfect people need apply.

That's why Cornel West starts his talk about activism by saying, "Somebody loved me."

I'm an activist and we are activists because somebody loved us.

Maybe that somebody was blood kin—family you were born into. Like Chris Crass, our speaker from last week, you grew up hearing your father say hateful things about people of color but you saw your mother push back and this went a long way in leading you, today, to fight racism.

Or maybe you had only one parent and that parent read you stories about caring for the earth and, as often as possible, he or she would take you into untamed natural places. That's why, today, you honor the planet and you recycle and you do what you can to combat climate change.

Maybe it was somebody in Rosa Parks' family who loved her, and it's part of why she became who she was. I don't know.

What I do know is that parenting and grandparenting and step-parenting and any and all other ways of influence and education happening in one's family are powerful forms of relational activism.

You teach a growing person to love what is right, and they live always in that light.

And as I say this, I feel some sadness, because it wasn't like this for me, and maybe that's so for you too.

In my own case, a memory stands clear. It's the mid-1970's, and I'm living with my mom and dad and two brothers in northern Alberta, way up there, just 300 miles south of the Northwest Territories—a region that, like the rest of Canada, had been stolen from First Nations tribes. Where I lived, the Cree Nation had originally been plentiful, but contact and conflict with white people over land rights and religious identity had decimated them.

When Cree people speak about themselves in their own language, they call themselves "true people." But I saw something troubling when, one day, with my family, I was entering the McNamara Café, our favorite restaurant in downtown Peace River. I saw a "true person" near the entranceway, sprawled out on the ground. I saw his long hair, tangled and dirty, half-covering his snoring face. I saw his clothes, stained and disheveled. I smelled a pungent sour smell on him. What was this? I had never seen this sort of thing before. I asked my parents, What happened? Is he OK? They clucked their tongues, said he was drunk, and hurried me into the restaurant.

Out of sight, out of mind.

It could have been a mini-Truth and Reconciliation moment where I was led into the insight that a "true man" and his Nation had been hurt by the same historical laws and social arrangements that benefited me.

It could have been a mini-transformation moment where I learned that people who suffer in your community may be out of sight but can never be out of mind, not just because their pain is unacceptable to any good human being, but also because any society that creates such intense pain in some of its members can be counted on to twist up and distort the humanity of all of its members.

No one is untouched by the evil.

The need for Truth and Reconciliation—the need for transformation—the need to become fully human by being a love and justice activist—would not emerge for me from family. We were, in truth, too wrapped-up in coping with my mother’s mental illness to have bandwidth for anything more.

But I am here today to say, even so, somebody loved me.

Somebody loved me.

The somebody that took the form of a friend. He was practically the first out gay man I’d ever met, when I was 30 years old. I had grown up sheltered, in conservative communities. That changed, I met him, and we have loved each other like brothers for years. I am fierce for GLBTQ justice not just because it’s right, but because I know his life and I know his dreams and if God hates him then God hates me.

Somebody loved me, into the activism I do.

Do you have somebody like this, not a family member, but a friend or a teacher who has, as Cornel West says, “injected love inside of you”?

And then there is the somebody who loves us that is a community.

I was there at Justice General Assembly in 2012, like our ministerial intern. It was just as we heard her say a moment ago: “We rode in school buses, and General Assembly organizers had appointed ambassadors for each bus, who would answer questions and lead us in song. Riding into the night, we lifted our voices in song, singing about letting our little lights shine, and that we would take one more step.” “Our UUA President gave a rallying cry, as did the president of the United Church of Christ, who was also represented. They spoke about how our faith called us to name the abuses going on in tent city, and to rise up and advocate for refugee’s human rights, and to protest with our bodies, our voices, and our power to stop the violent injustices.”

She goes on: “At one point, the lights in tent city flickered on and off, the people in captivity were telling us they could hear us, and they knew we were there. They were not alone anymore.”

This is what it feels like to be Unitarian Universalist.

Unitarian Universalism loving us into activism.

It led us as a congregation to vote to affirm our Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression, Multiculturalism Resolution. Moments before the vote, it was like we were

*standing at the precipice, arms locked
together like tandem skydivers*

working up the courage to jump.

--(From "All That We Have Been, All That We Will Become" by Leslie Ahuvah Fails)

But then we asked ourselves,

*What have we got to lose?
A poverty of the spirit?
The lie that we are alone?*

And so we, together, jumped.

Unitarian Universalism loved us into it. We jumped because somebody loved us.

We have jumped; we have marched; we have studied together; we have worshipped together; we have reminded each other that we can be like Wonder Woman in our lives, both compassionate and strong; we have said to each other, "Look into the future—how will you be remembered?"

And we must continue jumping, as we continue asking:

*What have we got to lose?
A poverty of the spirit?
The lie that we are alone?*

We must do this because these days we are encountering the biggest challenge there is to relational activism: pushing back against what's wrong without pushing people away. To actively resist injustice--because to stay neutral means you side with the injustice--but to do so in a way that stays humanely connected with people who want you to stay neutral. They don't want you speaking up, but you must speak up. But you also don't want them out of your life.

Do you see how big a challenge this is?

We're all living this big challenge these days.

I know I am. I am struggling so deeply with it. I was in Canada a couple weeks back and I bought Justin Trudeau socks, because he is a world leader I respect. And when I thought of returning home to the United States, ugh. I was sad unto despair.

I will never buy Donald J. Trump socks.

But I and we have to find a way to live in the same country as him and the people who voted for him. Some of those people might be us. Definitely there are family members and friends of ours who did.

Moving forward, I want to pledge myself more deeply to the humanistic essence of our Unitarian Universalist faith that affirms, with the ancient Roman playwright Terence, that "I am a human being; nothing human can be alien to me."

So when I encounter a point of view that says, “build a wall,” I will resist, but I need to do that in a spirit that affirms that the “build a wall” perspective is not alien to me. What were the life experiences that make “building a wall” reasonable for the person in question? What are the issues that deeply concern them?

Relational activism affirms that, no matter what the perspective is, underneath is a human being trying to make sense of their experiences and their fears.

Not a devil. Not something inhuman.

This is true of us all.

Unitarian Universalism loves us in our humanity, and it means that it is loving us into treating others humanely. Even if we resist what those others believe with fierceness.

No one has to be perfect to do the work of love and justice activism.

The way forward is unpredictable. Two steps forward, three steps back, five steps forward, ten steps back, twenty steps forward.

We walk together.

We never stop.

Because somebody loved us.