

Standing Up by Sitting Down

January 8, 2006

By Rev. Martha Niebanck
First Parish in Brookline

Reading: *The Role of the Dissenter in Western Christianity* Nancy Shafer

Yes

Dissent begins with *Yes*.

Deeper than any *No*, prior to *No*,
is *Yes*.

Hope comes from *Yes*.

Willingness to give one's life comes from *Yes*.

Yes is the beginning, not only of dissent,
but all life before that.

We are born into *Yes*, are born because of
some grand *Yes*, are forever
finding our way back.

The longings of our hearts are always *Yes*.

No may rally us;

But what sustains us is *Yes*.

The saints who came before us...

all those who rest, now, from their labors,
knew that *Yes* is deeper than, prior to,
stronger than, any *No*.

They knew that dissent
may on the surface look like *No*,
but far more resilient, far more creative—
that which called them—is *Yes*.

All of our gathering, all of our seeking as religious liberals,
is about *Yes*.

In his jail cell, on the October night in 1553 before he was the next day to be
burned at the stake for heresy,

Michael Servetus dictated a confession.

He had all the night before him,

and he said that the length of the night satisfied him, because he had much to
think about.

Sometimes his mind wandered—fearing, he said,

the terribleness of the flames to come the next day; but still he dictated simply and eloquently what he knew to be true.

Listen to his words. What *Yes* do you hear in them?

Michael Servetus said:

I, Michael Servetus, do compose this testament on the eve of my death, which was decreed by Monsieur John Calvin, spiritual leader of the Geneva Protestants. This man's fervor for God is so great I will burn for it.

The Catholics of Lyon once burned me in effigy, after which I escaped their prison in April of that year, but the Protestants will see that there is no straw man in my stead come the dawn.

There is no escape from Geneva, or any other city in Europe.

There is no place to run to.

I think this is no defeat.

I defy their ability to still my voice.

Do they think wood and flame

Can erase my words?

What optimists they are!

I am forty-two years old,

and twenty-two years ago I sealed

my fate when, callow youth I was,

I wrote *On the Errors of the Trinity*,

This three-beinged God. I recorded this,

how can I recant what anyone can read?

All I have done is glorify God

with the truth I am permitted to receive.*

Michael Servetus said *Yes*

to there being no further place to run,

but before that, he said *Yes* to contemplating Mystery with his own mind, own wit.

Yes to puzzling: What is God? How is God?

Yes to telling the world what he found.

He said *Yes* to the consequences of that telling—

his own removal from this life

and the permanence of his words.

...how can I recant what anyone can read?

All I have done is glorify God
with the truth I am permitted to receive.
He said *Yes* to personal truth
As enlarging the Holy. *Yes* to knowing,
found through mind, through reason.
Yes to integrity, to faith—
as more important than life.
Servetus is called a dissenter—but
see the ways his dissent was *Yes*.
What about Jesus? What was his *Yes*?:
Yes to renaming who the innocent are, what charity is.
Yes to redefining what constitutes purity.
Yes to rethinking what justice is—who deserves pay, who, food.
Yes to forgiving—even to seventy times seventy.
Yes to a kingdom, invisible and within, yet more powerful and lasting than
anything tangible and seen.
Yes to using the words of stories and the touch of his hands to show how that
kingdom might be found.
Dissent begins with *Yes*, is held in *Yes*,
is prior to any *No*. Dissent is in its essence
a turning toward that which most lastingly sustains.
What is the character of dissent? What allows it?
...
The character that allows dissent
comes from loving wisdom—
an inner, personal knowing—
more than health and beauty;
choosing it as radiance that never ceases;
believing that such knowing is an unfailing treasure—
the mother, the beginning of all else good.
Your own dissent, your *Yes*:
How does it come to you?
How do you meet it? How, know it?
How do you pray over it?
How, sit with it?
How does it shape your life and call you into being?
May we, here, feel the presence of saints walking among us.
May we even *see* them. May we listen well to their stories, and fit our own
more closely to theirs.
May our singing of saints bring them palpably

into our lives, our world, which still, as of old, needs their Yes—and needs ours.

