

Get Up, Stand Up!

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Singer Neil Young, upon receiving a Spirit of Freedom Award in December of 2001, ironically took that opportunity to give his support to the Patriot Act, [saying](#), "To protect our freedoms, it seems we're going to have to relinquish some of our freedoms for a short period of time." He says not to worry, that this is just temporary and "that these are our rights and we can get them back."

Now, whatever you think of the Patriot Act, I have to question Young's line of reasoning, his sense of history. And I think it's worth questioning, because I don't think he is alone in his argument. This takes on a renewed significance as the debate over extension of the Patriot Act is taken up in Congress and people call for an investigation of the Administration eavesdropping on citizens of the United States without warrants or any court approval.

But as we think about the struggle for human rights all through the ages and continuing today; as we prepare to celebrate Martin Luther King day and we remember he and Rosa Parks and lesser-known names [like Viola Liuzzo](#), a white woman, a Unitarian, who, after taking part in the historic Voting Rights march, was murdered by Klansmen while driving down a lone highway with a black companion; as we think of the struggle against Apartheid by Nelson Mandela and so many others whose names we do not know in South Africa; as we tally up the people who have suffered (and continue to suffer); those who have died (and continue to be murdered); those who struggle their whole lives long, never knowing if what they work for is achieved or simply buried over by the forces of oppression and injustice and greed and war...

As we think of all this, (and we *should* think of all this), what do we make of Neil Young's offhand assertion that "that these are our rights and we can get them back."

Can we so easily relinquish the freedoms that people have given their very lives for with the promise that some benevolent patriarchal *other* is really just suspending a few of our privileges while the war on terror is fought, and that as soon as the coast is clear our rights will be handed back to us? Does that ring historically true? Psychologically true? Spiritually true? *Practically* true?

Awhile back, I did a sermon on prophets...not profits as in corporate profits, but prophets as in Old Testament prophets; who are the prophets of today? In fact, the title of this sermon comes

from [a Bob Marley song](#), a singer who was mentioned as a present-day prophet that day. I have come to the sad conclusion regarding singer Neil Young, however, based on the statements that I began with, that he is most assuredly *not* a prophet. He is not saying, as the prophet Amos did, “Let justice roll down like waters, and peace like an overflowing stream.” He is saying, “You know, this is just a temporary dam we’re building here, and once we finish this war, they’re gonna give peace back to us...justice will roll down as soon as, you know, things are under control...they promise...they crossed their hearts...pinky-swore...hoped to kiss a crippled cricket.”

Prophets do not seek to convince us that compromising our values is okay. They do not sell the political plans of those in power. They do not deal in half-measures...

And yet, they do. They do sometimes deal in half measures...they have to, or those who follow the words of the prophets have to deal in half measures, though in a very different sense than Neil Young spoke of. They do not deal in half measures regarding what they work *toward*, regarding their ideals or their values, but they often have to deal in half measures (or less) regarding what they receive, the *results* of their work. I’m talking about what Reinhold Niebuhr spoke of in our opening words today. “Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; *Therefore, we are saved by hope.*”

You see, today I am interested in what *keeps us* from getting up, from standing up for our rights and the fundamental human rights of others. One of those barriers, I think, is that we may not see the work completed. In fact, we *won’t* see the work completed. When we are committed to human rights across this world, we are inevitably dealing with huge and crushing disappointments, no matter how hard we work. And yet, the worst thing, the unforgivable thing would be to use that as an excuse for giving up the work.

Or to let the “war on terror” be an excuse for giving up the work. Or to hide behind our newly-recognized vulnerability as a nation as an excuse for giving up the work. Or to use our frustration at our inability to effect speedy and clear and satisfying results as an excuse for giving up the work.

We have the rights and freedoms we have today because people did not give up, even though they may never have enjoyed the fruits of their labors. The work will not be completed in our lifetime...therefore we are saved by hope. And that hope is further inspired by the work of those who have gone before us.

But we have a tendency to romanticize the work of those who have gone before us. It is the nature of history that we can only construct it in retrospect, so we then make a clean, continuous narrative of it. This leads to this, which leads to this, which leads to the desired end, and it all has

an air of inevitability and a clarity that we cannot imagine being on the wrong side of. I think this oversimplification undermines our present work, because we struggle, expecting the desired results as a matter of course. Because we wait for something to appear undeniably right, as the struggles in history from our present vantage point seem undeniably right, before we dare to act.

