

Will the Circle Be Unbroken? Leaning into the Mystery of Resurrection Faith

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I/ When I was eight or nine years old, music was my doorway into a world of wonder, learning the piano my initiation into a world charged with the mystery of God. Our piano lived in the basement. I was scared of the basement. Every afternoon, reluctantly but dutifully, I would descend the stairs groping in the dark, until my hands found the small lamp that rested on top of the piano. A turn of the switch and the old console lit up before me. Those moments of relief and silence as I settled onto the bench were almost magical. The monsters scattered, I could breathe again. As I struck the first chords, feeling the hammers strike against strings and vibrate through my body, I seemed to dissolve into the sound, no longer conscious of myself, really, as a separate, observing being. The play of music seemed to take my breath away and give it back in the same stroke. Time dissolved, touching the eternal. I was alive, teaching me that this life, this being, is flush with light and grace. But there was darkness, too, and foreboding, as I learned to improvise and experiment across minor keys and dissonant modes, the piano perhaps teaching me the art of discernment and attention. Behold: life will come before you in so many keys and disparate colors!

I can see now how the piano was for me a kind of refuge. By refuge I do not mean an escape; rather by refuge I mean where we go to find our center. Buddhism speaks of “taking refuge” in the vows: not as an escape, but as a commitment, a discipline, a set of embodied practices that shape one’s whole way of being in the world; for Jews the rituals of Sabbath; for Muslims, the call to prayer throughout the day; for many Catholics, the Mass and the rhythms of the liturgical season; for some it may be gardening, cooking, hiking, painting; for me it was, and still is, the piano. Oftentimes I remember as a kid when my father would call down to me from the top of the stairs for dinner, I would stop playing, draw a deep breath, and whisper into the silent basement air, “Thank You.” To whom I imagined saying it as a nine year old, I can’t say for sure, yet I always felt—and still do—a palpable sense of “presence” at the piano, a “something” or “someone” other than me, at once with me, yet also rising from me, bearing my spirit into the rhythms of the day.

But there was one other gift that music had yet to give me, something I could never have anticipated as a ten year old, and that was the way that music would initiate me into a sense of community much larger than myself, that I was part of a communion much more hidden, yet no less powerful, than what lay on the surface of things, a community of both the living and the dead.

In the summer of 1988, fresh out of college at the age of 23, I packed up my belongings and left my hometown of Lexington, Kentucky to study music at a small

Buddhist college called the Naropa Institute (now Naropa University) in Boulder, Colorado. It was an unlikely decision. I had been a pre-med and psychology major at the University of Kentucky; I had taken the MCAT, and was well prepared to apply to medical school. (My parents, I can tell you, were more than a little concerned about their Catholic son heading off to a Buddhist school in Boulder, CO.) Yet something in me was unsettled; the longing to study music had never abated. (I should pause here to note that some years later I would meet and marry a pre-med student who is today a pediatrician – so between us we have the arts and sciences pretty well covered.) It occurs to me now that the decision to pursue music further was a kind of unconscious surrender to the hidden movements of grace; God, it seems was stirring a particular desire in me, though I had no idea where it might lead.

One of my first courses at Naropa was a tour de force called “Building a Vocal Community” taught by guest professor Dr. Ysaye Barnwell, long-time member of the all-female African American acapella singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock. For two weeks Dr. Barnwell took her 50 or so students on an intense and wondrous ride into the terrible beauty of the African American spirituals tradition. It is one thing to think and talk *about* race and race relations across the color line in the academy, society, and church. It is quite another to accompany a great artist and storyteller as they plunge you headlong into the deep river of black suffering, resistance, and grace. It was in this class, and indeed in Dr. Barnwell herself, that I first encountered the presence of Christ whose face happens to be black, whose presence still lives (and dies) deep down in the dangerous memories of the African American community. I will never forget the haunting power of Dr. Barnwell’s voice; I can still feel the thrill of our final concert, during which we led the whole campus community in song and celebration of the living tradition we had begun to learn together.

