

Phoenix Rising

REV. PEGGY CLARKE

FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY, HASTINGS ON HUDSON, NY

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The story of the Phoenixⁱ is powerful and iconic, driven into our collective consciousness largely because of the hope it provides, the vision of possibilities when all else is lost. Life, death and new life again. Today, I'm starting with a Phoenix story happening here in our country, a story of a city struggling to come back to life. But this isn't a sermon about a city. It's a story about who we are and how we live in the world. And it's a story about dying and rising out of the ashes as something new.

I spent the better part of a week in Detroit last spring for an environmental justice meeting. Those with whom I spoke before I went might remember the dread I had in going to, frankly, the only city in this country I wanted never to see. A dead city, struggling with a long history of crime and racism. It turns out, I was wrong about Detroit.

Late one night in June, 1896, Henry Ford ran out of the shed behind his house to grab an ax. In his spare time, Ford had been building an automobile he called a Quadicycle but now that it was done, it wouldn't fit through the door. He hacked the doorframe and drove his new invention around a sleeping town, a town and a nation that had no idea what magic was afootⁱⁱ.

Twenty years later, we've got assembly lines and the Model T and the Five Dollar Day. Building cars pays. Peasants and sharecroppers from Europe and the American South flocked to Detroit, each bringing new food, culture, music and languages. Businesses of all sorts were booming and factories were popping up everywhere. But here's an interesting fact; those factories weren't popping up in Detroit. The Ford Motor Company hasn't built a car in Detroit in over a hundred years. Instead, they built in an area within the city limits of Detroit that was incorporated as its own town. The purpose was to avoid Detroit's taxes and ensure police cooperation during labor disputes. And there isn't only one of these odd little towns. The city of Detroit has several areas that do not pay taxes and have their own police force.

For a good while, though, most folks didn't care about this oddity. All the workers lived in Detroit-proper and the economy was booming, but General Motors, having invented the modern decentralized corporate structure, decided to decentralize the city too by building its own downtown. Clearly, this was a city designed and administrated by corporate interests.ⁱⁱⁱ

Detroit has a rich and fascinating history as a hotbed for racism and socialism, economic highs and lows and as an artistic epicenter. There were struggles, few unique to Detroit, as long as we understand that this is a city designed to support and serve the automobile industry.

I might extend that a bit to say it's designed to serve and support a wealthy and middle class white population within the automobile industry. The Five Dollar Day did a lot to bring folks from all over, but as white Americans have done often in our history, they accepted the diversity of workers, but not of neighbors. At first, the city was dreadfully, but not unexpectedly segregated. But over time, geniuses of design built the first concrete highway so people could live farther and farther away and later fashioned an elevated tram so that folks in outlying towns, white towns, could actually bypass the city, creating the possibility of working in Detroit five days a week without ever stepping foot on a city street.

And then the automobile industry crashed. Those massive plants were abandoned, leaving the city desolate, without commuters or businesses to keep it going. And, I suppose if no one was there at all, it might ultimately revert to farmland and be just fine, but there are people in Detroit. And children and schools and plenty of folks who've been there for generations who need to make a home there, even if they have to do it on their own.

The streets of Detroit have an eerie quality. In residential neighborhoods, one of every three houses is boarded up. Entire blocks are abandoned having been previously occupied by factories and now populated only by slowly collapsing buildings, each one bereft of any material that might have had value like glass or copper wires or piping. We were driving one morning and the car we were following pulled over to park. We were about to park behind them, but we realized it was a bus stop, so we moved in front. When we told them that was a bus

stop, the driver, a Detroitier told us that buses almost never run and even if they did, there aren't enough police around to walk abandoned streets giving out parking tickets. This is a city living largely without infrastructure, not unlike many developing nations.

In fact, this summer it was reported that 11,000 households had been without water for more than 2 months. For some, there was no water in the house since January. Water had been cut for lack of payment, even though cutting water in most first world nations, ours included, is done only as a last resort after it's been determined that the family can pay, but has chosen not to. In other words, we have recognized access to water as a basic human right and provide it free of charge if necessary. In Detroit, those 11,000 homes are without an income and are unable to pay their water bills, but water was cut and for many remains off. In fact, while new management of the water system is under negotiation, thousands more are in line to get cut.

Detroit was living up to my expectations of a dying city. No work, water, public transportation, police, city services or commerce. But from those ashes, a bird is rising.

Every third house is in foreclosure, but the neighbors aren't just letting those houses decay. They are using the unused properties for neighborhood vegetable gardens. There are cases of neighborhoods dismantling empty houses and creating playgrounds or small skate parks in unused space.

I visited a food justice organization called Earthworks, that serves 1000 meals a day. But in Detroit, access to fresh food was difficult. This organization has built giant hoop houses where they are growing their own food and starting plants for people to bring home to those neighborhood gardens.

But getting people to Earthworks is a problem. There's virtually no public transportation system and what exists is unreliable. So a regular at the soup kitchen opened a bicycle shop on the grounds. People bring broken bicycles for him to fix. There's no charge. In fact, there's a new economic system – or maybe an old one – beginning to take form in Detroit. A barter system. There aren't many jobs which leaves little money in the system. People do what they can for each other and pay each other back with goods and services. Fix my bike and I'll plant you a row of tomatoes. Teach my kid to play guitar and I'll teach your kid Spanish. And while access to fresh food used to be very difficult, there are now more than 1,600 community gardens in the city of Detroit and the largest public farmers market in the country, connecting local farmers to restaurant and homeowners.

