

Sanctuary

Karen Hutt, August 25, 2019

The sounds of those seeking sanctuary vary. Some are loud like the Hunchback of Notre Dame as he swooped down a rope from that Gothic Catholic church in Paris. When Charles Laughton in the title role, sees Maureen O'Hara as Esmeralda, is about to be hung for being a witch, he swings over and rescues her from the executioner, and takes her back to the church balcony screaming SANCTUARY SANCTUARY and the crowd goes wild.

The sounds of sanctuary can also be very quiet almost like whispers heard as stocking feet go up wooden stairs to where Anne Frank and her family lived. In 1999 on my way to Kenya I stopped in Amsterdam to see the sights. In taking that infamous tour, I walked behind that bookcase, up those narrow steps, I remember not saying a word, looking behind me, feeling the potential steps of a Nazi soldier.

While in those tiny rooms I imagined the silence that would be required of me to live in this sanctuary.

I remember my great grandfather talking about how his uncle had emancipated himself one night from the brutality of enslavement. Somehow, he just slipped off into the night seeking sanctuary in a swamp breathing through a reed of straw. Sucking oxygen bubbles as he sought sanctuary in anaerobic bacteria.

Things have got to be really bad for someone to seek sanctuary. To leave their homes to find refuge in another place. Imagine! having to pull up every root and

relationship you have ever known and valued, to leave that all behind? HOW COULD YOU DO THAT? HOW, because people seeking sanctuary believe that they are worthwhile and deserve something better than the horror that is facing them, or coming after them. It could be crop failure, perpetual unemployment, untreatable diseases, state violence or the poor preying upon the poor. Whatever the reason, the need to protect oneself and one's loved ones is probably the greatest example of human self affirmation we can ever witness. An even greater human assertion, is the belief that there could be something better. The Franks in Amsterdam knew that there had to be something better than the scientific and systematic extermination of the Jews. My great grandfather's uncle knew while he was sucking air from that reed that something had to be better than being treated worse like a hated dog. Those migrants walking from Central America know that there must be something better, a place for their children to be safe from the continued unrelenting, purposeful, destabilization of their countries.

You see there is something special about those seeking sanctuary, cause everybody doesn't leave. This group walking to freedom is a tiny fraction of a fraction of people in Central America. There are over 20 million people in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Everybody didn't leave the plantations of enslavement. Some Jews thought that the Nazi phase would pass and they stayed put. What is it about these people?

What makes them seek sanctuary?

I believe they are set apart by two things. First they are set apart because they are self motivated by their own moral imagination. They believe that their inherent worth and dignity is non - negotiable. Their lives and the lives of those they care for are worth taking the needed risks. Moral imagination, means to envision the full range of possibilities in a particular situation in order to solve an ethical challenge. Think about it, the social structures have been designed to fail those seeking sanctuary. They failed the German Jews and then the America Jews, they failed the enslaved Africans and then the free Blacks, and they have failed the companeros of Central America and the DACA kids from Los Angeles. But they still imagine righteousness, equity and fairness. Freedom has always been precarious for black and brown people who stood on the legal margins of society. Blackness and enslavement were so firmly connected in antebellum America that to be free and black was to exist as a civic anomaly. It takes moral imagination against all odds to survive perpetual systems of dehumanization.

Sanctuary seekers have self empathy and the awareness to discern what is morally relevant in a given situation. The very act of seeking sanctuary..... is the spark that ignites the flame of moral imagination.... A moral imagination to envision new and creative alternatives. *"I can see myself as a free person, I can see myself as safe," "I can see myself worshiping my chosen faith"*. People seeking sanctuary also have the moral courage to see themselves as human beings and as persons, not as objects whose value rests in utility or usefulness. In many ways seeking sanctuary is a process by which an individual "creates" metaphors from images recorded by the senses of basic humanity. These senses

are stored in memory, which are then surfaced so that a person who is suffering can bring forth moral correspondences in lived experience. This requires them having an intuitive belief that truth can be found in chaos and there is hope for the proper ordering of the soul.

I believe that in addition to moral imagination these people seeking sanctuary are set apart by by a sense of generativity, a term coined by the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson in 1950 to denote "a concern for establishing and guiding the next generation. It describes a need to nurture and guide the next generation. People seeking sanctuary want to first have their children and their community survive. By providing them with a safe harbor they seek to care and teach the next generation their stories and beliefs and accomplishments. They want to show their children that their continued existence matters. One of the greatest moments of generativity for black people in America was the period called Reconstruction after slavery. The first thing quasi free Black people did was go searching for relatives who had been sold all over the place. They went looking for their children, their partners, their loved ones. As they sought their families they banded together and made new family, along roadsides, in the swamps and burnt out plantations seeking refuge as landless people with no rights. But very quickly, with in 50 years. All over the country, these bands of illiterate homeless people built black towns throughout the south and west as they sought sanctuary from the brutality of America.

