

Our Founders Did Not Feel Helpless!

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The Reading

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. — Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

[The Declaration goes on to enumerate the injuries and usurpations including, among others, dissolving colonial governments, sending in occupation armies, “obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither”; “quartering large bodies of armed troops among us, protecting them, by a mock Trial from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States”; and “imposing Taxes on us without our Consent.” “He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.” They went on:]

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their

native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these united Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States, that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. — And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.

The Sermon

[1776]

It was 241 years ago today that a significant majority of the members of the Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, voted to declare their independence from England. I said 241 years ago *today* because it was on July 2nd that the vote was taken. It was July 4th on which Jefferson's Declaration was adopted and was signed by the President of the Congress, John Hancock, and its secretary, Charles Thomson. Most of the delegates signed on August 2nd, with the delegates from Pennsylvania and South Carolina declining to sign at the time. Delaware's delegates split, and the New York delegation abstained. In the end, all but New York's delegates signed. [Actually, one person didn't sign until 1781.]

On the 3rd of July, John Adams wrote to Abigail, predicting that:

the Second of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epocha, in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding generations as the great Anniversary festival.

Jefferson initially included a paragraph in his Declaration, charging the king with transporting slaves from Africa and "suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce," this in spite of the slaves Jefferson held. The paragraph was deleted by the Congress because some of the slaveholders objected. It is clear that the Declaration was mostly about White, property-owning males. 69% of the signers were men who had held official colonial offices under English rule. This was not a movement stimulated by the common people. Many of the signers stood to gain power and wealth from the Revolution.

We are commonly given the impression that all the colonists rejoiced at this great event and rushed to join the fight against the British. Sam Adams estimated that actually, 1/3 of the population supported the Revolution, 1/3 actively opposed it, and 1/3 didn't much care. Thousands of colonists fought on the side of the redcoats. One of the books I read while I was in Junior High was Kenneth Roberts' great historical novel, **Oliver Wiswell**, which told the story of the Revolution from the perspective of a Loyalist. Roberts had other great novels from the Revolutionaries' perspective, but felt it was important for us to acknowledge there was another view. That book had a significant impact on my way of looking at things – to always try to remember most events have more than one side. [The things we were taught in school were not always accurate or complete.]

None of this is intended to detract from our celebration of the 4th of July or the courage and vision of the members of the Continental Congress, and those they represented. Limited though it might have been, it pointed in an audacious direction – taking on the King and army of the most powerful nation of their time - daring to speak of freedom and the idea that governments "derive their just powers from the consent of the governed."

At the conclusion of the Revolution and after six years with an ineffectual governmental structure under the Articles of Confederation, a convention was held to create a Constitution that would better provide for a government that would reflect the dream of the new nation. James McHenry, a signer of the Constitution, recorded in his diary that when Benjamin Franklin walked out at the conclusion of the Convention, Mrs. Elizabeth Powell, a friend of George Washington, ran up to him and asked, "Well Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a

monarchy?" He responded, "A republic, Madam, if you can keep it." That has been the challenge of the past 230 years.

[changes]

That Republic has faced repeated challenges over those decades. The understanding of what it is, or should be, has changed, often painfully. People who were intentionally left out of the founding Declaration and from the original Constitution, have been included. People of color who were counted as 3/5's of a person are, at least theoretically, whole people in the eyes of the law - most Americans today believe that "Black Lives Matter." The rights of women have been recognized, even if not to be compensated equally. Many rights have been recognized for those who were earlier deemed to be "savages," although their treaty rights are still not always honored when they stand in the way of corporate profits – think of water and pipelines.

Who, two centuries ago, could have dreamt of social security and medicaid and medicare? Who could have imagined an America with troops defending its "interests" in 177 nations, and drones being used in others? Who could have imagined a Black president, or a woman getting the most popular votes for the office? Who could have imagined that the American currency would serve as the basis of the world's economy? Oh, how the nation has changed since the time of the Declaration and Constitution.

