

Giving Back America
An Alternative Independence Day Message
By
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Almost twenty years after first hearing about *Hope*, the title of an 18th century painting depicting a distressed woman playing a lyre, Barack Obama was elected our nation's 44th President. He heard about it in a sermon during which his minister said, "with her clothes in rags, her body scarred and bruised and bleeding, her harp all but destroyed and with only one string left, she had the audacity to make music and praise God.... To take the one string you have left and to have the audacity to hope..."¹ Obama never forgot the image or the sermon, which inspired the speech that propelled the young Senator into the public spotlight during the 2004 Democratic National Convention, a speech he entitled, "Audacity of Hope." You know the rest of the story, only four years later Obama became our country's first African American President.

While running, having little to criticize him for, the irrational, extremist, rightwing propaganda machine, which has the audacity to call itself "news", went after Obama's minister, Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, instead. In its nonsensical, guilt-by-association attack, Fox and its friends narrowed in on a 2003 sermon he gave entitled, "Confusing God and Government," during which Wright said, "'God Bless America.' No, no, no. Not 'God Bless America'; God Damn America!" Apparently, in a country with so many primitive thinkers, merely uttering this taboo phrase can be enough, some think, to magically rain ruin down upon us all. For there was apparently no need to present the context in which Wright spoke these words, or to ask what he meant by them, or, more importantly, to consider the possibility they might have been justified. (By the way, I'm quite sure, having just said that, I'll never be able to run for President.)

As a minister myself, I wasn't troubled by the phrase at all. I immediately presumed, rather, especially in Wright's case, it was coming from a place of pastoral care and concern. You see, the same week this story broke, or should I say, was fabricated, I happened to hear a black woman on NPR speak of how her grandmother always kept her hands hidden from view. When she asked why, she explained years before a storeowner had mangled them with a pair of plyers after she came in wearing freshly polished false nails she'd retrieved from her employer's trash can. The storeowner mocked her for trying to, in his words, "look like a white woman." At the time there was no where she could turn for justice. She couldn't go to the local police and report the assault because they would have done nothing and wouldn't have cared. She had no choice but to live the rest of her life baring the scars, both physical and emotional, from this evil, twisted injustice, which was likely only one of many she'd known.

¹ From *Preaching Today*, 1990

So, upon hearing about the Jeremiah Wright controversy, I imagined, as a black minister his age, he must have heard thousands of horrific stories like this woman's. This was the America he knew, an America that got away with murder, and so much worse. An America that mangled the hands and hearts and lives of the people he loved, the people, as a pastor, he was supposed to care and fight for.

Obviously, we don't have time to hear his entire transcript, but I am going to give Rev. Wright just a little justice by reading enough of "Confusing God with Government" to present the context in which his forbidden words were spoken. He begins by talking about how "Jesus wept," not just once, but, often over many of the abuses and injustices he witnessed in his day, and that the Bible itself tells many stories of God condemning, God "damning," governments responsible for such horrors. "Governments fail," the now retired minister of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago told his congregation;

The government in this text comprised of Caesar, Cornelius, Pontus Pilot—Pontius Pilate—the Roman government failed. The British government use to rule from east to west. The British government had a Union Jack. She colonized Kenya, Guana, Nigeria, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, and Hong Kong. Her navies ruled the seven seas all the way down to the tip of Argentina in the Falklands, but the British failed. The Russian government failed. The Japanese government failed. The German government failed. And the United States of America government, when it came to treating her citizens of Indian descent fairly, she failed. She put them on reservations. When it came to treating her citizens of Japanese descent fairly, she failed. She put them in internment prison camps. When it came to treating her citizens of African descent fairly, America failed. She put them in chains. The government put them in slave quarters, put them on auction blocks, put them in cotton fields, put them in inferior schools, put them in substandard housing, put them in scientific experiments, put them in the lowest paying jobs, put them outside the equal protection of the law, kept them out of their racist bastions of higher education and locked them into positions of hopelessness and helplessness. The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing "God Bless America." No, no, no. Not "God Bless America"; God Damn America!

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Rev Wright, a former Marine and Naval officer, once assigned to President L. B. Johnson's medical team, was further vilified in the media for saying "America's chickens are coming home to roost," again, without context. He had twice committed the sin of criticizing "the greatest Country on Earth," which simply is not allowed. To be fair to him, to right this wrong, at the risk of similarly condemning myself, I offer the context in which these taboo words were given.