Thomas Merton once observed that the Psalms hold a certain advantage over the New Testament because we *sing* them, which makes us vulnerable to the text in ways that reading or passively listening to someone else read the gospel narratives does not. In singing the Psalms, says Merton, “we lay ourselves open as targets, which fire from heaven can strike and consume.” The same is true, I discovered, with the spirituals. Black or white, yellow or brown, rich or poor, sinner or saint, you cannot hide from the haunting power of the spirituals. Moreover, when we sing them together we lay ourselves open *to one another* in ways we might never before have risked. Is there any act of greater vulnerability and power than singing, full-bodied and shoulder to shoulder, with another person? When you sing—“I’ll Fly Away”—surrounded by 5 or 10 or 40 or 50 others, you begin to believe it, joyfully, unexpectedly, down in the marrow of your bones. Looking back I can say that it was only after being introduced to the spirituals that the resurrection of the body ceased for me being an abstraction. Moreover, in the womb of such experiences, the tender question of every young person—“Who am I?”—is transformed into an arguably more fundamental and beautiful question, “To whom do I belong?” The “I” of youth begins to recede into a larger sense of “We.” In laying ourselves open to one another we become, as it were, *who we already are* in the eyes of God: resurrected beings, Beloved Community, a New

Creation. It is no wonder that the music of the black church was at the very center of the Civil Rights Movement.

II/ In a wonderful little book called *Music and Theology*, Emory University theologian and musicologist Don Saliers explores the ways in which the act of singing in the face of oppression “becomes a political act of resistance to idols, and a prophetic call for the transformation of the order of things.” Describing the Negro spirituals, Saliers writes:

This music comes out of struggle, pain, and courage in the face of enormous economic and social hardships. [Born of biblical faith, these are songs] of protest and affirmation . . . that “move the soul” and hence the social body. This is the sound of political theology. . . . Not the words only, but the power of the melodies and the way the whole body of the community sang the words, sounded the deep religious passion of such a theology.

For people of faith music itself “becomes a theologically relevant action,” says Saliers, insofar as it galvanizes our freedom to resist the false idols of our culture. In theological terms we might say that the words, in our singing them together—“We shall not be / we shall not be moved”—become as *sacraments*, instruments of real presence for a people on pilgrimage together in history. Our pathos becomes one with God’s pathos, God’s cry for justice, God’s own dreams for the world.

But I have to confess that the spirituals that have haunted my imagination the most are those that seem much less sure of themselves, songs that bear us straight down into the valley of the shadow of death, and hold us there, granting only the faintest glimmers of encouragement or hope.

a/ “I wanna die easy when I die . . . shout salvation as I rise / I wanna die easy when I die / when I die.” “Wade in the water . . . / God’s gonna trouble the water...” “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child . . . a long way from home.”

b/ “Soon I will be done / with the troubles of the world . . . No more weepin’ and a wailin’ . . . I wanna’ see my mother . . . [analysis – major / minor shifts]

In the opening pages of his extraordinary slave narrative, Frederick Douglass describes hearing his fellow slaves in the evening, singing as they made their way through the woods between the fields and the farm house—“[making] the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness.” “Every tone was a testimony against slavery,” he writes, “and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them.” What is the wellspring of human memory and experience from which these songs arise?

A few pages earlier Douglass details the faintest memories of his mother coming to hold him in the middle of the night when he was but a few years old, at great risk to her safety. Separated from him as an infant and sold to another plantation twelve miles away, the penalty she risked for “not being in the field at sunrise” was a severe whipping. Nevertheless she came. “I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to

sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it, her hardships and suffering." Just seven years old when his mother grew gravely ill, young Frederick was forbidden to visit her, and "received the tidings of her death," he says, "with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger." Nevertheless, the memory of those nocturnal visits remained burned into his consciousness, imprinted, it seems, on his very flesh. A woman by all other accounts "disappeared" from American history, an anonymous Nothing in our national consciousness, Douglass' mother is nevertheless *Presente!* Why do you seek the living among the dead? She is not "there," she is here, reclaimed by God for fellowship among the living. And so also reclaimed by us, when we make room for her in our consciousness, when we, like Douglas, give her a name, as it were, reclaiming her life, her sacred dignity, from anonymity.

Listen to the narrative structure of one of my favorite spirituals—notice how it carries us into that uneasy liminal space between death and life, loss and mysterious communion with the dead, as the narrator watches the hearse roll by, carrying the body of his mother – and please, if you know the song, join with me when we come to the chorus:

c/ "Will the Circle be Unbroken"

W. E. B. Du Bois, in his classic work of 1903, *The Souls of Black Folk*, dedicates a whole chapter to what he calls "the sorrow songs." To listen to them, he says, is to behold "the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas." Though "neglected," "half despised," and "persistently misunderstood," the spirituals, claims Du Bois, remain "the greatest gift of the Negro people" to the nation.