There are, of course, varying opinions of the changes that have ensued. There are those who would like to see the clock turned back - who prefer the way the things were in a previous time. There are also those who hope for more change, and there are those who, looking at the history of previous Empires, fear that the era of American dominance is coming to an end. We have survived a renewed war with England in 1812, a bloody Civil War to end slavery, two World Wars which were supposed to end war, and countless military interventions. America has actually been at war for 222 out of its 239 years. We have, for the most part, come out on top, at least never on the bottom. But how long can this continue?

[The Retreat of Western Liberalism]

Just this week, a friend called my attention to a new book called **The Retreat of Western Liberalism**, by Edward Luce, a columnist for the "Financial Times." [I highly recommend his book - **The Retreat of Western Liberalism**]

Luce is pessimistic. He points out:

Until I was six years old, there were barely thirty democracies in a world of almost two hundred nations . . . By the time of the millennium there were more than a hundred democracies worldwide . . . Things started to go wrong after 2000. The first great blow was in Russia where Vladimir Putin replaced Boris Yeltsin as president and set about closing down the system of free elections while retaining its trappings . . . It was on Obama's watch that the tally of global democracies fell most sharply. The world now has twenty-five fewer democracies than it did at the turn of the century.

It is Luce's contention that the essence of the problem is the growing gap between the rich elite and the bulk of the population. He observes:

In 2000, exactly a third of Americans described themselves as lower class, according to Gallup. By 2015, that number had risen to almost half. In many ways these self-identification surveys mean much more than hard statistics on median income or

income inequality. They express a feeling people have about being shut out from society. It is a very un-American state of mind.

It is Luce's contention that the American era is passing. China and India, he believes, are the growing economies and we are likely to be left in the dust. He fears that rather than domination by either of those nations, the outcome may be chaos.

He says:

Whatever your remedies to the crisis of liberal democracy, nothing much is likely to happen unless the West's elites understand the enormity of what they face. If only out of self-preservation, the rich need to emerge from their post-modern Versailles. At the moment they seem busier shoring up its fortifications. . . .

Western liberal democracy is not yet dead, but it is far closer to collapse than we may wish to believe. It is facing its gravest challenge since the Second World War. This time, however, we have conjured up the enemy from within. At home and abroad, America's best liberal traditions are under assault from its own president. We have put arsonists in charge of the fire brigade.

The essential problem, as Luce sees it, is that people have lost hope, they feel helpless. They are convinced that the present system is so stacked against them that they can never win. Today, faith in democracy is shrinking. According to a survey:

One in six people of all ages in America and Europe now believe it would be a good thing for the "army to rule." That has risen from one in sixteen in the mid 1990's - a near trebling.

Luce does not suggest we should give up – that is the problem. We feel overwhelmed and therefore try to hide from the reality of our present situation and denying it makes it less likely that we can confront it.

[Soul of a Citizen]

As I said, I only learned of Luce's very persuasive book this week. My original focus was originally on the solution, without adequately acknowledging the depth of the problems we face: Luce provided a correction. Fifteen years ago, I happened upon Paul Rogat Loeb's book, **Soul of a Citizen**, which was subtitled "Living With Conviction in Challenging Times." Loeb spoke at the UUA General Assembly and I arranged to interview him for my TV show when he came to Madison – my station had a sister station in Madison, which was an hour and a half from Rockford. Last year, Loeb spoke in Potsdam and he gave me a copy of the new and revised edition of the book. I found his message to be truly inspiring and it fits well with Luce's vision.

[learned helplessness]

Loeb cited the psychologist Martin Seligman, whose work we considered in my sermon some time ago on optimism. Pessimists, according to Seligman, have a condition he calls "learned helplessness." These are people who have become convinced that the causes of whatever difficulties they have experienced have been permanent and pervasive. They see no room for hope.

