

Bound For Glory ©

Rev. Julie Forest

Last year at this time, Maren, Jude and I were on the road, leaving our home in Wisconsin and heading for the coast. We traveled along the old Route 66 just for the experience of it as we made our way to Southern California. While traveling through the highways and byways we found ourselves in Tulsa, Oklahoma, home of the Woody Guthrie museum. It's a wonderful museum and I commend it to you. It is a simple, humble yet remarkably generous showcase for his singular talent.

A few weeks ago, I was at Torrey Pines State Park. The sky was a vibrant blue, birds were swooping around and there were still so many flowers in bloom. The ocean was sparkling and the tide was coming in. I felt something special. It is hard to describe, but it feels something like being home, but in a deeper home, a home of a deeper dimension.

As I was walking listening to the way the wind tinkled the whispering pines, I heard something. I felt something well up in me -- that feeling, that voice that welled up in me, reminded me of the voice that Woody Guthrie sang about in "This Land is Your Land" when he sang, "And all around me a voice was chanting." It's a voice that comes from nowhere-and everywhere- all at the same time.

Woody wrote that song on the road, as he did so many songs. It came about, in part, because he pulled into a diner and after dinner was confronted with Kate Smith singing "God Bless America". It was exactly the kind of song Woody couldn't stand -- romanticizing America, telling people not to worry, that God would take care of everything. That song, written by Irving Berlin, portrayed an America that Woody simply did not see. He wrote "This Land Is Your Land" for everyone else: for all the poor people who had lost their land, jobs and homes in the depression. He wrote about the dangers of private property and hungry people juxtaposing the bounty and beauty of this land with our ridiculously inadequate ability then, as now, to sustain our own citizens.

Woody knew about this kind of poverty first-hand. His childhood was chaotic and violent. His mother had Huntington's disease which caused her to engage in violent, unpredictable and dangerous behaviors. His mother burned his house to the ground two separate times; a sister died in another fire, and Woody's dad was severely burned in a fourth fire. In addition to the chaos

contributed by his mother, his dad was a difficult man as well. He was involved in many questionable real estate deals, and by the time Woody's father was middle-aged, he could no longer use his hands because the bones and nerves in his hands had been damaged by fist fights: his way of settling land disputes.

Woody's family moved around a lot when he was a kid, and often he was left to his own resources. He never graduated high school, but he continued his education by reading extensively at the library. He checked out books on metaphysics, healing, yoga and world religions. He also lost himself in art and made a living for a while as a painter, doing advertising signs for people.

At one point he became known as a fortuneteller and a healer. He felt his success was due to the mastery of psychology, theology, sociology and just plain common sense. He painted a sign for his own business, which he called his "Trouble Buster Business". The sign read, "Trouble ain't worth nothing so I won't charge nothing to fix it." From all accounts, he did a good job of healing people and telling their futures. I would love to have gone to Woody to have my fortune told.

Woody decided to pursue a career as a singer because, in his words, "You paint a picture it lasts 400 years: You play a song for people and they want to hear it again and again." He felt that, "songs were a music and a language of all tongues."

Guthrie took his uncanny eye for detail that he developed as a painter, and blended it with an incredible ear for words. This creativity and talent were matched by his zest for life and his commitment to social justice and equality. Although it was probably not the only time, there is one recorded instance of him exhibiting signs of racial prejudice. On his radio show in L.A., he sang a song that had a racial epitaph in its title and refrain. The next week when he went back to do the next show, he found a letter waiting for him at the station. A young man, who identified himself as a Negro, asked why Guthrie felt the need to use that kind of language and sing that kind of song.

Two things happened that day; Guthrie developed a clearer understanding about the power of language and his ability to use that power through his songs, and he realized how poorly that song communicated his actual feelings. When he went on the air that morning, he apologized to the letter writer and to all who had heard the show the week before.

In the late 1930s, Europe was heating up. After Germany invaded western Poland, and Great Britain and France declared war on Germany, Woody wrote in a letter to his sister:

Now it looks like there are some wars breaking out around over the world. This is between the rich people. Us poor folks have nothing in the world to do with these wars, because, win, lose, or draw, we are poor to commence with and will be poor to end with. So it is plain that these wars are between rich people for more lands, more fields, more mines, more oil fields, more factories, more colonies, more folks to work for them, and more profits in their pockets.

During WWII Guthrie was on a submarine that was torpedoed twice. At that time in our armed forces and on that ship, strict segregation was the rule and the norm. After the second torpedoing, he overheard the African American sailors singing and he wanted to bring both the white and the black voices together. Even though it was forbidden, he somehow got the commanding officer to let everyone sing and dance together. He also had a wicked sense of humor because the first song he had the soldiers sing was “The Sinking of the Rueben James”.

Many streams contributed to his desire for social justice. In part, he had experienced a life of poverty and hunger. His own pain made him more sensitive to the pain of others. He had a genuine desire to heal people and to provide them with opportunities to enjoy themselves and forget their troubles. He played in countless migrant camps and benefits for union and labor organizers. This same sensitivity and willingness to be with the downtrodden also made him aware of how unjust conditions were. His songs were a perfect way of conveying that injustice and inspiring others to feel that injustice and respond to it.

He came from the dust bowls of Oklahoma and, like other “Okies,” went to California which was supposed to be the Promised Land. It may have looked like the Promised Land, but only if you had a good job.

He wrote in the song, “Do Re Mi”:

California is a Garden of Eden,  
It’s a paradise to live in or see,  
But believe it or not,  
You won’t find it so hot,  
If you ain’t got that Do Re Mi.