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs [he writes] there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?

Will the circle be unbroken? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true? Dare we imagine that our labors for justice and peace will not be in vain? Dare we dream of a life-world beyond the grave?

Some two thousand years ago a similar question was asked of some women in a garden outside the walls of Jerusalem. Some friends of Jesus had come at daybreak to anoint his dead body according to the Jewish custom with spices and perfumed oils. (The accounts differ: Luke names them as Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, Joanna, and "others with them"; Mark has Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome; Matthew reports the two Marys, and John names only Mary Magdalene, though it's unclear whether she is alone.) But when they came to the tomb they were astonished to find the stone rolled away, and the body of Jesus gone. Suddenly there appeared "two men in dazzling garments," who ask, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Visit any cemetery, stay for a while, and watch those who linger in

silence by the grave markers. What has drawn them there? Does the presence of the beloved endure beyond death? Why do we seek the living among the dead? The question itself seems almost to mock anyone who would claim such an irrational hope. “*They are not here*” insists the voice of reason. “They aren’t *anywhere*.” (Lest we forget the apostles who were dismissive of the women’s reports that Jesus was risen.) Yet the heart that has known the touch of the beloved persists: “They *are* here. I can neither see nor touch their body, it is true. But I can feel their presence.”

To say in one breath that the dead are not here, in the earth, this place of burial, may be to suggest in the very next breath that they *are* here: we simply need to know where to look, and how to listen. Close your eyes, lean in to the silence, and listen: the earth itself remembers, the ancient woods reverberate with their songs, touching our highest joy, revealing our deepest sadness. Behold, the trees whisper, the circle *will be* unbroken; the sorrow songs do sing true.

And eventually I began to understand why the slave songs in particular were so effective in galvanizing people’s courage in the face of such systematic racism, hatred, and violence; the way these songs *lean into the mystery of resurrection faith* awakens in the believing community a fierce conviction that our struggles and hopes will not ultimately be in vain. Even if only for the duration of a song, to sing the spirituals is to feel, to know experientially, the transformative power of resurrection faith. This is the sound of a political theology that is at once mystical and contemplative at its very deepest roots. To sing the forgotten dead is to breathe them back into life in the wellsprings of our creativity, our commitment, our hope. They are not “there.” They are here, with us. They *are* us. I began to understand, as Catholic Worker Fumi Tosu writes, that “a people no longer afraid of death is a people who will no longer be docile in the face of oppression.”

III/ I want to share one more song if I may, a contemporary sorrow song for our own times, a kind of postmodern spiritual that speaks powerfully to the world’s present sufferings.

“Mothers of the Disappeared” is the final track on Irish rock band U2’s 1987 album *The Joshua Tree*. Inspired by lead singer Bono’s experiences of traveling through Nicaragua and El Salvador in 1986 during a period of brutal civil war, the song has been described as a deeply moving “hymn to human rights,” and “a simple, plaintive lament of stunning beauty and sadness.” For me, the song reverberates in the same force field of remembrance and hope as the gospel accounts of Jesus’s appearances to his friends after his death; the song leans into the mystery of resurrection faith, and dares to do so from the vantage point of the mothers who still stand on this side of the veil, remembering their lost loved ones, and seeking justice.

Midnight, our sons and daughters / Were cut down and taken from us.
Hear their heartbeat / We hear their heartbeat.
In the wind we hear their laughter / In the rain we see their tears.
Hear their heartbeat, we hear their heartbeat.
Night hangs like a prisoner / Stretched over black and blue.

Hear their heartbeats / We hear their heartbeats.
In the trees our sons stand naked / Through the walls our daughters cry
See their tears in the rainfall

Note the commingling of presence and absence, the witness of faith sifted through the grief of the mothers—we hear their heartbeats—and at once the implicit command—hear their heartbeats.

