

Reading “A Tale of Two Charlies”

Once upon a time there was a man named Charlie

Once upon a time, there was a man named Charlie

It was 2007

It was 1984

He lived on the south side of Chicago...

He lived in the center of Bangor

...where he worked in a small but popular bakery.

...where he worked part-time through an employment agency.

He lived with joy

He lived with joy

he was well-liked

he was well-liked

but being an African American man

but being an out gay man

on Chicago's South Side

in Bangor

(together) was a risky proposition.

(together) Charlie was killed

in a gunfight

downtown

on East 79th

in the river

from a bridge

in an altercation

Delivered Dec 2, 2007
UU Church of Ellsworth

“Let It Begin With Me”
Rev. Leela Sinha

(together) in the heat of the moment

he was 38
he was 23.

they were tried as juveniles
no arrests have been made.

A memorial book is on the coffee counter

the memorial slab was approved by city council

he is survived

by his four children

by his friends

(together) and fondly remembered by many.

Once upon a time there was a man named Charlie...

Spoken Meditation

so much violence

There is so much violence in this world,
and we expect to change it?
What can we do,
we small humans with
smaller hands,
we specks on the surface of a tiny surface,
surrounded by stars exploding, boulders crashing into surfaces of other hunks
of rock and sand and maybe,
somewhere,
hope?

What do we think we are,
some kind of miracle force,
not just stronger than gravity but stronger than death itself?

Oh but we are,
for we are alive,
bunches of cosmic dust and miracles
gathered together by precious accident
to forge
unimaginable

you.

Sermon

There is too much violence in this world.

That's the long and the short of it.

Charlie Howard, age 23, thrown off a bridge.

Charlie Carpenter, age 38, shot “after an altercation”.

As my colleague Aaron McEmrys says, “what exactly is 'altercation' anyway?” Charlie Carpenter was African-American and male and in a fight on the South Side. Deaths like his go entirely unnoticed every day. His death in May isn't even noted on the internet except by the University of Chicago's newspaper and by several of my colleagues in their blogs. The memorial at his coffee shop is remarkable in its presence, that anyone outside of his family and friends noticed at all. I knew him because my seminary is located a block and a half from the coffee shop where he worked. I don't drink coffee, but he handed me a lot of pastries. I remember that he smiled and sang and joked across that counter, that he remembered people's names and faces and stories. I remember him as a good man.

His death came only months before another killing rocked the seminary's community—Cornelius Lockhart, died of stab wounds from a fight that wasn't even his. Like Charlie, Cornelius was African-American, relatively young, sweet. Like Charlie's, Cornelius' death went virtually unnoticed outside of his direct community. Meadville-Lombard noticed because Cornelius was one of the custodians for our seminary buildings. Cornelius, as McEmrys notes, was the person you called when things when clunk or drip or splash in the night. He knew us, and to some extent, we knew him.

Charlie Howard is getting a memorial now, some 20-odd years after his drowning. The shock waves from his death have rippled through time and space, making his story a milestone event for the queer community here. Bangor is small enough and safe enough, and violent hate crime is rare enough, that he will not be forgotten soon.

But... last week a news story broke my heart, again. Apparently it's been a month since the NAACP in Bangor received a death threat; they cancelled their annual Kwanzaa celebration, they have been meeting in secret, they are trying to decide what to do next. There was a press conference on Friday and we're waiting to hear if there's anything we can do as communities of faith that would be supportive of the NAACP and communities of color. That we are horrified

goes without saying.

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What drives people to violence? If we are not intrinsically violent, then what moves us past who we are to the people we don't want to be?

Fear.

Desperation.

Anger.

Pain.

Hurt, of one kind or another.

Want.

Some days it really seems like the Buddhists have it right. Desire drives us to a lot of what ails us...but it's not just desire for things. More often it's desire for feelings: security, happiness, peace.

Ironically, in our quest for security we often create insecurity, in our quest for peace, we make war.

What is going on?

Do we want to live in a world like this? No, clearly not. Part of our call in the world is to change it, to move toward a peaceable community where we can all live together.

There is something perverse in our human natures, something that takes conflict and twists it into a knife, which cuts us apart, or tears us asunder and simple disagreement escalates to violence before we know what we've done. That's how Charlie Carpenter died; that's how Cornelius went, caught in sudden violence born of conflict born of unrelieved stress.

I'm not excusing it—no one should die that way, not ever, not in the world I want to build—but that's the true story; that's what happened. If I could rewrite the stories of those two fights I'd put away the knife, hide the gun, and send everyone involved for three generations for meditation practice, three square meals a day, and the security of knowing that no one they loved was going to die suddenly in entirely preventable ways.

If I could rewrite the story of Charlie Howard I'd send those three guys to Tai Chi and to church in a community where “fag” and “sissy” aren't insults and they would never think to be threatened by someone else's sexual orientation or gender expression.

But that's not what it's like. That's not a cosmic story that's available, at least not there, not for those people, not at that time.

Yes, I’m a minister. Sure, It’s part of my job to find the compassion, to see the story the way it might have been, to rewrite endings for some future set of possibilities. But it’s also a life choice, because that’s what I believe the right thing looks like, digging for the compassion even if it’s my people who were hurt—even if it’s me. We can’t always find forgiveness. We don’t always see the rewrite clear and strong. We certainly don’t always find it right away. But part of the paradox we’re called to hold is the paradox of revulsion and compassion; of abhorrence and healing. How do we honor those who live in violence, even as we reject the violence they bring into our world?

