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Listening to *Les Misérables* as a Spiritual Practice

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Les Misérables premiered on Broadway in 1987, after earlier versions in France and London. I first encountered *Les Mis* in the early '90s. My church youth group took a trip to New York City that included seeing *Les Mis*. I had never paid attention to the musical before—other than seeing the ubiquitous t-shirts with the image of Cosette on the front. But after seeing the musical live in New York City, suddenly all of my peers were listening not only to the 1987 Original Broadway Cast recording, but also — if you were really cool — the 1989 3-CD Complete Symphonic Recording, featuring the entire score.

The musical is based on the Victor Hugo's *massive* 1862 novel of the same name, that weighs in at around 1,500 pages. Perhaps the biggest misconception about the musical is that it is set during the French Revolution. *La grande révolution* started in 1789 and includes all those famous moments such as attacking the Bastille and Marie-Antoinette facing the guillotine. But the insurrection featured in the musical is the 1832 June Rebellion in Paris, more than three decades *after* the end of the French Revolution. Victor Hugo witnessed that 1832 insurrection personally: “He walked the streets of Paris, saw the barricades blocking his way at points, and had to take shelter from gunfire” ([Robb](#) 173-4). So,

in the world of our play, it is the eve of the Paris Uprising. The fight will come tomorrow. But for now, there is **“One Day More.”**

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“One Day More” is the ‘show stopper’ at the end of Act I. But revolutions don’t come out of nowhere. How did we get to this point of insurrection?

Les Mis opens in 1815—a little more a decade-and-a-half *before* the events of the Paris Uprising. The condition of the laboring classes is one of increasing depravity, exploitation, and desperation. After a long day at work, justice would mean earning a living wage. But that’s not the condition the workers find themselves in **“At the End of the Day.”**

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I’ve always heard the musical referred to by the original French title *Les Misérables* — or most often shortened to *Les Mis*. And perhaps it’s because I never learned French, but it was a while before I fully appreciated that the title of this musical literally translates as “The Miserable Ones.” More loosely translated, *Les Misérables* could be rendered as “The Poor Ones,” “The Wretched Poor,” “The Victims,” or “The Dispossessed.” So I can see why marketers chose to keep it in French and abbreviate it as often as possible.

From another angle, the call to look unflinchingly at the plight of “The Miserable Ones” of this earth is part of *Les Mis*’s power. Raising our awareness about the struggles of “the least of these” creates the possibility for social change.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. carried one other book in his briefcase in addition to the Bible: *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman. That title (*Jesus and the Disinherited*) is pretty close to “The Miserable Ones” or “The Dispossessed.” Thurman’s book is about reading the Bible “as a manual of resistance for the poor and disenfranchised” — and about achieving social justice

through recognizing one's own inherent worth and dignity and then extending that same love and compassion for your neighbor. (Sounds pretty UU!)

Along those lines, Victor Hugo says the following in the preface to *Les Misérables*:

So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation, which, in the face of civilization, artificially creates hells on earth, and complicates a destiny that is divine with human fatality; so long as the three problems of the age — the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of women by starvation, and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night—are not solved; so long as, in certain regions, social asphyxia shall be possible; in other words, and from a yet more extended point of view, so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless.

Accordingly, as terrible as the factory conditions were that were raged against “At the End of the Day,” when a young woman named Fantine is unjustly fired from that job, her situation becomes even more hopeless on the streets. The original French title of her lament translates as “*I Had Dreamed of Another Life.*”

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Dorothy Day once said that the problem is our “acceptance of this lousy, rotten system.” Part of what she meant is that we too often accept that the way things are is the way things have to be. The truth is that paradigms shift, revolutions happen, and things can, have, and will continue to change.

But we will now be confronted with a different perspective. In *Les Mis*, Inspector Javert doesn't question the larger system. He is only concerned with enforcing the law as it is. For him, there is no room for mercy. He fails to see, as Thoreau taught, that “An unjust law is no law at all.” And he swears to enforce the law. He swears by the “*Stars.*”

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In looking to make the system less “lousy” and “rotten” and more “just,” our UU 5th Principle affirms, “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” That word democracy combines two Greek roots: *demos* (meaning “people”) and *kratos* (meaning “power” or “rule”). So democracy literally means, “power to the people.” The opposite is an *aristocracy* (“rule by an elite.”) Or in a more extreme form: prior to the French Revolution, one person (the king) ruled by an absolute monarchy. And his tyranny inspired the French Revolutionary cry for “*liberté, égalité, fraternité.*” Challenging the “divine right of kings,” the people demanded *liberty, equality*, and a respect for our common *humanity*. That demand for social and economic justice echoes unto today: “***Do You Hear the People Sing?***”

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In the grassroots, subversive spirit of moving from absolute monarchy to “people power,” and from aristocracy to democracy, it is appropriate that Inspector Javert, who is spying on the rebels, is exposed not by an adult or one of the student leaders of the uprising, but by a young “streetwise urchin” named Gavroche, who reminds us that cultivating “power to the people” means everyone in all generations — because there’s a lot that “***Little People***” can do.

