

July 14: Justice and Making Amends

The new Statue of Liberty Museum in New York Harbor boasts a number of treasures: the original torch, which was replaced in the 1980s; an unoxidized copper replica of Lady Liberty's face; and recordings of immigrants describing the sight of the 305-foot monument.¹

It also revives an aspect of the statue's long-forgotten history: Lady Liberty was originally designed to celebrate the end of slavery, not the arrival of immigrants. Ellis Island, the inspection station through which millions of immigrants passed, didn't open until six years after the statue was unveiled in 1886. The plaque with the famous Emma Lazarus poem — "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" — wasn't added until 1903.

"One of the first meanings [of the statue] had to do with abolition, but it's a meaning that didn't stick," Edward Berenson, a history professor at New York University said in an interview with *The Washington Post*.

The monument, which draws 4.5 million visitors a year, was first imagined by a man named Édouard de Laboulaye. Laboulaye loved America — often giving speeches described by a *New York Times* correspondent in 1867 as "feasts of liberty which move the souls of men to their deepest depths" — and he loved it even more when slavery was abolished.

In June 1865, Laboulaye organized a meeting of French abolitionists at his summer home in Versailles. "They talked about the idea of creating some kind of commemorative gift that would recognize the importance of the liberation of the slaves,"² Berenson writes.

Laboulaye secured the partnership of sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi. An early model, circa 1870, shows Lady Liberty with her right arm in the position we are familiar with, raised and illuminating the world with a torch. But in her left hand she holds broken shackles, an homage to the end of slavery.

When Laboulaye's Statue of "Liberty Enlightening the World" was completed, it not only represented democracy but also symbolized American independence and the end of all types of servitude and oppression. A broken shackle and chain lie at the Statue's right foot. The chain disappears beneath the draperies, only to reappear in front of her left foot, its end link broken.

But of course, the oppression of African Americans did not end in 1886. Lady Liberty still calls us all.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/05/23/statue-liberty-was-created-celebrate-freed-slaves-not-immigrants/?utm_term=.ba357324f724

² *Ibid.*

I remember talking to a friend who is African American recently and bemoaning what is happening in our country now to the freedoms of women, immigrants and the freedom of the press and she said to me, "Welcome to the American that we have always lived in as African Americans."

Poet David Whyte talks tells the story in his TED talk called, "A lyrical bridge between past, present and future"³ of his niece who takes 7 weeks to walk the Camino del Santiago, the journey of 500 miles said to that ends is Santiago, where the remains of St. James, one of Jesus' disciples, were carried from Jerusalem and brought to Santiago.

After walking for many, many days, at the end, you arrive at Santiago, the town of such sacred meaning since medieval times for so many is now a town of 100, 000 residents, many of whom try to sell you trinkets as your journey ends, and others who feel invaded by what they think of as your tourist presence.

But you do have the possibility of going on for three more days to this place called Finisterre, from the Latin, a name given in Roman times which means "the ends of the earth," the place where ground turns to ocean. David Whyte call it, "The place where your present turns into the future."

On the journey to Finisterre, there are 3 rituals. First, one eats a plate of scallops, or if you are vegan you contemplate the scallop shell. Scallops have long been a symbol of the Santiago. As the legend goes, as James' body was being shipped to Santiago, a heavy storm off the coast of Spain hit the ship, and his body was lost to the ocean. After some time, however, it washed ashore undamaged, covered in scallops.

As you walk the Camino del Santiago, every arrow pointing your way is under an etching of a scallop shell. So this first ritual is asking: "How did you get to this place? How did you follow the path to get here? How do you hold the conversation of life when you feel unbesieged, when you're unbullied, when you're left to yourself? How do you hold the conversation of life when you feel unbesieged, when you're unbullied, when you're left to yourself"

How do you hold the conversation of life that brings you to this place? In terms of making amends, how do we hold the conversation in this country about slavery? How many times do you hear, "But that was so long ago. can't you just get over it?" How can one get over anything until we all admit what there is to get over, until we walk the journey of history together?

³https://www.ted.com/talks/david_whyte_a_lyrical_bridge_between_past_present_and_future/transcript?language=en

The second ritual involves burning something that you've brought, something that needs to be let go of; and then the third ritual is leaving an item of clothing that aided you in your arrival to this place.

So David Whyte's niece, after eating a scallop and burning a letter and leaving her boots that got her there, sits on the cliff at Finisterre, known as the end of the world, where the land becomes the sea and watches the sun go down as the moon came up and her shadow extended out over the sea and she knew, then, that she had to walk over that unknown sea into her future.

