



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

“Never Stop in a Storm: Perseverance through Pain and Challenges”

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Thank you so much for welcoming me today. I am truly humbled each time Rev. Carl and all of you invite me to speak. It is really an honor. And the date of this conversation came at just the right time. It has been an incredibly fulfilling and incredibly challenging year.

My work, while important and rewarding, comes along with trials. I get emotionally tired. I know many of you can relate, whether in your personal lives, professional lives, or both.

We are facing many challenges these days and I am here today to outline a few of those as I urge YOU, and remind MYSELF, to never stop in the middle of a storm! That is my simple, yet complex message for today. Never stop in the middle of a storm. The dictate is not mine, however. I have borrowed it from an incredible poet in Georgia with whom I have had the pleasure of working in my position at the Institute for Common Power. I will this morning, tell you about him and how his encouraging words can inspire us and carry us into a better future.

But first, a little about some of the emotional obstacles I have faced, some of which we are all facing, and how I find inspiration to try and persevere.

As many of you know, I was a tenured professor of History at Hood College until 2022 when I left to be Director and co-founder of the Institute for Common Power,

the educational branch of Common Power, a voting justice organization. The Institute provides education and programming that fosters, sustains, and expands what should be the most common power in American democracy: the right to vote. Because ensuring a vote for all is essential to dismantling systems of injustice and creating equitable healthcare, living wages, decent housing, affordable education, and so much more. Just about everything is tied to voting.

In the Institute, we learn about how common power has been forged in America despite overwhelming obstacles. Specifically, we are guided by the strategies, people, and institutions in historical movements for Emancipation, Citizenship, Suffrage, Civil Rights, and Justice to inform how we take action to foster a just and inclusive democracy today.

At the base of what we do is the use of the discipline of history to inspire, to create change, to move us to action.

We offer a variety of programming from mini-courses on history, to workshops on how to have conversations across difference. We have a program called Scholars in Motion with chapters in Frederick and now Selma, Alabama. It is designed for high school students who live in government-subsidized housing. We are attempting to create a level playing field for those students by providing free tutoring, SAT prep, and college visits to help them get to college.

One of the hallmarks of our work at the Institute is an experiential educational opportunity called the **Truth and Purpose Learning Tours**. We take organizations and individuals on journeys through the American South to explore aspects of our collective history that are too often dismissed, ignored, or denied. By diving into the historical roots of this country and attendant racial and structural disparities born from the past, we aim to equip people with the knowledge and insights necessary to recognize and dismantle injustice as they drive lasting change.

I spend A LOT of time traveling to the American South discussing the tragic AND triumphant history of African Americans, helping to usher people through pain and awakenings and move them into action. My colleagues and I work diligently to help

others learn how they can change people's lives for the better, how they can eliminate systems of injustice. It is unbelievably rewarding work. Many of the people who join us on the learning tours are k-12 educators from across the country. Several are from Frederick. We give them full scholarships so they can go on these important journeys. This work is one of the most important things that I have been blessed to do in my life. It is an absolute honor. I get to teach, to learn, to be inspired.

And, in full honesty...it is hard. It is at times emotionally draining, taxing. Exploring and teaching the history of race, racism, enslavement, and Civil Rights, as well as tying the history to today often leaves me wondering why is there so much hate in this world?

Please understand this: It is a blessing to take people on journeys through some of the most challenging places in the country, teaching tough history, showing them how they can be inspired by the history makers. But it nonetheless comes along with challenges. But the work also allows me to regularly meet people and go to places that inspire me and others to persevere.

On these incredible journeys, I have had the honor of learning from and becoming friends with Mr. Hank Stewart, a poet laureate in Atlanta, Georgia who was nominated for the position by the late, great, Congressman John Lewis. Mr. Stewart, through his beautiful prose, tells a compelling story that teaches all of us how we can keep going and weather the storms that we encounter.

One day, Mr. Stewart was driving to Jacksonville, Florida from Atlanta, Georgia to visit his father. With his young son in tow, he was driving down the highway going about fifty miles per hour. Then he pauses and says, "well maybe sixty miles per hour. Maybe seventy, ok closer to eighty, eighty-five miles per hour." And then the sun began to disappear behind heavy storm clouds and thunderous rain began to pour from the skies. Mr. Stewart reveals that his visibility was almost nothing. Cars next to him began to stop along the highway as the rain continued to pour heavily and the skies increasingly darkened. He slowed down to fifty, forty, to thirty, to fifteen, ten miles per hour. But he didn't stop. Instead, he drove slowly, safely, but steadily,

passing those cars pulled over along the road's edge, passing the people who stopped in the middle of the storm. He continued along and gradually made his way forward and then the rains stopped, the sun reemerged and shined ever so brightly in the sky. His visibility returned.

He did not stop in the middle of the storm and on the other side was sunshine and beauty that welcomed him. On the other end was a brighter day.

Many of you do and have done incredible work to help others. That is something that I adore about this institution. You all work to change lives. I know that you understand me when I say it is an honor to do work for and in service to others.

But I also want to say that it is ok to recognize the work is hard, at times painful. And those feelings can be compounded by the things happening in the world around us.

As I stand here today, there is a horrific war happening in the Middle East that divides people here in America. Children are being murdered, hospitals are being bombed. You can scarcely look at social media without seeing the pain and grief of mothers and fathers who now, despite the difference in their religious beliefs, their culture, their political views, are united by unimaginable loss.

There are similar atrocities occurring in Sudan that news outlets here barely cover, but where innocent people are nonetheless dying terrible deaths. It is like living in "a piece of hell," an anonymous man told the BBC.

