

Coming Back To Ourselves

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May these candles bring the light of hope to all who need it. May they remind the lonely they are not alone and the joyful to share their delight. May these lights remind us all to see beauty when we look at each other and to know wisdom comes in many forms. And may we always hold each other in tenderness, allowing love to transcend and transform our community. For all our desires spoken and for all those held in silence, we pray. Amen.

Call Me By My True Names

Thich Nhat Hanh

My joy's like spring so warm
It makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain's like a river of tears,
So vast it fills the four oceans.
Please call me by my true names
So I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
So I can hear that my joy and pain are one.
Please call me by my true names
So that I can wake up
And the door of my heart could be left open.

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Pope Francis addressed the American Congress Thursday morning. Outside the Capital Building, hundreds of thousands of people gathered in support of this astounding global figure and the message he brought with him. Coming from the Jesuit tradition he is multi-lingual, highly educated and committed to service. He has quite intentionally embraced his namesake, Saint Francis of Assisi, the 12th century monk who served the poorest of the poor and lived out of the understanding that Earth is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.

Pope Francis addressed many themes Thursday morning including immigration as the backbone of American history, and the financial barriers young people experience when trying to start families, and he issued a call to end the death penalty globally because, he declared, "incarceration is not the end of hope."

The bulk of his speech was focused on four Americans he used as examples of his universal message: Abraham Lincoln, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King and Thomas Merton. He reminded us of Lincoln's commitment to freedom and Day's dedication to the poorest of the poor and King's tireless fight for racial equality and Merton's gift for peacemaking through dialogue. Of these four great Americans, only two were Catholic. He wasn't pitching a Catholic message, in particular. He was playing the role of great spiritual leader holding up for us our most beautiful faces, calling us to remember who we have been when we've been at our best. He was calling us back to ourselves, reminding us of moments we've reached our greatest potential.

I watched the Pope make his unprecedented address to Congress with a dear friend. She lives in Southern

California, so really we were in opposite corners of the country. I wasn't planning to watch and that morning hadn't even thought about turning on the TV. I was at home with my laptop beginning to write this sermon. Her first text said, "I'm watching the Pope enter the Capital Building. Why can't I stop crying?" and I responded, "Because that's Hope, walking." With that thought, I turned on the speech and found myself mesmerized by this spiritual leader's gentle coaxing of American potentiality. He mirrored for us our own desire to be the "land of the free and home of the brave" and called us a "land of dreams" for which he seemed genuinely grateful on behalf of so many of the world's dreamers.

But as the first pope ever to be granted an audience with an American Congress, he wasn't there to stroke our egos, to tell us what a good job we're doing and go on his way. He was playing a card only he has. Because there are hundreds of millions of Christians in this nation and because this man has gained international respect by demonstrating both humility and a willingness to speak truth to power, and because he's the spiritual leader for more than a billion people around the world, Pope Francis is in the unique position of being able to address the American Congress as an outsider whose opinion will be heard and respected. He might even have the power through nothing but speech, to change the minds of some of the most powerful players in this country.

And there he stood, holding nothing back. He asked, "Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society?" And he answered honestly and directly, "Sadly, the answer, as we all know, is simply for money: money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood." He wasn't shy. He said what needed to be said. But he did it with kindness and grace.

As an international figure, as an Argentinian who now lives in Italy, an octogenarian with an unusually global perspective, he could have brought us the message of the AIDS crisis in Africa or the refugee crisis out of Syria or the crisis of disappearing island nations or, sadly, hundreds of other global events I'm sure he'd love us to address. But instead, he told us our own story. He reminded us about who we are and have been and could be. He talked about the American spirit of cooperation, versus a system of tyranny. "Such cooperation is a powerful resource in the battle to eliminate new global forms of slavery," he reported and went on to remind us that democracy can be used to, "serve and promote the good of the human person" and uphold the dignity of the individual. And, again, he used our words, holding up our own intentions for us to see.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." He said, right there in our Capital Building before nearly every one of our Senators and Representatives and even members of our Supreme Court "If politics must truly be at the service of the human person, it follows that it cannot be a slave to the economy and finance. Politics is, instead, an expression of our compelling need to live as one, in order to build... the greatest common good: that of a community which sacrifices particular interests in order to share, in justice and peace, its goods, its interests, its social life."

He wasn't coming to us with a message from outside, but a message from within. He was playing the role of our conscience, whispering to us from the inside. He was showing us our own faces, that of Abraham Lincoln and Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King and he was calling us back to our own ideals, the promise of who we can be because it's who we have been.

Members of Congress who heard him seemed moved by the experience. But one of them said an interesting thing. He noted that the rhetoric was beautiful and the goals lofty and worthy, but that once the speeches are over, it's his job as a United States Senator, and the job of his colleagues to get specific and start negotiating and do what he called "the back and forth" of politicking.

