

Liberation begins with being there

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Liberation! That word in the title of my talk this evening opened up so many framing questions that it almost overwhelmed me as I thought through what to share with you. What could I possibly say in the context of something so grand? Big thoughts, big issues, big people.

Intimidatingly BIG!

Liberation - my mind was filled with the imagery of trumpets sounding, rallying calls, the breaking of chains and the manning of barricades. There I was, part of a daring overthrow of the corrupt and oppressive status quo. Later as I thought this through with rather less emotion, I recalled many places around the world where I've worked and lived, where oppression and exploitation of the vulnerable and the marginalized was and remains the norm – and how so many people have simply had to come to terms with that reality. Dictators are ruthless, patriarchy is powerful, the selfishness and elitism of the wealthy are commonplace, and many laws have nothing to do with justice. That used to be my American way at looking at the daily realities of “them” in so many of the developing countries in which I've worked; it's so distressing to see that now it is becoming a growing part of the daily reality right here. As our own nation's civility, decency, democracy, and solidarity unravels, as cherished norms and values go undefended by those who were entrusted to hold the places of power from which to defend them, there is very little for me to celebrate in my home town of Washington DC – other than having the most amazing hockey team ever. Go Capitals!

So other than perhaps liberating the Stanley Cup, where do I begin with “liberation”?

After all, “liberation” has a multitude of meanings, stereotypes, and heroic images out of history – one need not think any further than such historical figures as Simon Bolivar, and his trouncing of the Spaniards to secure independence for Bolivia, Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. Still...glorious historical political and military victories are probably not what resonates well with this audience, or with me.

Perhaps the title best belongs to the likes of Thomas Paine, one of the architects of the independent democratic structure of the United States and an early outspoken social justice advocate on issues of slavery, women’s equality, poverty alleviation, protection of animals, and internationalism. Or maybe the accolade should go to William Lloyd Garrison, founder of an influential Boston weekly newspaper called *The Liberator*, which was published from the 1830s through the Civil War. Garrison was a pioneering and forceful abolitionist and feminist, both highly controversial positions to take at that moment of history.

Other historical examples of great “liberators”, depending on how the term is applied, can include an extraordinarily long list. We’re likely to find Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, Jomo Kenyatta, the mother of American social work Jane Addams, children’s rights advocate Florence Kelley, the writer Upton Sinclair, women’s health advocate Margaret Sanger, Nelson Mandela, Eleanor Roosevelt, the Dalai Lama, or the leading Quaker pacifist, antiwar activist, socialist and union organizer A.J. Muste. And so on...it’s already becoming a long list, and that’s just an initial scratch of the surface.

So...no, we are not lacking positive exemplars, historical or contemporary (even if none of them were free from some human failings), or people who are noteworthy for their leadership and vision in so many struggles for freedom, self-determination, respect, social justice, dignity and equality. Many of them are Quakers or were inspired by Quakers. Through their work and their lives, they have moved all of us closer to social justice, to solidarity, to freedom and opportunity, to empathy, and to a form of liberation. Yet we know we have so far to go, and that these gains are fragile – humanity has yet to evolve morally or spiritually to overcome and be liberated from some of the less desirable contemporary attributes of human nature.

But is “liberation” really such a grandiose undertaking? Do we need to be people of the caliber of Bayard Rustin, Harvey Milk, Susan B. Anthony, or Malala Yousafzai? Do we even measure up to remarkable new leaders such as Emma González from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School? Does “liberation” belong to an almost unattainable human strata of accomplishment, charisma, sacrifice, eloquence, gumption, and laser-focus? Is being a liberator a vocation where only heroes need apply?

Looking at famous liberators may not help us that much. It all seems too remote. What do their lives and leadings have to do with me and my life, we ask? Yes, such people inspire us, and often motivate us to think new thoughts and take bold actions we would not otherwise have been led to. We admire them. Sometimes we become very active followers of such liberators, and that may not be a bad thing – so long as our followership is informed by an appropriate discernment that truly resonates with our own sense of identity, and our own values.

