

“Peace and Struggle” Remarks by Rev. Amy Morgenstern

Peaceful Presence, June 11, 2020

The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote,

The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.

There’s a tension between peace and justice at times that is difficult for would-be peacemakers. At least, we may think there’s a tension. Because we mix up *peace* with *calm*. And things are not very calm right now.

As peacemakers, we’re sometimes taught something like this: That violence against people is wrong. And that if violence against people is wrong, then the destruction of property is also wrong. And if the destruction of property is wrong, then loud voices and angry words must be wrong. And if loud voices and angry voices are wrong, then anger is wrong. And if anger is wrong, then saying clearly, emphatically, what is happening to you and what you need must be wrong. Telling people what you need and that you aren’t getting it—that makes them uncomfortable. They feel unsettled and upset. They feel guilty. And that must be wrong.

There’s an error somewhere in that chain.

We as peaceloving people, would-be peacemakers, may think that our job is to make sure everyone is comfortable. But we can say: violence is wrong, but the feelings, the needs, the anger are not. It’s not the struggle in the streets that makes us feel uncomfortable, unsettled, upset, even guilty; that’s the struggle in our hearts. And without it there will be no justice.

Not only that, there will be no peace. Peacemaking begins with truth-telling. And that’s where Douglass was so wise. Because truth-telling, like plowing up the ground, is unsettling. It changes things. It creates turmoil where there was calm . . . *Calm on the surface.*

Douglass went on to say:

Find out just what any people will quietly submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them; and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

(And, I’d add, by the willingness of others to witness the oppression and do nothing.)

When the endurance of the oppressed has reached its limit and their struggle comes out into the open; when the ability of the witnesses to remain indifferent has reached its limit and their struggle cannot be denied; then we will have change. We will make justice. We will tell the truth and hear the truth.

It will be tumultuous and difficult. But is there any hope for peace except through that struggle? The struggle to know the truth?

Because as another great man once told us, when we know the truth, the truth will make us free.

Song

Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon set words of the great organizer, Ella Baker, to music and called it "Ella's Song." The group she founded, Sweet Honey in the Rock, sang it first. *[In the service, Amy sang and invited others to sing. Rather than reprint the words, for which we do not have permission, here is the official video.]*

["Ella's Song," Sweet Honey in the Rock](#)