Now that the visit is over, the detail work will begin again. I think this happens in our own lives as well. We hear or read something that reminds us about who we want to be. We are inspired, excited, ready to renew our vision of ourselves, but then we get busy. There's laundry to do and bills to pay and dishes to stack as inspiration turns to perspiration and the moment is lost amid the chores of daily living. Politicians will remember that they need to raise thousands of dollars every day in order to win the next election and that long term plans rarely gain mass support and shifting policy even toward grand moral visions requires an educated public and most people are too busy with their own tasks and chores to be able to spend a lot of time considering deeply alternatives to current practices.

Nonetheless, the call to the American people on Thursday morning was to come back to ourselves. Come back to being people of freedom as Lincoln was and people concerned for the poor and marginalized like Day was and people of dialogue like Merton was and come back to our best self as people of justice and equality like

King was.

While that might be the call for a nation, I am now wondering what the call is for us as individuals. What is my best face? When am I most beautiful? Who are we each when we are at our finest? And what would we need to do to come back to that? It's cyclical. Sometimes we're at our best and sometimes we're not. Maybe some people in this room are feeling pretty good about who you are right now and I'm sure it's well deserved. It comes and goes. We move in and out, growing and strengthening our characters. And shifting away, finding ourselves to be impatient, short-sighted, greedy, self-centered. Our focus is small and our days are packed with ways to get what we want with little regard for those outside our immediate circles. It happens.

Some of us are feeling like we've moved away from our best selves and some aren't. Like I said, it's cyclical. We do that as a nation and we do it as individuals. We get lax about things, take the easy way and then there's a flare of hope, a beautiful face, our face, that reminds us about who we can be.

What is it that takes us away from ourselves, from who we most want to be or who we are at our core? I was wondering that while I was listening to the pope speak. As it happens, I have read just about everything that Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King have written. They were my heroes, my inspiration to a life of activism. I took a college course on the three of them. One of my college mentors lived and worked at the original Catholic Worker house and the other was the President of the Thomas Merton Society. I was at a Catholic college getting degrees in Theology and Peace Studies. There was a way I was hearing Pope Francis calling me back to my-self, back to the young activist who didn't even know that there's a danger in speaking truth to power, who had what was termed by a teacher a Holy Impatience because I didn't want to wait for people to catch up to Truth and therefore to Justice. People are starving, wars are being waged, there's an unnecessary level of suffering and we can stop it, so everyone needs to get up and get working! I stood on street corners every chance I had, howling at people with signs calling their attention to any one of a thousand injustices.

I seem to have lost some of that fire. It's not entirely gone. I know that I'm particularly sensitive to folks on the margins and ways that we push people out or don't let them into the center. I know that some people would still label me an activist although I'm not sure I deserve that title anymore. I'm not asleep, but I'm not awake in quite the same way either.

Have some of you had the same experience? Do you look back on who you were at some time in your life and wonder what happened? Have you let go of some part of yourself you'd like to reclaim? Is there a way you've been tamed or civilized that isn't entirely true to who you are or want to be? Is there a way you are unfamiliar to yourself?

How do we come back to ourselves? If we are feeling nostalgic for another time, a time of calm or clarity, what do we need to return to our best selves, to reclaim our true face?

For each of us the answer to that is different. I know I feel more like myself when I have time to sit in silence for a significant period of time and even better when I can do that as a daily practice. The ocean is also renewing for me. Sometimes I just need to remember who I was and remind myself it's who I am, that I haven't lost my core self.

And maybe that's what the pope was doing for us these last few days. Maybe he's been reminding us about who we are and what our core values are. We are freedom fighters. We promise equality to everyone. We are the land of plenty and place of dreams. We are intentionally diverse, welcoming many ways of knowing and believing and loving. We are always stretching to meet new needs in a quickly changing world. We stumble, we get frightened, we don't love change and sometimes we forget. But we have ways of reminding ourselves about our core values, ways of birthing people who embody our best selves and we alter course. We come back to ourselves, back to the promise of who we could be.

There is great hope in the American story. So much tripping and falling and even more getting up and moving forward. We have faces of non-violence and truth seeking and truth telling. We have dreams that are larger than any one person and a nation established to embrace them. We are Jews and Christians and Muslims and Atheists and UUs and Wiccans, black and white and Latino and Asian and Native American and bi-racial and multi-racial, gay and straight, bisexual and transsexual and physically abled in many different ways and the promise of American is open to all of us.

There is great hope in our individual stories. Ways we've moved away from ourselves and so many ways we move back, ways we reconnect with our core values with those parts of ourselves we love, that excite us and remind us about the potentiality of our own lives. Life is long and filled with opportunities to move toward and

away and back to our best selves, so that we can, once again see our true faces and know ourselves to be whole and beautiful.