In 1998, during a live televised performance of the song in Chile, U2 brought Las Madres onto the stage with them, each mother bearing a photograph of their missing relatives. In the middle of the song, Bono made a plea directly to President Augusto Pinochet: “Give the dead back to the living. Please, General Pinochet, tell these women where the bones of their sons and daughters are.” I want to suggest that in a very real sense, U2 had already and many times over given the dead “back to the living” through their recording and many performances of the song. Indeed the word “performance” doesn’t quite fit with “Mothers of the Disappeared”; the word “liturgy” is far more fitting, akin to those ineffable moments during the Mass, and especially during the Good Friday service, when the assembly intones the great Negro spiritual “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?,” thus calling all those united with Christ in his suffering back into the presence of the living. In our remembering, they are “*Presente!*” But even more, and I shudder to say it, their presence holds the living to account for what we have done and what we have failed to do. Their tears, the rain, beats down on the roofs of our houses. Their bodies populate the trees of the forest. This is not to suggest that we remain forever prisoners of a blood-soaked, irredeemable past. Rather it is to insist that the past, as hard as we may try to “disappear” it, is never really past but is always contained in the present, like the bodies of the dead who become the earth.

To suggest that the dead remain with us is dangerous *politically* precisely because it thwarts every earthly power that would build its hope—an idolatrous hope—on the “disappearing” of all opposition. Indeed it has to be said that the witness of the Mothers of the Disappeared precisely *as mothers* cannot be denied, not least by the powers and principalities of the world. Like the bond between Frederick Douglas and his mother, their memory, too, is a bond enfleshed in breast, bone, and womb that no general or torture chamber could ever steal away. Bono was not indulging in hyperbole when he said of Las Madres that the ruling political classes of Latin America are “afraid of these women.” To lean into the mystery of resurrection faith like the mothers do—like the women at the empty tomb—is to follow our deepest intuition, as night gives way to dawn, that life reverberates beyond death, and that love will endure beyond any earthly power to extinguish it.

The hope of the Christian has always been an eschatological hope; our prayers and songs, the rhythms of the liturgical year, the gathering around the Eucharistic table, all of it plunges us into the liminal spaces between life and death, presence and absence, solitude and solidarity. When Jesus says, “Do this in remembrance of me,” and we who are his companions share the broken bread around the table (his broken body), and drink together from the cup of wine (his spilt blood), we really are granted a foretaste, in mystery, of a hidden glory that is yet to come. The Messiah is the redeemer of *history*,

not a disembodied angel but a flesh and blood human being, whose presence calms the storms blowing in from every earthly Hell, and whose loving mercy ensures that the living will not be found among the dead. "Hear their heartbeats. We hear their heartbeats."

This is our refuge, no escapist fantasy or fairy tale pipe dream without credible basis in reality; to the contrary, the miracle of life breaking free from the chains of sin and death is rooted in our deepest identity as a people of faith, it is where we go to find our center and strength, especially when the way ahead seems most tenuous and uncertain. We stand under a cloud of witnesses, a kinship with all things in God that we can claim with a certain confidence not because of any clairvoyant power of our own, still less from some utopian political vision that promises to make us great again, to build a perfect society of law and order, a world purified of all that is messy and unclean. The memory and the hope that we bear, by contrast, is trustworthy because we have come to know intimately, in Christ, a God who remembers the least and most forgotten of history, a God whose love overturns the power of sin and death, and so we can dare to live from a hope that seems, by all reasonable accounts, impossible.

IV/ It is important to be clear, finally, and as clear-headed as possible, about the vulnerability of living from this vision of a future that cannot yet be seen, of loving and leading others into these liminal spaces between life and death, between what is and what is yet possible.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered what would be his final public speech in a crowded church in Memphis, he spoke of the injustices being felt by the city's sanitation workers. But if you remember, Dr. King famously went well beyond the political situation in Memphis that night to speak of his own death, the inevitability of his own mortality. The Rev. Samuel Kyles, listening to King from just a few feet away, recalled in a recent interview that "There had been so many death threats against his life, especially since he had come out against the war in Vietnam. But he talked about death more that night than we'd heard him talk about it in a long while." Kyles says that King "preached himself through the fear of death [that night]. He just got it out of him. He just ... dealt with it. And we were just standing there. It was like, what did he know that we didn't know?"

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!

King ended his sermon in a kind of rapture, the assembly lifting him up with shouts of encouragement and thanksgiving as he broke from the podium. Rev. Kyles remembers that "Many of us, grown men, were crying. We didn't know why we were crying. We had no way of knowing that would be the last speech of his life."