There is an assault on truth in this country, an attempt by politically motivated and frequently racist politicians and their bands of "anti-woke" sycophants to codify the denial of systemic racism and legislate *against* our ability to discuss and teach the vast contributions of African Americans, women, LGBTQ+ Americans, and others who have been vital in the struggle for civil rights, voting justice. And the very growth of this nation.

Educators in recent months have been fired for teaching about racial and social justice.

Just last week, the officers who murdered a 23-year-old African American young man, Elijah McClain in Aurora, Colorado were acquitted. I have written and spoken

about Elijah often since his death. Elijah's last words included him telling his murderers that he loved them.

And, of course, we each have our own individual challenges that are very real and can impact us in serious ways. Personal challenges that often leave us feeling downtrodden, discouraged.

There is a cost to doing work that is in service to others. There is a cost to understanding the challenges people face around the world. There is a cost, a physical and emotional cost, to personal strife and pain.

But we cannot stop driving in the middle of a storm because the cost of stopping is far greater. There is beauty and sunshine waiting for us on the other side.

Furthermore, while there is a cost to work that changes society, work that helps others, it is nothing like the cost paid by people who came before us. History constantly reminds us of this. I say this frequently: history is a self-help book, it is my inspiration.

History tells us stories that sustain our energy to create a just and inclusive democracy. It functions as both prologue and primer. It extends to us warnings as it fills us with the hope and determination necessary to change the world, necessary to redress the evils of the past as we uplift those around us.

It teaches us so much about weathering the storms.

In 1961, the Freedom Riders, an interracial group of courageous foot soldiers sought to eliminate segregation on interstate travel. What if they stopped in 1961 because of what they faced and simply went home? What if they said this is too much, too hard. We would not have transportation equity today.

WHAT IF the six hundred and then 2,000, and then 25,000 people from varied ethnic and racial backgrounds, varied faiths, who marched from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 stopped in the middle of the storm? They marched because they believed in freedom and the right for all people to vote, regardless of race. They marched to honor Reverend James Reeb, a Unitarian minister who traveled to Selma to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge and all the way to Montgomery to bring attention to injustice in

Alabama and beyond. Reverend Reeb wasn't able to make it to Montgomery. He was murdered by people so filled with hate that they didn't want any type of democracy to prevail in this country. What if people didn't continue the fight and instead stopped in that horrendous storm? We would not have a voting rights act today that makes sure people can vote without being imprisoned, beaten, or killed.

If people who worked to create change, to bring about racial and social justice, had stopped their work, we would not have the freedoms we have today.

We cannot stop in the middle of a storm.

And I must pose to you an exceptionally important question that I want you to ask yourself when you are tired, when you feel challenged. When helping others and doing work that makes a difference feels taxing, impossible. **Here is the question: If we stop in the middle of a storm and retreat into self, if we don't take care of others, if we don't try to help others, what will happen to them?** It is a question that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. so eloquently posed in his final speech.

Last month, I traveled to the place where he delivered that speech. It was a profound experience that served as a reminder of why we must keep pushing and never stop.

In the midst of the turmoil and uprisings that had gripped much of the nation in 1967, when people were rebelling against systemic racism, police brutality, and the absence of human rights, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. penned his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Imploring people to understand the frustrations of those situated in the geographically and economically restrictive boundaries of inequity, he called for change, for perseverance, for courage to dismantle an unjust system. The passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act marked seemingly inconceivable and unattainable change, but there was still work to be done. Dr. King, always one to stride confidently and audaciously into the path of change, would lead by example in answering the question posed in his final monograph when he traveled to Memphis, Tennessee to help when many considered the "least among us."

On April 3, 1968, Dr. King arrived in Memphis to come to the aid of striking, sanitation workers. Just weeks before Dr. King's arrival, two men, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were fatally crushed by a faulty garbage truck and the city failed to act. Their deaths revealed long-standing abuse and dismissiveness of sanitation workers in Memphis and existed as the spark that ignited an organized effort to exact change. Dr. King arrived that Wednesday as 1,300 sanitation workers were on strike. He came to aid in their fight.

That evening, the evening before his assassination on April 4, 1968, one of the most visible leaders in the world delivered an unbelievably powerful and emotional speech to a crowd gathered at Bishop Charles Mason Temple. There stood Dr. King, clenching the edges of the lectern—sick from what appeared to be influenza—understanding and living one of the guiding tenets of his faith, his identity: what is done to the least of us is done to all of us. While discussing the plight of the local sanitation workers, he posed the following to highlight and herald the importance of self-sacrifice: "The question before you tonight," he implored, is **Not**, "If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week...?' The question is **Not**, 'If I stop to help this (person) in need, what will happen to me?'" The question, Dr. King insisted, is "If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to **them**?' That's the question." *What will happen to them?*

The question before us today this day and each day, is what will happen to others if we do nothing. What happens to others if we stop in the middle of that storm?

What happens to you personally if you stop in the middle of a storm. Sunshine and better days are on the other side.

And you do not have weather that storm alone. You sit here in a community of people willing and wanting to help you through your struggles. Lean on each other.

We sit today in a room filled with people who are welcoming to all. There is so much good, so much beauty around us that when we feel burdened by the weight of all that is wrong, we must look around and find the good. It is truly everywhere. But you have to keep driving to find your way out of that storm or you will never see the sunshine.

Are we going to stop and allow the thunderous rain to consume us, or will we keep driving, keep going until the storm clouds part and the sun shines down upon us? We must find the strength to continue because the consequences of stopping are too grave, too detrimental to ourselves and others.

So however challenging things may seem, remember what those who came before us faced and how they were able to weather the storm and create change. If they can do what they did given the challenges surrounding them, we can do anything. I want to tell you today to never give up, never stop in the middle of a storm. Keep driving, keep pushing, keep loving. Hate and pain shall falter before the strength of virtue, love, and determination.