Motion from violence and toward peace comes from our choices.

It comes from meditation or prayer, from regular practice, from time for ourselves. It comes from taking care of our own deepest needs—not just food, clothing, shelter, but those other needs—love, touch, solitude, company. Thoreau went to the woods because he wished to live deliberately, and in the process he got himself an abundance of solitude. Most of us don’t have the option to drop everything and build a cabin in the woods. We have lives, families, jobs, we have schedules. We have deadlines. And not all of us would want to go to the woods--some people are fundamentally social—they need good company to feel alive.

There is no one right way to inner peace any more than there’s one right way to spiritual fulfillment. What’s important is integrity. What’s important is knowing ourselves well enough to meet our own needs.

If we take care of ourselves, we exponentially increase our capacity for giving. It really is easier to be nice if you’re in a calm, well-nurtured mood, and one of the best ways to foster that aura of grace is to take good care of yourself.

If peace is to begin with us, we have to make sure we have the energy to make it happen.

If we do not do these things we contribute to the troubles rather than the healing. Even if we think we don’t, we do. Every time we create stress unnecessarily, we are tossing a pebble or two onto the crisis side of the scale. Every time we bring distress into the world, we create more problems for someone to clean up. You might think that if you clean up and then de-stress yourself it evens out, but there’s overhead for the process.

It’s like our production of electricity. If you take coal and burn it, you get heat. But if you take coal and burn it, convert the heat to electricity, transmit the electricity to another location, and then use that electricity to heat an element to warm your house, you’ve lost a good deal of raw energy in the conversions. You’d have had much more heat if you just burned the coal at your house. Our stress is the same way. If we just prevent it before it happens, we can save a lot of energy expended in the creation and diffusion of the stress.

A few days ago, I had a sliver under my thumb. In an extraordinary moment of insight, I found some tweezers and removed it instead of letting it fester...and I was astonished that removing the offending speck, literally, from my thumb resulted in such an immediate and dramatic

improvement in my thumb’s general sense of itself.

It doesn’t matter how small a thing is, if it causes you discomfort, if it disconnects you from yourself, you have to address that first.

The Christian scriptures say the same thing: take the log out of your own eye before you try to take the speck out of another’s eye. It’s not just about sin, it’s about everything. Put on your own oxygen mask before assisting passengers traveling with you.

The holidays are often a lot about wrapping our loved ones in what they need, in giving and giving and giving...but we can’t give unless we have something to give, and that something comes from nurturing ourselves.

There is a marvelous children’s book called The Quarreling Book (Charlotte Zolotow, 1963) in which a father, getting up in the morning, is grumpy at the mother, who is grumpy at the children, who kick the dog...who, being a good-natured dog, wags its tail anyway, thus turning the whole cycle around.

Imagine if the father lived alone on the south side of Chicago, and instead of being grumpy at the mother walked out the door, got into a fight and shot someone?

Imagine if the children, instead of kicking the dog, walked home that night and ran into a gay man on *his* way home?

Much as we like to deny it, there’s not much that separates us from the people who commit crimes that they probably regret for the rest of their lives. They are not someone else. They are us. And what keeps us from tearing our own worlds apart is this thin veil of grace...and a lot of practice.

Practice at taking a deep breath.

Practice at saying what we mean.

Practice at holding paradox and tension and disagreement and simply letting them be true. And practice at taking good care of ourselves.

Singer/songwriter/poet and activist Ani DiFranco wrote a poem called *My IQ* in which she says, “Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right.”

All of our qualities are value-neutral until we use them.

Every use gives them a value.

We must find the uses that impart the values we want,
and choose them,

and choose them over and over.

In this world where murder is more acceptable on television than lovemaking, there’s a perverse counter-cultural flavor to choosing peace; peace is rarely the default choice, and it is rarely easy. We might have to choose peace a half dozen times in one conversation. We might catch

ourselves slipping away from it in a moment of inattention. Living in assertive nonviolence is *work*.

But what work is more worthy than seeing the world that we want take shape before our eyes?

If peace is to begin with us, then we must first recognize that violence begins with us. Each of us. We are disappointingly human, and we are marvelously human, for with this recognition comes hope. If the problem starts *in here* rather than *out there* then there really is something we can do about it.

We have to see that part of them that is in us; we have to know that there is a very fine line between hunter and hunted, and a single moment could move us from one frame to the other. We have to accept that part of the truth and we have to find the choices that allow us to live with ourselves, flawed and even dangerous as we may be.

There is an old story, retold here by blogger Mickey Z:

An elder Cherokee Native American was teaching his grandchildren about life. He said to them, “A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight, and it is between two wolves. One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, sorrow, ...and arrogance. The other wolf stands for joy, peace, love, hope, generosity, compassion, and faith. This same fight is going on inside of you and every other person too.” The children thought about it for a minute and then one child asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?” The old Cherokee simply replied: “The one I feed.”

(<http://www.dissidentvoice.org/Dec05/MickeyZ1231.htm>

accessed Dec 1, 2007. Mickey Z.)

Which shall we feed?