Amen.

Prayer

Rev. Mark Belletini

O Love. I know some things.

I can list the capitals of Europe and Africa and Asia, thread my way through the Periodic Table, and list the many biographies and novels I've read, studied all my life, but I have so few answers.—Fewer and fewer all the time.

And the questions themselves get more convoluted, more subtle and cunning, making me wonder if I even want to know the answers.

Sometimes my footing isn't so sure.

Sometimes my map crumples into powder at my feet.

Sometimes the lights go out, the engine seizes, the song is cut off, the sadness is tangible.

And on those days, I don't need Paris or Prague, Nairobi or Delhi.

I don't need answers. I don't even need the questions.

What I need is a squeeze of my hand, a shoulder on which to lean, a voice that says, "We'll do it together";

a smile that does not say "chin up" and "be tough,"

but which simply stands close, silent,

arms draped around my stooping shoulders.

Give me no lectures on clumsiness when I stumble.

Give me no pep talks on vision when I cannot see.

Just be there, O Precious Love, whenever I am not strong enough to admit I am not always strong.

Be there. Hold me.

And then walk with me in silence all the way home.

Amen.

Sermon

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks made a choice that made a difference in ways that continue to unfold. She refused to give up her seat to a white passenger and launched the 381-day boycott of the Montgomery bus system by 50,000 African- American residents.

Would you take a long look at the picture of Rosa Parks on the day of her arrest? What do you see in her eyes? In the expression of her mouth?



When I look into her face I see the faces of my women ancestors - my grandmother, my Great Aunt Marion, my mother. This is the face of judgment. There is backbone behind that face. When my Aunt Marion looked at you with this expression, you were going to stop whatever foolishness you'd begun.

Take a moment, look again. If this were your mother or grandmother, a favorite teacher—what would her expression be conveying to your body and mind?

When I see what looks like courage in what must have been a time of fear, I want to know its source.

Howard Thurman, minister and theologian, active at the time of Rosa Parks' arrest, tells us of the mood of persons like Ms. Parks; men and women in the

hold of systemic, cultural violence. He writes: “The oppressed are victims of a war of nerves. Fear...becomes the safety device with which the oppressed surround themselves in order to give some measure of protection from complete nervous collapse... They make their bodies commit to memory ways of behaving that will tend to reduce their exposure to violence. This is what the weak do everywhere. Through extreme care they have learned how to exercise extreme caution so as to reduce the threat of immediate danger from the environment...the disadvantaged man knows that in any conflict he must deal not only with the particular individual involved but also with the entire group, then or later... the result is a dodging of all encounters. ..This fear, then, which served originally as a safety device ...becomes death for the self. The power that saves turns executioner.” (Jesus and the Disinherited” pp. 45-46)

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When Quaker educator Parker Palmer imagines himself inside Rosa Parks’ expression, he imagines a person who is deciding to stop living with a gap between their own integrity and their outer words and actions. “the courage to live divided no more, and to face the punishment that may follow comes from (a) simple insight: No punishment anyone lays on you could possibly be worse than the punishment you lay on yourself by conspiring in your own diminishment. With that insight comes the ability to open cell doors that were never locked in the first place and to walk into new possibilities that honor the claims of one’s heart.” Parker Palmer names this moment in the unfolding of any person of integrity, the moment of making what he calls the “Rosa Parks decision”—the moment when a person starts wearing their own face—the moment you take charge of your life story.

When I see what looks like courage in what must have been a time of fear, I want to know its source.