Following World War I, and during the oil boom of the 1910's, the Greenwood section outside of Tulsa Oklahoma was one of those towns. Recognized nationally for its affluent African American community. This thriving business district and surrounding residential area was referred to as "Black Wall Street. In fact, the district was so successful that a dollar would stay within the district an estimated nineteen months before being spent elsewhere. Not only did black Americans want to contribute to the success of their own shops, but there were also racial segregation laws that prevented them from shopping anywhere other than Greenwood. "They ran oil wells, built civic organizations, churches, and a political structure that demonstrated the generativity of a people without sanctioned universal franchise into the American system. Greenwood may have been a haven for African-Americans, but the state of Oklahoma had strict laws limiting the rights of black people. schools, hospitals, trains, stores, restaurants, even public phone booths were segregated and miscegenation was a felony. Lynchings were not uncommon and by 1920, the Ku Klux Klan was re emerging in the state

DESPITE ALL OF THIS..they had the moral imagination to see themselves as worthy of dignity and worthy to thrive in this sanctuary of generativity

UNTIL.....May 31, 1921

"Six-year-old Olivia Hooker was home with her family when a group of white men came through the backyard carrying torches. Her mother quickly hid Olivia and

her three siblings under the dining room table, covering them with a tablecloth and told them not to make a sound. The men entered the house and began to destroy anything they could find of value. They broke her father's record player and took an ax to her sister Irene's beloved piano before moving on to other homes and businesses in the community. The NYT reported that *"Fires had been started by hundreds of white invaders soon after 1 o'clock and other fires were set from time to time. By 8 o'clock practically the entire thirty blocks of homes in the negro quarters were in flames and few buildings escaped destruction. Negroes caught in their burning homes and businesses were in many instances shot down as they attempted to escape." hundred of black people murdered and 6000 arrested for creating their own sanctuary town. No sanctuary for Greenwood, or Rosewood Florida, or Bridgeton NJ or the Colored Children's home in New York City burning to the ground in 1923. No Sanctuary*

But Olivia Hooker went onto to demonstrate the moral imagination and generativity found in those that live without sanctuary In 1945, Olivia Hooker became the first African-American woman to join the U.S. Coast Guard. She went on to earn a doctorate degree in psychology and helped form the Tulsa Race Riot Commission in 1997 to investigate the massacre and make a case for reparations. Dr. Hooker is now 103 years old and thought to be the last surviving witness to the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.-

In D. Hooker's testimony she talked about the joy of her home in Greenwood before the invasion. Like so many she knew that being in a sanctuary often means that you are in a constant state of vigilance, always looking both ways, always worried about being caught, found out, threatened or wiped out. The liminal nature of sanctuary space make them very temporary.

A sanctuary , but for how long???????

Friends, I have to share something and I do so with an open heart and I hope yours remains open as well. You have heard me say from this pulpit before that I authentically enjoy the idea of America and its unique historical constellations. YET, I hold these democratic aspirations in complete and continued tension, because we, the children of enslaved Africans, we the foundational human engine that created American wealth, we the people of a darker hue, have no safe space. Friends , know that I have never experienced a feeling of sanctuary, ever. I believe the perilous and insidious day to day realities of being black in America has altered our brain chemistry to the point that we have been recalibrated to be immune from the fanciful vision that we could ever have sanctuary in America.

And as a result I do not yearn for that impossible day when I can rest my burdens and my ancestors burdens, down. I do not hope for it because 400 year old fantasies place limitations on my sanity. YET there is a gift in all of this. Because of this lack of sanctuary my moral imagination. and passionate generativity rises above and subverts the intent of those who would deny me sanctuary.

Given the limited resources that black folks have to work with, given the odds, given the constant debasing of our very souls look what we have done!!!!

Our moral imagination is evident in jazz, in literature, in art, in philosophy in religion, in science, engineering and politics, you name it and you will find some quiet unassuming Black person who made a way out of no way. Despite the obstacles we have and do face we have excelled.

Black Lives Matter despite sanctuary. We have learned to take jargon like The Negro Problem (a famous book from the 1960's) into the new Black Joy and Black Girl Magic movements (look it up) Despite sanctuary we know who we are.