What did King know that we do not know? What could he see that we cannot see? And was it King's overcoming of the fear of death that finally made him, according to the reigning political powers, the "most dangerous Negro" in America? Standing in the breach between hope and despair, perhaps King could see and feel something of

what the slaves sensed when they gathered in secret underneath the hush arbors in the deep of the night: look deeply into the “presence of the now,” and you will see not only the ruins of the shattered past but also the beginnings of a broken world made whole. Here is the distinctive paradox at the heart of Christianity: that our faith in life on the other side of death galvanizes our courage to labor for justice on this side. As Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino professes, “God raised a crucified man, and since then there is hope for the crucified.”

I’m thinking here of Sr. Dorothy Stang, killed in 2005 for defending the indigenous poor in Brazil and daring to defend the suffering Earth from the ravages of overdevelopment. She did so for nearly 40 years, long before Pope Francis would so publicly commit the global Catholic Church to such work in defense of the environment. I’m thinking of the Trappist monks of Tibhirine, kidnapped and killed in 1996 during the brutal Algerian war, choosing to stay with their besieged Muslim neighbors despite the near certainty of martyrdom. I’m thinking of four Missionaries of Charity, murdered in Yemen on March 4 of last year, along with 12 others in the home they shared with the elderly and infirm. Like the monks of Tibhirine, long after most had fled the country, they chose to stay and continue their ministry. I’m thinking of Sr. Paula Merrill and Sr. Margaret Held, killed in their home in Durant, Mississippi, in August of last year, their bodies found after co-workers became concerned when the two women didn’t show up at the medical clinic where they ministered. I’m thinking of their respective congregations, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, and the School Sisters of St. Francis of Milwaukee, who issued a joint statement celebrating their companions’ lives as “compassionate, faith-filled women” and reiterating their commitment to life and to the abolishment of the death penalty. “Let us hold everyone involved in prayer,” they said.

I’m thinking of Sr. Helen Prejean, in April of this year joining her voice with many others to try to stop what one journalist called the “banal horror” of executions conducted by the state of Arkansas—Sr. Helen, who continues to confront a hard-hearted nation not only with the inner contradictions of the death penalty but also to the inseparable connection between its practice and the practices of slavery, segregation, and institutionalized racism; and further how religion has been used to sanction killing in God’s name. “You look at the patterns,” she says. “The Bible belt and the death belt are the same belt.” Asked in an interview how she copes with the trauma of death, Sr. Helen said, “What do you do with your grief, what do you do when you find out that things are so wrong and people are being executed who are poor and have no redress? You take that outrage, you take that sorrow and sadness, and you work for justice, so that other human beings don’t have to experience the same thing.” This, I think, is the sound of political theology, not far from the pathos of the spirituals—singing and praying and acting for justice in the world as an expression of wonder, resistance, and hope. This is what Thomas Merton, citing Julian of Norwich, calls wisdom, and the very heart of Christian faith—to live faithfully and lovingly at the very center of these contradictions of our times, without allowing ourselves to be overcome or defined by them.

Of course there are no guarantees that embracing such a vision of life, a “faith in the ultimate justice of things,” will not make us look the fools. To envision a day when we will be judged not by the color of our skins, nor by the sum of our bank accounts, nor by the anatomy of our gender, but by the quality of our love and the content of our character is to risk bitter heartbreak and disappointment. On the cold surface of things, we are still a long way from such a reality in society and church. Yet if Heaven and Beloved Community be only a distant dream, visible only “through a glass darkly,” then for my part I would rather live by such dreams than without them. For every now and then, perhaps at the graveside of a beloved friend, or perhaps even in a dark and cold basement, where a child somewhere even now is sitting down at the piano to play, dreams and visions of things that once seemed impossible have a way of breaking into reality.

Quiet yourself, lean into the silence, and feel the presence of those who have gone before us. Whether the hope of the Gospel “sings true” is a matter that each of us alone must decide at the beginning and end of every new day, a wager tested against a lifetime’s journey of love and loss, of belonging and redemption. For my part I have come to believe that life is too short to play in small, self-enclosed circles. We feel our way through the darkness of resurrection faith by reaching out to hold the hands of others. We sing our way from fear and hesitation to courage and fresh hope. We make the path forward together by walking it.