The more time Woody spent in the migrant camps, the more politicized he became. In 1939 he was invited to sing at a benefit sponsored by the Communist Party. Many people were secretive about their membership. The man who invited him didn’t know if Woody realized that the ramifications of

accepting the invitation to such a left wing gathering might include the potential to be blacklisted. Woody responded, “Left wing, right wing, chicken wing--it’s all the same to me. I sing my songs wherever I can sing ‘em.”

In addition to writing “This Land Is Your Land” as a response to the innocuous platitudes of Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America”, he also wrote a song in reaction to the Carter Family song “This World Is Not My Home”. In the song, the Carters give witness to the feelings that all treasure and hopes are for the next world and not to be expected in this world if you were poor. This angered Woody. He felt that the poor were being told to be patient and meek and wait for their rewards in the afterlife. In response to this very popular song, he wrote “I Ain’t Got No Home In This World Anymore”.

I ain’t got no home, I’m just a-rambling,  
I work when I can get it, I go from town to town.  
Rich men took my home and drove me from my door.  
My wife took down and died upon the cabin floor.

From what Guthrie could see, rich men were the cause of the corruption of Eden and contributed through their greed to the poor living conditions that caused so much death and destruction. His songs gave voice to the voiceless, and those that were too downtrodden to lift their voices to demand equity on earth, in this life. As Unitarian Universalists, we also do not think that poor people should settle for being poor. We believe that this earth is a garden for all and that salvation happens in the here and now of growing the common good, rather than some platitudes about a better time in the after life.

Woody had many gifts. In his autobiography, Bound for Glory, the writing is “beat” before there was such a thing: It is vivid, rich, and jumps right off the page. It was as if Woody were plugged right into an electric socket.

At times this creativity seemed to eviscerate him. About his songwriting Guthrie said:

I feel now like I have felt before ... that these words are such a force, such a pressure, such a bomb inside me, that if I fail to get them out, written down here ... they will expand and actually explode and destroy me like wax paper.

And he was being destroyed, from the inside out, not just by the demanding fire of his creativity, but by his alcoholism and his Huntington’s disease.

So far, I have presented a portrait of a very creative man who came from very challenging circumstances and managed to rise above them, creating a lasting canon of work that influences American letters and music right up to

this very day. As a matter of record, our most recent Nobel laureate, Bob Dylan, lists Woody as his most important influence. Clearly, he was a man who spoke with a prophetic voice that we honor as one of the sources of our faith. But that is not the whole story, because he did not rise above his troubled childhood, and he was not a good role model for the rest of us.

As a matter of fact, after I began to immerse myself in his life and work, after I saw how poorly he treated his first wife and the children he had with her, and his second wife and the children he had with her, I was going to pull the plug on Woody Guthrie even though he was genius, a prophet. Was he someone I wanted to hold up in a worship service? I began to see through the myth to the man, the less than perfect man.

I thought to myself, "Well, he wrote some great songs, but he had some significant issues in how he lived his life. In short he wasn't perfect, so I can't use him for a sermon." AND THEN it hit me! I began to realize how often I do that, how often I disregard something, some situation, some aspects of myself or another person just because we're not perfect! No one is perfect, and when I think like that, I create and fall into quite a chasm. I impede myself in apprehending and appreciating beauty when I am so critical. It is also true that I am never just critical of the outside world: I am also critical of myself.

Sometimes in our quest to do social justice, our eyes become so trained to see what's wrong that we forget to see the original giftedness of our world.

What does it take to make this world right again? How can we see with softer and kinder eyes? How can we recapture our sense of wonder in the world? How can I-how can we-release our spirits when they get trapped in and consumed by struggling and striving for a perfection that will, in effect, starve and immobilize our very souls?

First, we trust that who we are and what we have to offer will be enough. Secondly, we accept this world and respond with integrity. This world, with all the imperfections, is the perfect world. I, with all my imperfections, am the perfect me. You, with all your imperfections, are the perfect you. This approach, this softness, this gentleness, is a way out of the very small space that we get ourselves into sometimes. It is the practice of allowing ourselves more comfort with the paradoxical nature of reality.

It is not the only way, but it is a more gentle way. We fix things and respond most fully to things when we allow and encourage our consciousness to glimpse this perfect nature. Joni Mitchell called it finding our way back to the Garden. French philosopher Paul Ricouer called it second naiveté. Jesus of

Nazareth called it the already and not yet kingdom. And the wisdom in the Tarot deck labels it the Fool. The Fool is located at the beginning of the journey and is the first card of the deck, but it is also the last card of the deck. It is tempting to overlook this simple wisdom -- perhaps because it is so simple.

We need to get out of these small spaces, so that we are not paralyzed and bound by a sense of cynicism and hopelessness. I want to forgive the geniuses in our world who are not perfect. I want to forgive my parents, who were not perfect. I want to forgive myself for not being perfect. I want us to forgive each other for not being perfect. Then, and only then, can we appreciate the sheer giftedness of life. Then, and only then, can we let this appreciation guide us in our responses to life as we celebrate goodness and beauty, and challenge systems that impede others from experiencing this goodness and beauty.

This is one of the most challenging parts of the spiritual journey, getting our soft eyes back, knowing full well all that is wrong with our world and still being madly, truly, deeply in love with, and in relationship with, the world and each other.

Our reading this morning was the first page of Woody Guthrie's autobiography. He titled the book Bound for Glory and started off with a description of a bunch of dirty, disparate, broken hobos whose mouths are filled with dust, yet who sing, knowing they are all on the same track, on the same train. We are all on that train. We are bound to each other, and we are bound for glory.

And all around us, the voice is chanting, we are made of, and from, and for this land, and this land is made of, and from, and for us. Blessed be. Amen.