Again, Reinhold Niebuhr steps in with a helpful reminder:

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history;
Therefore, we are saved by faith.

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history. I can guarantee you that I can supply you with a pretty substantial argument against most anything you wish to support. There are very smart people out there who can point out the flaws in your reasoning; the unrealistic goals of your struggle; the unforeseen pitfalls in your plan. We can play point/counterpoint forever, and much of the news media is enamored with doing just that... back and forth, we hear opinion 1, then opinion 2, then rebuttals, then we get to decide who won, knowing that whoever it was, they just might lose tomorrow...and what do we make of it? Can we reason ourselves toward effective action? Don't we often reason our way right *out* of effective action? Isn't there a place where we say, we are doing this because, given what we know, and given what we feel is right, right here, right now, we can do nothing else? No matter if it is proved to be impractical, disorderly, unwise? No matter if it is labeled radical, idealistic, politically correct or incorrect, or unreasonable?

A minister was asked if his unpopular stance on a political issue wouldn't threaten the funding of a non-profit organization with which he was involved, and he replied, "You should never let your non-profit make you a non-prophet."

You see, we look back in history, to the era of the civil rights movement to which we pay tribute through the Martin Luther King holiday, and we say, "How could they *not* be on the side of civil rights? How could they keep Howard Thurman's children, or anyone's children, from using public facilities that should be open to all?" It seems so clear. But trust me; there were arguments on the other side, and there were many good people who allowed themselves to do nothing, and allowed those arguments to justify their inaction. Safety, security, patriotism, tradition, religion...all of these were called on in order to support *the way things were*, even though *the way things were* was horribly immoral. And we look back and say, "How could they?" and we say, "Things are so much more complicated now," and we yearn for a struggle which we can join where we feel so undeniably right as the civil rights marchers must have felt.

So imagine a future time, and people looking back on this time, saying, "How could they *not* want to stop the genocide in Darfur. How could they let the atrocities continue there? How could they ever justify torture, under any circumstances? Why would they not recognize the

marriage of two adults committed to one another in love? How could they not see what they were doing to the environment? What possible justification could there have been for destroying the very planet that sustained them? How could they spend so many billions of dollars on war and weapons when so many people were starving? It all seems so clear...”

So very clear.

Rosa Parks died this past year. She is a legend in the civil rights movement, and will most likely go down in history as one of the great figures in the struggle for human rights worldwide. Though you may know the story of her refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white man, an action which provided the spark for a bus strike that proved pivotal in the civil rights movement of the sixties, it is worth looking a little deeper into her story. It may help us with the seeming confusion and futility that surrounds our own actions sometimes.

First of all, [the story we know about Rosa Parks](#) was not an isolated incident that suddenly spurred action and reaction. The story has gained such notoriety that sometimes it rises above its very context, becomes almost mythical, daunting our action today rather than inspiring it.

There was a bus boycott, quite successful in many aspects, in Baton Rouge that preceded the one that the Rosa Parks incident ignited. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and others studied this as they proceeded with plans in Montgomery. Those who worked on that boycott, though their names do not appear in history books; though their story is not told and retold; they are heroes, too.

And there was a fifteen-year-old girl in Montgomery named Claudette Colvin who had boarded a bus earlier in the same year of Rosa Parks' encounter, in front of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King was minister. No whites were on the bus when Claudette boarded, so she sat down in a middle seat. (Those were seats that were open to blacks *as long as* no whites desired them.) Whites began boarding the bus, and soon the driver demanded that four African American women give up their seats. (When a white person wanted to sit, they would clear the whole row so that the white person would not only get a seat, but would not have to sit next to a black person). Claudette refused to move. The police arrived, knocked her books from her arms, grabbed her wrists, and physically removed her from the bus. She was shouting and screaming, “He has no right...this is my constitutional right...he has no right to do this!”