What Malcolm X said when he was silenced by Elijah Mohammad was in fact true, he said "Americas chickens, are coming home to roost." We took this country by terror away from the Sioux, the Apache, the Arawak, the Comanche, the Arapaho, the Navajo. Terrorism. We took Africans away from their country to build our way of ease and kept them enslaved and living in fear. Terrorism. We bombed Grenada and killed innocent civilians, babies, non-military personnel. We bombed the black civilian community of Panama with stealth bombers and killed unarmed teenagers and toddlers, pregnant mothers and hard-working fathers. We bombed Qaddafi's home, and killed his child... We bombed Iraq. We killed unarmed civilians trying to make a living. We bombed a plant in Sudan to pay back for the

attack on our embassy, killed hundreds of hard working people, mothers and fathers who left home to go that day not knowing that they'd never get back home. We bombed Hiroshima. We bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon and we never batted an eye. Kids playing in the playground. Mothers picking up children after school. Civilians, not soldiers, people just trying to make it day by day. We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff that we have done overseas is now brought right back into our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost. Violence begets violence. Hatred begets hatred. And terrorism begets terrorism.²

When I first began thinking about today's sermon, I planned on beginning with a list of America's injustices, from committing the worst genocide in human history against this land's first civilizations; to importing, trading, and subjugating slaves, and continuing to terrorize, oppress, impoverish, and lock away their descendants; to discriminating against anyone considered nonwhite, including, oddly enough, some whites, like the Irish, Italians, and Jews; to the Chinese Exclusion Act, prohibiting Chinese Americans from filing criminal charges against White Americans; to treating woman as weak, inferior, stupid, and much worse; to exploiting workers, McCarthyism, segregation, Jim Crow, the Drug War, mass incarceration, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, terrorizing and discriminating against gays and lesbians and transgenders, child neglect, destroying the environment, propping up dictators and oppressive policies and practices around the world, voter suppression, election stealing, and, of course, Fox News. But, in taking the time to contextualize Rev. Wright's words, which have already exposed many of these wrongs, it's not necessary to go into more depth about them.

Instead, I'll move forward by stating explicitly, despite bringing to light a bit of our nation's shadow, I do not hate my country. Nor, do I love it. I am not a patriot, nor do I feel morally deficient for saying so, or consider myself legally bound to be so. Do I love my country? No, at least not if loving my country means not questioning my government or pointing out its many sins. Not if it means behaving like an automaton, like one of Pavlov's salivating dogs, in response to its songs and symbols. Such sentiments, to me, are but augmented forms of reality, ideological gridlines, imaginary borders, culturally instilled in us then overlaid atop objective reality, like lines drawn over the picture of a landscape to create a map legitimizing our delusions of segregation and possession.

Do I love this land? Yes, absolutely, if, loving the land means loving its beauty, being moved by it, being nourished by it, and, in return, respecting and caring for it. Do I love its people? Yes, but not because I consider them "my fellow Americans." I love them, rather, because, as Chief Joseph said, "The Earth is the Mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it..."³ I love those who share this land with me for the same reasons I love those across the waters, over the mountains, and beyond the deserts, because we belong to one Mother, the Earth, and, thus, we belong to each other. I love those who share this land and those beyond this land because I respect them, and care for them, and am concerned for their wellbeing and growth. I love them because I don't accept that I deserve more than them

² Wright, Jeremiah, September 16, 2001

³ Freedman, Russell, *Indian Chiefs*, Scholastic Inc., New York, NY, 1987, p. 111.

because of where I am from, or because of my gender, or my religion, or my politics, or because of the color of my skin. I am a global citizen, kin to all people and beings on this planet. Others don't belong to us, but we all belong to each other because we belong to the Earth, which belongs to the Sun, which belongs to the stars, which belong to the Universe. So I cannot accept those paradigms of exclusion claiming, "my land," "my country," "my people," "my property." I belong to the Earth. She doesn't belong to me.

Speaking of property, did you know the phrase, "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," those "inalienable rights," mentioned in the *Declaration of Independence*, were borrowed from the "Father of Liberalism," John Locke, an 18th century philosopher who actually said that governments should exist to secure their peoples' natural rights to "life, liberty, and property."⁴ Apparently the framers of our Constitution, all property owners themselves, including owners of other human beings, didn't wish to go so far as Locke suggested by guaranteeing everyone an inalienable right to property. Instead of guaranteeing a home and a patch of land we can always depend on, we get the right to *try* to be happy. Yay.

A couple of days ago I asked a group of people, "How many of you believe in Democracy?" They all enthusiastically said, "I do." "Let me rephrase the question," I said, "How many of you believe Democracy exists?" They were silent. Democracy, a system in which all people have an equal voice and are treated as equals in society and under the law, is but an aspiration, an idea we still aspire toward, but in the whole history of humankind, are yet to achieve. And by equality, I don't mean that we are all the same or should be treated the same. Wanting everyone to be the same is the problem with our society, not its solution. "Equality," rather, as Erich Fromm said, means, "oneness" not "sameness." It means solidarity. It means inclusion. It means one people of all nations, all colors, all genders, all creeds, all sexualities, all political leanings, and so on. It means creating pluralism and celebrating diversity. It means being one community even if we aren't all the same. It means delighting together in our differences.