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Earlier we heard Fantine’s lament, “I Had Dreamed of Another Life.” Now toward the end of the play, we hear a similar lament from Éponine, but her plight is of unrequited love and finding herself “***On My Own.***”

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Towards the end of the novel *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo writes that:

The book which the reader has before him at this moment is, from one end to the other, in its entirety and details ... a progress from evil to

good, from injustice to justice, from falsehood to truth, from night to day, from appetite to conscience, from corruption to life; from bestiality to duty, from hell to heaven, from nothingness to God. The starting point: matter; destination: the soul. The hydra at the beginning, the angel at the end. (Welsh 155)

At the beginning of the musical, Jean Valjean is “Prisoner 24601,” sentenced to five years hard labor for stealing bread to feed his starving nephew — and ultimately imprisoned for 19 years for making an escape attempt. Valjean redeems himself in many ways throughout the play, and we now hear his selfless cry of desperation: that he would trade his own life if his future son-in-law might be spared. He prays, **“Bring Him Home.”**

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Those last two numbers are bleak. But the play *is* called *Les Misérables*, “The Miserable Ones.” Yet our tale grows bleaker still. The 1832 Paris Uprising *was* a failed revolution. The good news is that Marius, whom Jean Valjean prayed for in “Bring Him Home,” does survive. But most of the insurrectionists, many of them young students, lost their lives in the struggle, leaving — at tables where friends once sat — far too many **“Empty Chairs.”**

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The 1832 Paris Uprising featured in *Les Mis* did fail. But in the words of the poet Seamus Heaney:

once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.
So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.

Believe that further shore
Is reachable from here.

Historically, we began to see increasing “power to the people” with the 1688 Glorious Revolution in England, the 1776 American Revolution, and the 1789 French Revolution.

But it’s important to remember that many of our nation’s founders — those leaders of the American Revolution against the tyranny of the British monarchy— those same American revolutionaries were also wary of giving *too much* power to the people. To take just one example, we did not have a direct election of senators until 1912—well over a century after the Revolutionary War. Prior to the 14th Amendment, the senate was seen by our country’s elites as a necessary balance to the more volatile, directly-elected House of Representatives.

I noted earlier that word democracy (*demos + kratos*) means “people power.” A related word from the ancient Greek that is once again relevant in our current political landscape is demagoguery (*demos + agein*, “to lead”). A demagogue is someone who seeks to lead people by “manipulating popular prejudices, making false claims and promises, and building arguments based on emotion rather than reason.” So while it can be easy to get caught up in cheering the students bravely storming the barricades in the struggle of liberty, equality, and our common humanity, that same angry discontent can also be cynically enflamed into mob violence, which we’ve seen happening increasingly at political rallies in our own country in recent weeks.

Be wary of political leaders who seek liberty, equality, and humanity *only for some* and not for all, who seek to divide us against one another instead of affirming the worth and dignity of *all*.

One of the memorable lines at the end of *Les Mis*, as Jean Valjean is on his deathbed, is that, “to love another person is to see the face of God”: that much of

what we know about the sacred, the divine aspects of reality, we know through the experiencing and practicing love, kindness, and compassion. Can you hear the call to solidarity with all of humanity? Don't listen only to the voices of the *status quo*, who rest content amidst the injustices of the world. Do you hear them? Even when we are tempted to look away or move quickly past, do you hear them? Do you see them: the miserable ones of this earth, the dispossessed. Those who are longing to be free? ***“Do You Hear the People Sing?”***

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The author, educator, and activist Parker Palmer has written an important recent essay titled, “Will Fascism Trump Democracy?” He concluded with the final stanzas of a poem by W. H. Auden titled “September 1, 1939”: “That’s the date [less than 80 years ago] on which Germany invaded Poland, launching a war fueled by a fascism more virulent than most Americans imagined possible.” Auden’s poem was published the next year in 1940, but its words continue to resonate today. Reflecting on the unexpected rise of fascism in his day, Auden wrote:

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

Do you hear the people sing?