So why was this not the rallying cry for the bus boycott? Well, things get messy here. The Judge dropped the segregation charge against Colvin, so that there was less chance of the case being challenged on constitutional grounds, then dropped the disorderly-conduct charge as “a gesture of goodwill, and finally announced that all Colvin had to do was plead guilty and pay a small fine. Also, because Colvin was an unmarried, pregnant teenager with, by all accounts, a pretty foul

mouth, it was hard to get the more conservative Baptist church members to rally around Claudette as the symbol of desegregation, never mind what the press might have done. Those were the political realities. Rosa Parks, who was serving as branch secretary of the NAACP, and who actually served as Claudette Colvin's advisor in a church Youth Group, counseling her to "always do the right thing," recalled in this instance that "the decision was made to wait until we had a plaintiff who was more upstanding before we went ahead and invested any more time, effort and money."

That is the political and social reality of the situation. Most times you do the right thing and it does not pay off in the way that you think it should; it does not automatically create the thing you strive toward; and yet this is a little story of victory, too. A young girl with that type of courage that cried out to the authorities, "This is *not right!*" Who learned, in church, that she should never lose her dignity. And who knows but what her act didn't inspire Rosa Park's later decision? That the student did not teach the teacher something with her bravery?

And it was not the first time that Rosa Parks had resisted the immoral practices of segregation on a bus. Twelve years earlier, Parks had boarded a bus with a particularly mean and miserable driver. He was one of the drivers who required African American riders to pay at the front and then go back out the front door to board through the rear door. Sometimes, these drivers, for fun, would take off after the riders had exited the front door and before they had boarded through the rear. This driver, James F. Blake, demand that Parks exit and board through the rear after she had paid. She refused, saying she was already on, and besides the stairwell in back was already packed with people as the "black section" was full. He reached for his holster, as all drivers carried weapons, demanded that she exit, and finally reached to pull her out by her sleeves. She held her head high, told him not to strike her, she would exit by her own power. "Get off my bus!" he seethed, and she, in a sly and wonderful act of defiance, dropped her handbag on the way out, causing her to have to sit down on one of the "whites-only" seats to retrieve it. You can imagine this made Blake angrier still.

Interestingly, for the next twelve years, as a way of retaining her dignity, she refused to ride his bus. If it was the only one that came along, she walked. For twelve years she kept up that particular boycott of Blake's bus, until the day that went down in history. On that day, in 1955, she didn't pay attention to the driver, until he turned around, as a white rider boarded, and demanded that Rosa Parks and her companions in the row all give up their seats. "No," said Ms. Parks. "I'll have you arrested," said Blake. "You may do that," she replied. Dignified. Ready. (*Many thanks to writer Douglas Brinkley for [his book on Rosa Parks](#), from which all this information was obtained.*)

But why tell all these stories? Only to say that our actions are not in vain. This was a powerful incident that we celebrate in the person of Rosa Parks, but it is the cumulative effect of so many

other actions that felt useless, so many other plans that fell through, so many other people who remain nameless in our histories...and still their light shines for us today. They were saved by hope.

“An event is never single and isolated,” wrote Robert Penn Warren in his 1965 book, *Who Speaks for the Negro*, “It is not a bright unit gleaming before the eye of God. It’s a complex of various factors. It is hard to know where [chance] comes in. It is hard to know where necessity comes in.”

It is hard to know. I would say it may even be impossible to know.

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime;

Therefore, we are saved by hope. And we sing for hope. And we sing to create hope

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history;

Therefore, we are saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;

Therefore, we are saved by love. We can’t get there alone. That is why we join together here, to feel the saving power of love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own;

Therefore, we are saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness. We will make mistakes. I guarantee it. And I’m sorry to shock those of you who were sure that no mistakes would be made...The struggle for freedom, for justice, for human rights, is not an exact science. It is hard and it is confusing sometimes and it is messy and it is often hurtful...so we need to truly listen to one another, we need to search out understanding, and we need not only love and support from one another, but forgiveness.

I’ve been thinking about Maxine Krall all week, as many of us have. I was somewhat resentful of having to write this sermon, as I was concentrating on getting her memorial service ready and handling other details and I didn’t really want to try and focus...but it came to me in the writing that Maxine could have *given* this sermon. With her work, her knowledge of how things run and how she felt they *should* run, her understanding of society and her passion for politics. The work for justice, for peace, for economic, political, civil rights? “Course it’s messy,” she would say. “What’d you expect? Doesn’t mean you don’t *do* it.”