There is a sense in which our nation is suffering from "learned helplessness." Through a combination of events and brainwashing by the media, we have been persuaded that the events that really control our lives are out of our control -- it is big government and big business that are in charge and we are powerless. We have seen a radical redistribution of

wealth in the last quarter century. The rich have become much richer; the poor, poorer; and the middle class less secure. An appalling statistic from Loeb:

If you are in the top economic quarter of the population, your children have a 76 percent chance of going through college and graduating . . . If you're in the bottom quarter, however, the figure is 4%. That's shocking enough. But consider this, in 1979, it was 27 percent – not great, but vastly better than it is now.

We are continually bombarded with messages of our helplessness. Even history is rewritten. We are told that the 60's represented the beginning of the disintegration of American culture. The 60's, in truth, saw some of the greatest demonstrations of democratic power. The people of America mobilized to finally bring an end to legal racial segregation. While we have not by any means entered the promised land, we made giant steps ahead. The people of America mobilized to bring an end to a terrible war over the objections of those who claimed to know what was best. Nixon claimed he watched television and ignored the hundreds of thousands of us who went to Washington to demand the end to the war in Vietnam, but his actions spoke louder than his words.

It was believed in the 60's that soon every community would have its own nuclear power plant, and the experts were convinced it should and would happen. But the people applied the brakes and the construction of nuclear plants ground to a standstill.

While we cannot claim a victory in the war on poverty, there were significant gains in our attention to those among us with the greatest needs – many of those gains have subsequently been demolished.

The media, throughout the 60's played up the hippy part of the movement with its drug abuse and sexual abandon, but the people who were active in the civil rights and antiwar movements were, for the most part, responsible citizens who were demanding response from their government, and received it. And those who believed they should be in control didn't want us to know that we really had the power. And so, the 60's are not dealt with as a period of greater democracy, but as an era of irresponsibility. And too many people have swallowed that lie.

[discouragement]

There was also a problem for idealists who thought that by winning the small victories, the larger problems would all fall into place and the forces of greed would be decimated. It was hard for idealists to deal with the degree to which we found that government lied to us – that the White House would be a place of lawbreaking plumbers and secret funding of armies [and now, “alternate truths”]– and that some people would believe that was ok.

It is overwhelming to realize that the most prosperous nation on the face of the earth now, as Loeb points out:

. . . leads the industrialized world in rates of homelessness, child poverty, lack of health care, infant mortality, inequality of wealth, and nearly every other index of desperation among the voiceless and vulnerable. Even if we own our own homes, have decent jobs, and possess a modicum of financial comfort, we're demeaned by our society's radical economic polarization.

Our response to the problems is to feel so overwhelmed and so powerless that many have decided that the best they can do is to try to look out for themselves and their families.

And, of course, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more helpless we feel, the more helpless we become.

[change is possible]

But Loeb is not a pessimist or a cynic. He is convinced that the means for a change are at hand, if we are willing to grasp them. Unlike Luce, Loeb's main focus is on what we can do. Several things are required.

One is that we look realistically at what has been accomplished and can be accomplished by a democratic people committed to change. While we sit licking our wounds for all the things that are wrong, an honest look at our history would require us to take pride in what has been accomplished by people who were committed and energized. We need to celebrate the achievements of democracy in action.

We need also to stop being intimidated by the fact that we do not have perfect solutions to all the problems. We are told that expertise is required and the government has it and we don't – the people just don't understand how complex the issues are. That's another of those lies that are designed to put us off.

Loeb quotes Marianne Williamson who said, "We have insidiously convinced ourselves that our wisdom is not wisdom, our common sense is not common sense, and our conscience is not conscience." Loeb says:

"As everything that can be known continues to increase, the effort to know everything grows increasingly doomed. Yet we don't dare speak out unless we feel prepared to debate Henry Kissinger on Nightline."

We have been sold a bill of goods when it comes to addressing systemic issues. The answer does not simply lie in a thousand points of light with caring people slapping band-aids on severed arteries. Nor as so many of the self-help gurus teach, are the underprivileged that way only because they think self-defeating thoughts. It's really their own fault. It's not our responsibility. That's just what the priest and the Levite said as they passed by the man on the Jericho road, in the story of "The Good Samaritan."