From the poem Finisterre by David Whyte that Marion read earlier:

"No way to make sense of a world that wouldn't let you pass
except to call an end to the way you had come,
to take out each frayed letter you had brought
and light their illumined corners; and to read
them as they drifted on the western light;
to empty your bags; to sort this and to leave that;
to promise what you needed to promise all along,
and to abandon the shoes that had brought you here
right at the water's edge, not because you had given up
but because now, you would find a different way to tread,
and because, through it all, part of you would still walk on,
no matter how, over the waves."⁴

David Whyte goes on his talk to say that the only way to walk into this life fully, to be present with who and where we are now, is to realize that 3 abiding illusions keep us from this possibility and to let them go. The first one is that we can somehow construct a life in which we are not vulnerable, in which we not only do not get sick and die but in which we are not changed by everyone we meet.

The second illusion is that we can have a life in which our hearts are not broken. This cannot be true if we are to love anything or anyone and the third is that we can have live in the world of our commitments, professional and otherwise, as a protection from vulnerability and heart break. Whyte tells us that if you live fully in whatever you do, you will be vulnerable, and your hearts will break.

David Whyte closes his talk by saying, "[J]ust by actually standing in the ground of your life fully, not trying to abstract yourself into a strategic future that's actually just an escape from present heartbreak; the ability to stand in the ground of your life and to look at the horizon that is pulling you -- in that moment, you are the whole journey. You are the whole conversation."⁵

⁴ <https://www.davidwhyte.com/pilgrim>

⁵ Ibid

How can we use the understanding that to live is to be vulnerable and to love includes a willingness to have our heart broken so that we can collectively and individually stand in our lives fully?

Where do we start with making amends? Sometimes there are so many to make that we turn away from it all. But in turning away from what is ours to recognize, part of our own shadow is lost and we wander, like Peter Pan, unable to make meanings that can sustain us until our shadow is stitched back to us, allowing us our darkness and light.

When Gary and I were on vacation recently, we visited my mom. My mom loves deep, involved, intense conversation. So, knowing she has a willing partner in me, she and I snuggle down pretty soon after I arrive and get to it! Mom & I look together at so many parts of what makes us all well and what compromises this ability.

In one of our conversations, I told her how it still hurts me sometimes, the way my brother and sisters seem to blame me for the past. I was the oldest girl of 5 children and in our alcoholic family, and I did a lot of mothering. I did it badly too. I was only a child myself.

Mom said, "It is not the past they blame you for but the way parts of it repeat, for them, in the present." She told me to talk to each one of them and ask what I am still doing that evokes the past for them. And then, she said, "Then you'll know what you need to go forward into a place that has room for all of you as equals."

This advice scared the heck out of me. How vulnerable, how capable of breaking my heart, how undoing! When I found the courage, I had these conversations with my brother and sisters and through them, made space in the present for new conversations and connections. This process allowed us all to stand more fully in our own lives.

Byran Stevenson, author, speaker, lawyer and head of the Equal Justice Initiative, participated in erecting a memorial in Alabama dedicated to the victims of lynching. Over 4,000 black people were lynched in a decades-long campaign of racist terror most of which occurred after the civil war, after the statue of liberty proclaimed us a nation where all deserved freedom, broken shackles at her feet.

At the center of this exhibit is a grim cloister, a walkway with 800 weathered steel columns, all hanging from a roof. Etched on each column is the name of an American county and the people who were lynched there, most listed by name, many simply as "unknown."

The columns meet you first at eye level, like the headstones that lynching victims were rarely given. But as you walk, the floor steadily descends; by the end, the columns are all dangling above, leaving you in the position of the spectators in old photographs of public lynchings.⁶

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/us/lynching-memorial-alabama.html>

Bryan Stevenson writes about what was done to black people in the South, lynching and burning and cutting off body parts that were brought home as trophies. He comments that this is no less horrific than what we shrink with horror from concerning the brutality of ISIS.

In an interview Stevenson said, "I'm not interested in punishing people for slavery or punishing people for terrorism. I'm not interested in punishing people for segregation or even punishing people for police violence. I'm interested in getting us to a place where we're feeling something that looks more like freedom and justice."⁷

What struck me most about what he said during this interview was, "We have to stop telling the lies that we tell about who we are. You go to the American South, and the landscape is littered with the iconography of the Confederacy. We celebrate our history of slavery. We celebrate our era of terrorism."

This simple thing, to look at who we are as a people and recognize that as a nation we have done this and it lives within us all. This simple thing, so complicated, is the first step.

Showing up fully in our lives has to mean that we look at the past with clarity, not only ours but the past from which we all come, and name it. It means allowing vulnerability and it means allowing our hearts to break together.

The boots of this journey are ready to take off and leave at the end of the world. Watching our shadows cross the sea in front of us, unsure of what is next and ready to stand in what has gone before us, we can leave new footprints and prepare ourselves for the next journey. And begin to arrive here together, as one people, equal and ready to build an earthly home where love can thrive.

Amen.

⁷ <http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/talk-to-al-jazeera/articles/2016/1/8/ending-injustice.html>