I don't think we're watching a city die. I think we're watching a new world being born. Detroit isn't coming back, it's becoming something new. Out of the ashes is rising a new young bird. The people have moved passed protesting because there are no people left to change the system. The people who are there are designing a new system, one reliant on neighbors, not dollars. Detroit isn't coming back; it's moving forward. It's becoming something other than it was, possibly other than what any American city has been in a long time.

It is the Phoenix story. It's not life coming from life, but life- new life- coming from death. I'm going to admit, I needed a life-from death story this summer. So much darkness and violence. War between Israel and Palestine. Too many bodies of dead children and grieving parents and too much rhetoric. Black men being strangled or shot by the police. Riots in the streets of Ferguson. And it's been cold. Too cold for a New York summer. The damage we have done our mother Earth is beginning to take form.

From death, comes a new life. We can watch as Detroit, a city that has experienced death, is becoming a new bird. Out of the fire, a new city is born.

Let us not lose heart during dark and cold days. Let's remember that we have what we need to get through this time. Let's remember that from ashes comes new life.

I think we face two challenges. The first, is allowing death. Too many of us, I'm sure, have been bedside as a loved one dies. We wait, both dreading the moment death will come and also, somehow longing for that release. Allowing death is the first undertaking. Allowing a person, a city, a system, a paradigm – allowing anything to die requires tremendous fortitude. How to let it go? When do we accept that something is no longer working? I suspect anyone in this room could preach on that question alone. When do we accept that something is no longer working? When did the folks in Detroit recognize that their city, built on the American dream, was dying? When did they realize that they needed to let it go and start anew? When might we recognize that our system of oil consumption is dying? I'm not nearly as opposed to fracking as I'm sure most people think I am. I'd like regulations to protect water systems, but I don't think that fracking itself is the problem. But, I do believe that the entire oil-reliant system is dying. My problem with fracking is that it gives us a reason for denial like the promise of chemotherapy to a person with stage 4 pancreatic cancer. Letting something die is a challenge. I hear

echoes of Dylan Thomas's celebrated poem "Do not go gently into that good night...Rage, rage against the dying of the light."^{iv}

The second challenge is allowing something new to rise from the ashes. I'm not talking about coming back or being reborn. I'm talking about new life, something that hasn't happened before.

Part of allowing new life from death is knowing we are fierce, we are made for this, we have what it takes to meet the dare of the new. We have the ability to rethink our systems, to change our behavior, but more importantly to change the structures in which we live.

I've said it before and I'll say it again, dismantling institutional racism, dismantling an international habit of continual war, dismantling our dependence on oil will only happen when we dismantle the core paradigm of power-over. We are living in a framework that suggests everything is in service to a dominant class. The models of oppression that marginalize human communities also lead to the destruction of Earth.

I believe that the people of Detroit are leading the way into a new world. I believe they are the Phoenix, the bird rising from the ashes. What if we all lived in partnership? What if we created a system dependent on our neighbors? What if we grew our own food and culture and political system and ideology? What if we recognized that no one is coming to save us, that we are on our own and we will have to make it work.

Do we know we are resilient, we are robust, we are fierce enough to redesign, to build a new way? Are we afraid we will burn in the ashes and that will be the end, or do we know we will survive? Are we confident enough to rethink everything we know? Not long after Henry Ford built his first Model T, he said "If I'd asked the people what they wanted, they'd have told me 'faster horses'". That was the box of his day and he broke out of that box and created something entirely new. Literally, he smashed through the walls of his shed with an ax to let his quadricycle out. And that first night, that first drive, he drove past a few people out early who were there when his new car stalled. And they laughed. They laughed at him and his crazy hope. Henry Ford was imaginative and unafraid. While the world slept, while the world laughed, he was building a new way.

I wonder sometimes when I hear stories, who I am in that story. Am I one of the townspeople asleep? Am I one of the scoffers, one who laughs or obstructs new ideas? Am I Henry Ford up all night, breaking through the walls confining my invention?

I want to be Henry Ford. I think we all need to be Henry Ford these days. (OK, I'm talking metaphorically. He's also the guy who created his own town so he could control the police- let's not get too caught in the details.) With that said, I want to be the guy who doesn't worry about the box we're all living in, the walls that confine us, but thinks instead about what might be possible, what would happen if...

I also want to be the guy in Detroit who started fixing people's bicycles, the guy who said, "Yeah, this isn't how we do things, but let's do them this way anyhow" or the people at Eastern Market who realized that no one is bringing food, either they grow it themselves or they're going to starve. And the people at the Boggs Center who are talking about becoming Solutionaries, who have ceased a culture of protest and have started a culture of creation and innovation.

We're heading into this new year, and I am feeling fierce. I'm feeling ready to create something new, something innovative that will break us out of a culture of violence and power and into a world of community reliance. I just learned that our church garden is about to become a community garden, open to the public. That's a really good sign. It's a sign of hope and openness and a willingness to take risks.

The bird we have been, the 500 year old bird, might be old and tired. I'm ready to become the sun that sets it aflame, to allow death to come and to let a fresh new bird rise from the ashes.

ⁱ The Story of the Phoenix was one of the readings earlier in the service.

ⁱⁱ Joel Batterman delivered a wonderful history of Detroit to our group. Luckily, he has posted it here: <http://hammerouthope.blogspot.com/2014/05/motor-city-detroit-history-in-30.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ All of this history comes from Joel.

^{iv} Thomas, Dylan. Do Not Go Gently. 1951.