Rosa Parks tells her story this way when speaking to a child: “Getting arrested was one of the worst days in my life...since I have always been a strong believer in God; I knew that He was with me, and only He could get me through the next step. I had no idea that history was being made. I was just tired of giving in. Somehow, I felt that what I did was right by standing up to that bus driver. I did not think about the consequences. I knew that I could have been lynched, manhandled, or beaten when the police came. I

chose not to move, because I was right. When I made that decision, I knew that I had the strength of God and my ancestors with me.“ (“Dear Mrs Parks” p. 42)

When I see what looks like courage in what must have been a time of fear, I want to know its source.

Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking to adults who were accusing Rosa Parks of being a NAACP plant, wrote three years after the boycott: “Mrs. Parks’ refusal to move back was her intrepid affirmation that she had had enough. It was an individual expression of a timeless longing for human dignity and freedom. She was not “planted” there by the NAACP or any other organization; she was planted by her personal sense of dignity and self-respect. She was a victim of both the forces of history and the forces of destiny. She had been tracked down by the *Zeitgeist*—the spirit of the time.” (“Stride for Freedom” p. 44)

When I see what looks like courage in what must have been a time of fear, I want to know its source.

When I listen to these ways of telling the story, I am struck by the mythic quality of the telling—*the heroic individual who rises to the call of history, saying “yes” to truth, standing alone courageously*. It rings true, in part, because we all make the journey to our fullest self through moments like these—moments when we must say “yes” to some deep part of ourselves by saying “no” to what our family, our school, our culture, believes is our role or part to play in *their* story. Sometimes we do say our “no” in such a way that we are cut off from community—Servetus is our UU model for being burned at the stake—a self-righteous immolation in the fire of truth.

I have come to know, however, that this is the *Disney* version of the Rosa Parks story; that it is incomplete in its telling. Rosa Parks did not simply wake up to her integrity one day on a bus. I believe that King and Parks’ telling de-emphasizes the intentionality of her action and I wonder if that is what fear does to our story-telling. When we, like Parker Palmer, name this moment as one of individual courage arising in a flash, with no evidence of the disciplined focus of attention, I think we cheat ourselves of knowing the full story—a story that a really free person can tell - freedom that comes from knowing that there is no way we can ever be separated from the heart

of love. Her story, infused with the “yes” of the sort that Jesus taught, is one of incarnation of that love in community across time.

Here are some of the details that flesh out the freedom of ‘yes’ expressed in that reliable lap of Love:

At the time of her arrest, Rosa Parks was a respected community leader already working to counter humiliating racist laws and traditions. She had been a veteran of black women’s organizations and a longtime member of the St. Paul AME Church.

She became secretary of the Montgomery NAACP chapter as early as 1943 and tried to register to vote three times before doing so for the first time in 1945. She was solidly anchored in black revolt. As a member of the NAACP, she worked on voter registration and youth programs, and, in fact, on that particular December 1st, she needed to get home to prepare for a youth workshop she was conducting that weekend under the auspices of the Montgomery Women’s Political Council.

In July, 1955, she had traveled to the Highlander Folk School located in Monteagle, Tennessee, for a workshop on school desegregation; a workshop also attended by Martin Luther King Jr. and Andrew Young. They came to study ways of non-violent protest.

Highlander had been founded in the 1930’s with a mission to “educate and restore human dignity and confidence to the people of the Appalachians - bringing back pride in their culture, music and heritage as a way to raise consciousness of class and labor injustice in the South.” They taught self-empowerment through dance, music, drama and prayer.

Highlander taught, and teaches, that “identity comes from valuing other people and recognizing a common heritage and future.” Highlander had achieved success in organizing and educating mill and timber workers in the ’30’s and ’40’s and was frustrated by the continuing existence of racial barriers to change in the 1950’s. Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King attended the Highlander-sponsored Citizenship School just before the Montgomery boycott, learning from the likes of Ella Baker how to empower and organize ordinary people at the grass roots level.

The Montgomery Women’s Political Counsel had, long before Parks’ arrest,

concluded that a bus boycott would be an effective means of ending segregation. The women's group planned an intentional strategy for a community action that was in place—with tactics and the ability to mobilize many people quickly and effectively—long before that moment when Mrs. Parks kept her seat.