[which team?]

The bottom line, for me, was spelled out in Loeb's story of Sonya Vetra Tinsley, whom Loeb cites as a young Atlanta activist." She said:

Every day presents infinite reason to believe that change cannot happen, infinite reasons to give up. But I always tell myself, 'Sonya, you have to pick your team.' It seems to me that there are two teams in the world. And that you can find evidence to support the arguments of both. The trademark of one team is cynicism. They'll tell you why what you're doing doesn't matter, why nothing is going to change, why no matter how hard you work, you're going to fail. They seem to get satisfaction out of explaining how we'll always have injustice. You can't change human nature, they say. It's foolish to try. From their experience, they might be right.

Then there's another group of people who admit that they don't know how things will turn out, but have decided to work for change. I see Martin Luther King, Jr. on that team, Alice Walker, Howard Zinn. I see my chaplain from college and my activist friends. They're always telling stories of faith being rewarded, of how things could be different, of how their own lives have changed. They'll give you reasons why you shouldn't give up, testimonials why we've yet to see our full potential as a species . . .

There are times when both teams seem right. Both have evidence. We'll never know who's really going to prevail. So I just have to decide which team seems happier, which side I'd rather be on. And for me that means choosing the side of faith. Because on the side of cynicism, even if they're right, who wants to win that argument anyway? If I'm going to stick with somebody, I'd rather stick with people who have a sense of possibility and hope. I just know that's the side I want to be on.

There is no way that Loeb is suggesting that activism is an easy way to guaranteed success. What comes across throughout his book, which is filled with rich illustrations, is that given the choice between passively accepting that we can do nothing and trying just to get by, on the one hand, and opening ourselves to the spiritual need to live as responsible citizens on the other, the choice is for many of us a no-brainer.

["Anyway"]

Let me make a detour here to share where this sermon actually began. I found a reference in a newsletter from another church to the "Paradoxical Commandments" which the minister had used in his sermon and of which people had requested copies. These commandments are one of those compositions that have been taken out of context and reprinted in ways which distort their origins. The minister from whom I got them did not have the source right. They were composed back in 1968 by Kent Keith, then a sophomore at Harvard in a booklet for high school student leaders. It was reprinted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and then picked up by poster makers without attribution (or payment) to the author. Someone saw a copy of the poster on a wall in Mother Theresa's orphanage, and it has often been attributed to her. They were reprinted in a little book Keith called "Anyway" in which he expanded on them in brief essays. It seems to me that they fit perfectly with the thrust of this morning's sermon because they reflect both realism and commitment. Here are Keith's Paradoxical Commandments:

- \$ People are illogical, unreasonable and self-centered. Love them anyway.
- \$ If you do well, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do well anyway.
- \$ If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
- \$ The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
- \$ Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.
- \$ The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.
- \$ People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.
- \$ What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.
- \$ People really need help but may attack you if do help them. Help people anyway.
- \$ Give the world the best you have, and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

I find Keith fascinating because, you will note, there is no theological justification offered for these commandments, and they are not based on a Pollyannaish view of the world. He points out:

It's best to begin by just admitting that the world is crazy. The world really doesn't make sense. . . . Many people have turned away from the human values that have served all the generations that came before us. Some people have decided that all things are relative and subjective. They attribute no meaning to anything, and then complain life is empty and has no meaning.

Yes, the world is crazy. If it doesn't make sense to you, you're right. It really doesn't make sense.

It's true. The world does not operate as we might prefer. But that is no excuse. We need to act, to do what we can "Anyway."

The assumption lying behind Loeb's book, and Keith's is the same: many of us have the experience of hearing within us, a voice that says, "You are part of a universe -- not the center of it. You live in relationship with others of your species and with other species. The life you have is an opportunity to make a mark -- to make the world a better place for your having lived. Not necessarily in big ways, but in little ways that, when combined with the efforts of others, result in larger changes. You never know what impact your small act will have."