Despite sanctuary we love ourselves.

Think about this, If Black people are at the bottom of everything in terms life indicators and disparities, then Black women are at the very bottom of every statistic, yet who has the lowest suicide rate in the US, Black women. Those with the highest suicide rate are those with the most sanctuary white men.

Despite living in a society that never has and never will honor my blackness as sacred, enough to hold me in complete and unconditional humanness, my worldview is shaped by, informed by and guided by the generativity of our great unparalleled story of a people invented by Italian navigation, Spanish greed, the King James Bible, and disorganized thinking about humanity called racism,

Yet you can not wipe us out no matter what. We are still here. I always felt that Black people are like that persistent little mouse you keep trying to kill , you try everything, traps, sprays, sonic booms and there she is, sitting on your counter at midnight eating some delicious Thai food leftovers. Always surviving and sometimes thriving without sanctuary.

As I close, I want to extend a reminder, a challenge and then an invitation to my white sisters and brothers.

THE REMINDER , On Nov. 1, 1850, The Liberator, the Boston anti-slavery newspaper published by William Lloyd Garrison, a radical Unitarian white abolitionist, alerted local residents to the presence of “two prowling villains.” It said that the two slave catchers had come to Boston from Macon, Georgia, with the aim of capturing William and Ellen Craft, a runaway enslaved couple, “under the infernal Fugitive Slave Bill, and carrying them back to the hell of Slavery.” Prompted to action by the Crafts’ plight, Boston’s black community gathered to plan their opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law. They adopted a set of resolutions, including a pledge “to resist oppression” and any attacks on their freedom. In the very first issue of his anti-slavery newspaper, the *Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison stated, "I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. . . . I am in earnest -- I will not equivocate -- I will not excuse -- I will not retreat a single inch -- AND I WILL BE HEARD." And Garrison was heard. For more than three decades, from the first issue of his weekly paper in 1831, until

after the end of the Civil War in 1865. When the last issue was published, Garrison spoke out eloquently and passionately against slavery and for the rights of America's black inhabitants to have sanctuary. Friends at First Universalist, be reminded that you can be an ally with a pen or your voice, use your access, use your resources and be heard.

NOW the INVITATION educate yourself, read about the Black joy project and Black Girl Magic, read Audre Lorde and Sister Souljah, , listen to the speeches of black humanist on you tube, go see If Beale Street Could Talk, read slave narratives, listen to gospel music, listen to Kendrick Lamar, Look at Beyonce's Lemonade, get to know the story of the black staff at your workplace, listen to Thelonious Monk and celebrate black survival and thriving with me.

FINALLY THE CHALLENGE. A number of years ago I was scheduled to preach at The Deerfield Church in Illinois. The church is just about few miles north of the city and as I approached the turn off, I made a slightly wrong turn and ending up backing out of a private driveway and turning around. Five minutes later, on this quiet Sunday morning, I hear that sound,whooh whooh. I look up see the red and blue light , Pull over. Turn off the hip hop music and turn on the classical station. Make sure I can reach all my necessities without leaning or moving in any direction and roll the window down just low enough to slip the documents

through, and in my most subservient, submissive slave voice I say “Oh no officer did I make a mistake,” thinking about only one thing. Making it inside to preach and then making it home to my family. The cop and I do the dance that black drivers and white officer do, but he took a long time to do it. He was most concerned with me saying, I am going to his church to preach. It just sounded suspicious to him. As I sat there right in front of the church I could see one of my colleagues standing out in front and looking dead at me and the cop. He was frozen, eventually something kicks in and he walks over to me. He must have seen my eyes getting real wide as if to say....get over here man. Well eventually he did and all of the sudden the officer said, no problem, no ticket and I went in to preach. After the service I asked my colleague what the hell happened. “You saw what was happening? Why didn’t you come and white me out of the situation sooner. White me out! (It is a real thing). He had no answer.He said he needed to think about it and he did and he wrote a sermon about this, from that sermon he said.....” I let my colleague down. I looked at her the same way I have looked at Blck men getting stopped by the police. I assume they did something wrong. I looked at my colleague the same way. The what if’s of that frightful situation play over and over in my head. Since then I have made a commitment to show up, lean in and walk towards.

Rochester friends, sanctuary is about a few seconds where you show up, white someone out by standing at the curb, let us know

when ICE is coming after your landscaper, open the door and say come in. Speak and do and bring sanctuary into being. Then you go and talk to ICE.

Peace