When the arrest they'd been waiting for happened, several black leaders, including King, wanted to distribute leaflets endorsing the boycott anonymously. The women's organization challenged them, calling them "little boys." Social historian Paula Giddings sums it up: "faced with a choice of confronting either the wrath of white racists or those black women, they chose the safer course." ("I May Not Get There With You" Michael Dyson, p. 204)

These women were facing both racism and sexism head on. Instead of a top-down, personality-driven organization led by male ministers, this action was cooked up in the kitchens of Montgomery. Rosa Parks was a woman who dreamed and worked with others in an intentional and strategic way. Yes, she was with God and with her ancestors on that day, and they were known to her, not just as some spiritual presence, but also in the flesh and blood of her intentional community.

We don't have segregated buses today, but we do have a two-tiered society. **We've privatized the front of the bus for education, health care, and public safety.** We've turned a generation of black men into the victims of the drug war and the war on terrorism, turning them into criminals and soldiers.

Hear the words of my colleague, Valerie Mapstone Ackerman:

"If we realized that we were unconsciously or neglectfully or distractedly or (perish the thought) willfully complying with the degradation of liberty and justice for all via seamless cooperation between political and corporate power, the new and improved fascism, then maybe, just maybe we would forgo re-runs of Desperate Housewives, remove the earbuds connected to our iPods, turn off Fox News, recycle the Victoria's Secret catalog, step outside the Starbucks, cancel the reservation at Chez Chi-Chi, foreswear another junket to yet another exotic land, donate the SUV to the Girl Scouts, avoid The Mall, renege on the contract to build or buy a McMansion, renew our

membership in ACLU, The Interfaith Alliance, Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, Pastors for Peace, etc.

“In other words, if we noticed that we were supporting and perpetuating astonishing injustice through inaction and inattention, perhaps we would decide to make whatever sacrifices were necessary to change the course of events. Further, if we realized that changing history requires cooperation, concerted effort and deep commitment, perhaps we could teach ourselves to follow leaders and teach ourselves to become leaders and learn to recognize the log in our eyes more frequently than we spot the mote in the eye of the other.

And then perhaps we could find the necessary compassion to awaken and act in the face of the juggernaut of destruction apace in Washington and our state capitols and our courthouses and city halls.”
(personal communication, by permission of the author)

I hear her call as an invitation to get serious about community organizing, to find a way to learn strategic leadership for social change in the way that Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King made those connections and learned those skills.

I would love your company on that path and I pray that we find a way to stand up in a way that goes beyond self-righteous complaining. The Highlander model continues in our midst in the work of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, GBIO. The UU Urban Ministry offers opportunities to make a difference with our privilege. Today the Social Action Committee is talking about how to direct their energy. Let them know what matters to you, even if you don't know what needs doing.

The Highlander Center got people together to ask questions and to sing. They trusted that human beings are designed to be free and creative and that solutions will bubble up out of the music and the poetry and the questions.

One day, as they stood on a picket line of striking tobacco workers, a singer began a spiritual whose words were crafted by slaves, singing “I Shall Overcome.” The whole group began singing and changed the words as they sang to: “We Shall Overcome.” This became the theme song of the school and then the civil rights movement.

Everyone here has overcome something. Remember the “yes” that inspired your “no.” Feel the energy of dissent in your life and in the life of our ancestors.

We have a lot to teach each other. May we find both courage and creativity within and among us as we sing: *We Shall Overcome*.

Benediction

Rev. Imre Gellérd

God does not expect from you to save the world,
Your mandate is limited to one single human being, who could be just
yourself or your neighbor.

God never expects more from us than we are capable of doing.

Each word of comfort, each act of compassion, is a small bonfire during
dark nights.

But these tiny flickering flames, the simple gestures of loving hearts, will
add up and will eventually save the world.

Salvation is not something we have to wait for, but we must do something
about it, because we can.

Because we can, therefore we must.