Yet how is it possible, when the opposite has been true for so long, in a nation that refuses to admit the many atrocities and injustices it has visited upon the Earth's children, for anyone to praise it and sing of its greatness? How can we consider immigrants and asylum seekers, whose children we've torn from their arms and disappeared, obligated to sing, "God bless America?" How can we consider dreamers, children of immigrants born in this land, whose parents are torn from their lives and deported, and fear deportation themselves from the only country they've ever known, obligated to sing, "God bless America?" How can we expect African Americans, whose ancestors were ripped from their homelands and dragged here in chains, who have suffered torment, oppression, terrorism, Jim Crow, voter suppression via the Drug War, mass incarceration, who still lag far behind whites in all indicators of social wellbeing, and are still gunned down in the streets by police, obligated to sing, "God bless America?" How can we consider women, who have been treated as second class citizens from its beginning, who've had to fight for the right to vote, to be independent, to work, for equal pay, and continue to fight to have exclusive rights over their own bodies, obligated to sing, "God bless America?" There are so many injustices, so much inequality, and yet, there is an

⁴ Locke, John, *Second Treaties of Government*, 1689.

expectation that all, even the most maligned and forgotten among us, be patriots, proven by dutifully standing and singing our Nation's anthems and making pledges to its flag.

A couple of years ago, San Francisco 49ers quarterback, Colin Kaepernick was vilified for not standing during the singing of the National Anthem. Like Jeremiah Wright, he became despised by many, assaulted in the press, though none of his critics have addressed the legitimacy of his concerns. Kaepernick began "taking a knee" during the anthem to protest all the police shootings of unarmed black men and other cruelties and injustices against African Americans. Donald Trump, who has made numerous racist comments, whose Administration is bolstering discriminatory laws, and has attracted and even appointed white supremacists and white nationalists to his cabinet, has suggested Kaepernick find another country, and that that any player who, "disrespects our flag," in his words, is an "SOB" who should be "fired," which sounds a lot like McCarthyism to me. I ask you, what is more disrespectful, not standing during a patriotic song, or not standing up for equality for all Americans? What is more disrespectful, not honoring our flag, or not honoring everyone whose rights it's supposed to represent?

A while ago, while citing the words of Jeremiah Wright, you may recall his use of the term, "Union Jack," a naval nickname for the United Kingdom's national flag, which it displayed on its ships while conquering and colonizing other lands and peoples before planting it in their soil. In fact, the use of flags originated with warfare and occupation, beginning around 27 hundred years ago when Chinese invaders carried them into battle, then raised them high above the cities they captured. Just as the first men on the moon planted the flag of their country, flags symbolize those who occupy a foreign place they claim as their own. To dishonor a flag, if only by failing to acknowledge its legitimacy, is to reject such a claim. As a speaker said yesterday, an indigenous woman, during the Families Belong Together Rally here in Spokane, "Nobody can be illegal in a country that was stolen." She also spoke of the 500-year occupation of her land by people who still have no legitimate claim to it. To honor the flag in her case, would be to honor its meaning, that those displaying it own this country.

I hope, in light of all these wrongs, America is not what it claims to be, the "greatest nation on Earth." While it may have been great for some, and today is really great for just a few, it has never been great, so it would be impossible to "make America great again." But that doesn't mean we can't make it great for the first time, not because of where it is, or because there's something special about its people, but because, as a people and a country, it begins to live up to the values it claims to represent—freedom, equality, peace, and democracy—for people all over the world.

Before we can begin to achieve this, however, before we can resemble our greatest values, humankind's greatest aspirations, and not look like the world's greatest hypocrites, we must own our shadow. We must admit our mistakes and apologize for them, and to all those who have suffered because of them, in this land and beyond. But just saying "sorry" isn't going to cut it. For justice is restorative by nature, not punitive. It's not about feeling sorry or being made to feel sorry. It's about making reparations.

In 1865, when the Civil War ended, and slavery became illegal, the U.S. government had the opportunity to give those freed from its horror a real chance to become equal by giving them each, as requested, "40 acres and a mule," as recompense for all their unpaid labor. Instead, the Union sold confiscated Southern lands to rich white northerners, a move that condemned most African Americans to generations of poverty lasting to this day. If, in 1970, when Nixon started the Drug War as a veiled means of suppressing the black vote, we had instead given every African American in the country, every one of the nearly 23 million black men, women, and children, \$45,000, it would have cost about a trillion dollars, less than what we've spent on the Drug War itself, which has led to the largest, most racist prison population in world history. That trillion dollars doesn't include the clear majority of every community's budget that now goes into criminal justice, nor the lives and communities it has ruined and impoverished around the world, including the lives of those our government is now struggling to repel at our southern border. By the way, \$45,000 in 1970 is the equivalent of nearly \$300,000 today. So, you can imagine what it would have meant to those receiving it, who would, no doubt, have put it back into our economy while improving their own lives and securing their futures, instead of an endless Drug War that has cost us all far too much.

Ever since I was a kid I've heard those on the losing side of politics say, "we must take back our country." What I'm saying instead is that we've already taken too much. It's time, instead, "to *give* back our country." We must make reparations for all its sins. We must repair the damage its caused. We must restore the dignity and wellbeing of those it has abused and robbed. That's the only way this country will ever be great, the day all of us, black, and brown, and white, gay and straight, male and female, those with only a little more and just a little less, as one people living up to the aspirations of all people everywhere, can, with joy, and integrity, and eagerness leap to our feet and sing, "God bless America."