[a good example]

About the time I first encountered Loeb's book, an example of what I'm talking about presented itself. I received a call from a woman in a nearby village who was looking for help from the ACLU, and I was the president of the local chapter. Her daughter had come home from school with a concern. The English teacher had assigned the class to write prayers for their graduation. They could submit either a brief opening prayer or a closing one. The prayers would be graded and the best chosen for presentation at the graduation. Those who didn't want to pray were offered the option of writing a long paper.

The daughter was concerned because she felt that any prayer that was offered would exclude some of her classmates. It didn't seem right to her. The mother went to the school and conferred with the administrators who claimed agreement with her, but there was no change in the assignment. The family sat down together to discuss what should be done. The parents were clear that, should they make an issue of this, the kids might be harassed by some of their classmates. The two kids who were old enough (one was the eighth grader and the other a high school student -- the third was not yet of school age) told their parents that they believed the principle that was involved was so important that they were prepared to stand up for it in spite of opposition.

I believe that the important thing is that there was a family which had apparently taught their children about citizenship -- that they should be sensitive to the rights of others, that it is important to take a stand for people who may be in a minority, that sometimes you pay a price for taking a stand, but you do it anyway. And they taught them that they, as children, had a say in a family decision of this magnitude. What a precious gift they had.

[engaged communities]

One of the things that Loeb stresses in his book is the importance of being part of what he refers to as an "engaged community."

Engaged communities can give us a way to do more than cringe in private. They can help us speak with a common voice and put up with the endless mailings, phone calls, meetings, and other repetitive tasks needed to mobilize people to act. They can

help us exchange our own stories, so we remember why we take our stands. They can help us develop and share a rich vision and sustain our commitment and hope.

My friends, I hope and trust that this church is, to you, such an “engaged community.” This is a place to come to be challenged and to be sustained, to keep in touch with realism and with hope, to assure us that what we do and do not do matters in the long run.

The challenges we face at this time are great. Most overwhelming to me at the moment is the reality that the leaders of the political party in charge are proposing to roll back the health care coverage of millions of our citizens in order provide billions of dollars in tax cuts for the top 1% of our citizens. Those who have an income of \$875,000 a year or more would get a \$45,000 benefit. The top one tenth of one percent would get an average tax cut of \$250,000. Warren Buffet says that some of his friends would be saving \$10 million or more a year if the bill passes. It does not take a genius to calculate where the priorities were and are.

Individually, we can sit back and shake our heads and whine at the unfairness of it all – or, we can rouse ourselves from our couches and easy chairs and desk chairs and work together to change the priorities. It is time for a change and we need to do what we can to support that change. Why?

Kent Keith put it this way:

When you live the paradoxical life, you find great personal meaning in loving and helping others. You can also find meaning by helping others find meaning. Help others learn what you have learned. Be the example they can follow in discovering and living their own paradoxical lives.

[commitment]

Loeb concluded his book with these words:

Others have risked and persevered. Now it's our turn. As Rabbi Tarfon wrote, nineteen hundred years ago, "It's not up to you to compete the task. Nonetheless, you are not free to desist from it."

The cynics will continue to smirk, insisting that our efforts are futile. But we're never truly alone when we act with courage and vision. And we never know what we might create if we try. To fail to realize the power of our actions is to reduce the potential of our soul. It's to diminish the spark that burns within us.

We all have our own distinct gifts, strengths, and opportunities to make our lives count. We all have our own particular fears, flaws, and constraints. But no one kind of person is responsible for healing all the wounds of the world. That has to be a common task. The challenge is to ask what we want to stand for, and to do our best to pass on our beliefs. For our choices will create the world that we pass on.

. . . . the moment of commitment cannot be deferred. It must become a lifelong process, one that links our lives to the lives of others, our souls to the souls of others, in a chain of being that reaches both backward and forward, connecting us with all that makes us human.

On this holiday when we commemorate the courage of those who declared their independence from the most powerful nation on earth, believing they were making this crazy world a more loving and just one, may we honor them and their dream by filling our lives with

a commitment to make the choices in our lives that will contribute to more love and justice for all people.