

Free at Last, or Worlds Apart?

with selections from the musical *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
Sung by the Chalice Choir

Jim sung by Gary Giles, Huck sung by Kevin Allen-Schmid

October 2, 2016
Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
Rev. Paul Beckel

WELCOME

Today we recognize Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, which begins today at sundown. Rosh Hashanah is the first of the annual High Holy Days, which conclude with Yom Kippur ten days later.

The high holy days provide an opportunity each year to begin anew. But it's not as easy as flipping the page of the calendar. The tradition begins with a personal acknowledgement of all of the harm we have done to others. The next ten days are to be used for apologizing, and righting the wrong wherever possible. The High Holy Days conclude with rituals and prayers of forgiveness.

Along the way there is also a communal confession, which the congregation speaks aloud together, using the pronoun "we"—to emphasize that there are also harms done by us collectively that we need to answer for.

There is freedom to be gained from this process. Not pride—because there is also a prayer in which the community acknowledges that, with all of our good intentions, human resolve remains weak. But we resolve to progress anyway, and we continue to struggle for freedom, even if we need to renew ourselves with self-awareness, historical awareness, and rituals of collective empowerment, on a regular basis.

We renew our commitment to freedom not as heroic victory, but as humble gratitude.

In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, may we be humble enough to take a lesson from our ancestors and cousins of the Jewish faith...as we light the chalice and speak together of our covenant:

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

Behold, how good it is for people to get along together. That's a translation of the Hebrew that we are about to sing together, and it is the link between our interwoven themes today. For in addition to the High Holy Days today we acknowledge too the struggles that we face as a nation around inter-racial suspicion and division...as we seek freedom, not for any one of us, and not for any group of us, but for all of us. Like the Jews we accept that repairing our relationships is not

something that happens once and that's that. Rather, we confess our limits, our misunderstandings, and our poor choices. And with joy now, we begin in love.

GATHERING SONG

Hine Ma Tov #392

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

When I was eight years old I read a book called *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It's a book that I look back at again and again because it reminds me what is important to me. It reminds me that I am not special. I am important and I am loved and I am blessed, but I am, deep inside, not really different from you or you or you or any other person who has ever lived. It's a story from a long time ago when many white and black people had a hard time seeing the good in each other, and had a hard time trusting each other. It's about two very different people who became friends, and they are here today to sing a song for you about a trip that they took together on a little raft in the mighty Mississippi River. It starts with them running away from a big gang of angry people....

Muddy Water

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rh2tBLUx6Ks>

REFLECTIONS

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is the story of America, and my story as an American. It is the story of racial conflict and reconciliation; the quest for freedom; and the seduction of the frontier. And with its uncertain ending, it is a reminder to us—of Possibility.

I suppose that a great deal of my attraction to this story has to do with my personal identification with the setting and characters. The Leaf River flowed alongside the farm I grew up on in northern Minnesota. The Leaf emptied into the Crow Wing River, which emptied into the Mississippi. And just an hour north of home was Itasca, the headwaters of the Mississippi, which we visited many times.

Canoeing on the Leaf and the Crow Wing Rivers was a regular summer activity with my parents, siblings, and friends. And my father never tired of telling us that someday he was going to rig up some kind of solar and windmill powered vessel out of junkyard debris, and drift all the way to New Orleans.

The human geography of my home town was also reminiscent of Huck and Jim's Hannibal Missouri: frugal, god-fearing, and bigoted. It was the kind of place from which we can easily imagine folks wanting to run away. I identified strongly with Huck: we were simultaneously naive and skeptical; passionately earnest to do what was right, and terribly confused by a world of hypocrisy. The themes that shocked me then still move me today: the paradox of freedom; the dignity and the cruelty of human beings. I have attempted to work through these themes throughout my life; I still have a long ways to go.

River in the Rain

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3UES2lv3L0>

Reading it as a child, perhaps the most powerful message of the book for me was that Jim was a human being. And yet, throughout, Jim was treated as anything but human. Not only did the other characters treat him as a dumb animal, even the author portrayed him, outwardly, as simple-minded. But we saw that inside he was fragile and compassionate, and more than any other character he had the capacity and the courage for self-transcendence.

That Jim was a human being—a person with Inherent worth and Dignity—was never stated explicitly. But it was revealed in reflections on his emotional depth, in his never-ending hope for freedom, and in Huck's on-going ethical struggle over what it would mean to STEAL a runaway slave.

Still, even as they came to appreciate one another on many levels, the two cannot completely close the gap that remains between friends of different races.

Worlds Apart

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvVUIP2op2Y>

Jim might have been thought of as a “good” slave. He always presented a smile with his "yassuh's." And tho he was kept from doing much of anything by his whiny adolescent companion—Jim was a heroic figure...towering over Huck with his very being: his physical strength, his moral integrity. Jim smiled to the face of his white masters, and even to this kid, who was leading him to a very uncertain freedom—by heading SOUTH! But he also smiled in the face of life, as life pulled him in all directions, to an uncertain fate.

Jim was uneducated, but hardly a simpleton. He knew oppression, and he also knew his own dignity. He had great ambitions. Simple freedom was more than he could really hope for, but he hoped anyway. And he had great frustrations. But Jim loved life...he believed in living, and struggling, and pursuing a dream, despite the odds—despite the fact that he had limited control over his own fate.

So often in a buddies-adventure story, the sidekick is the one who, from the background, pushes the main character into the moral confrontation he needs to see the light. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn are ethical adventures, painful contortions of a young soul trying to find his way through a whirlwind of hypocrisy.

As a child I was struck with a glorious rebellious joy when I got to the part where Huck has to decide: would he save his own soul by following the rules, the social expectations that he'd always been taught were right? Or would he realize something more important?

Huck: All right, I'll go to hell. And I'll take up wickedness again, which in is my line, bein' brought up to it. And for a starter, I'll steal Jim out of slavery again. And, if I can think of something worse, I'll do that too—because as long as I'm in, and in for good, I might as well go whole hog!

Waitin' for the Light to Shine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45cE1DGZnFY>

Free At Last

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bJQxBzaEQA>

SOCIAL and ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COLLECTION

for Community to Community

BUF CHOIR

Hashiveinu

MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)

Shalom Chaverim can be translated simply as “Peace to you my friends.” It is used both for greeting and saying farewell.

SENDING SONG

Shalom Chaverim #400

BENEDICTION

May peace be with you; may peace be with us. May our individual and collective transgressions remind us of our interdependence, and our power: to uncover our past, make amends, and move forward together.