Wait a minute – did I just say “discernment”? “Identity”? “Values”? OK. Now we’re getting somewhere. Perhaps. But let me return to this in just a few minutes – first I want to ponder another very important component of liberation: what do we need to liberate ourselves from? Or, perhaps, liberate ourselves for? Are we even aware that we need to be liberated? Or that we have an important – perhaps even essential – role in the liberation of others?

Where are we? Or, even more fundamentally, who are we?

We have some stocktaking to do, of our own lives, our own direction, our own identity, our own dignity, and of our own spiritual journeys. We have to own our authenticity and be ourselves. Only then will we have a credible perspective from which to evaluate where the barriers are in our lives to freedom, authenticity, choice, opportunity, service, and love. When it comes to confronting oppression, bigotry, hatred, greed, sexism, manipulation, disrespect, callousness, stigmatization, or violence, you need to know where you stand. That means being there, being yourself, being open as yourself to where you are being led – as yourself. Liberation is not done by proxy; you need to be there.

The message from my own life is that this is where it all starts – with being there. And “there” is that place of opportunity, that place where you need to bring everything that you are to the struggle. Think of Alex Ovechkin making that goal on Saturday night, literally throwing his entire body into the air and into the melee to tip that puck into the goal. No holding back. Everything. All in.

Only...we need to know what we bring, what we have to throw into the struggle, to seize the opportunity, to achieve the liberation. We need to own ourselves, be ourselves, and know ourselves to be in that place. We need to be self-ish, with the hyphen. And we need to be there, where “self” matters most. That may mean opening ourselves up to vulnerability as we face some very challenging, and often very unexpected, questions.

Being there for me certainly wasn’t easy; being self-ish is challenging. We are shaped by so many experiences, messages, expectations, ideologies, roles, and demands from others. We are shaped by our relationships, our obligations, our love and our compassion – which doesn’t always extend to ourselves as much as we extend it to others. We have much unpacking to do to get to the bottom of all of this and discover that who “we” are, who I am, may have become lost or obscured along the way. There are many sharp edges; our selves need self-care to be ready to pursue liberation, including the liberation of ourselves.

I was lost to that self – to myself – for half a century. Yes, there were fleeting moment of being “me” – in fact, many of them – along the way. They were intuitive, almost dreamlike, mere fantasies – or so I thought. Still, it wasn’t until I reached the ripe old age of 57 that I found my way to “being there”. And in my case, “there” was and remains being alive, engaged, at peace, whole, and liberated. In 2008 I began my transition from Stephen to Chloe, and while it may seem to many that this was merely a change of appearance with a few more substantive financial, bodily, and behavioral adjustments, this was big. This is BIG. This is about being there – being here – being me. This is about being open to a spiritual journey that demands that I show up ready, together, alert, and in the right shoes.

I now wear those shoes. They just happen to be women's shoes, but I'm doing my best to tear apart any myths that women's shoes are by definition ill-suited for challenging journeys. Just watch me run. Here I am at 68, and my journey has never felt more empowered, more liberated, more grounded. I don't know the final destination...I just know enough to trust that the way will open, and that I am on a journey of liberation for me and, in some ways through me, for many others. When I get there, I will know what "there" is. But at least I already know, in ways once unimaginable to me, what being "me" means. Getting "there" starts with "being" me; it all depends on self-awareness, integrity, faith, duty, service, and discernment.

And love; best not to forget love!

It's a sobering realization at times. When the Obama Administration unexpectedly reached out to appoint me as one of the first three transgender political appointees in federal history, the appointment liberated the imaginations and dreams of many transgender people in highly transphobic developing countries around the world, who were suddenly liberated to imagine a world in which their contributions, their talents, their service, their authentic "being" would be valued, respected and honored. I received scores of "wow!" emails from every corner of this world, and each one spoke to me of a certain liberation of hope and being. Being an exemplar of hope was, and remains, a heavy moral burden to shoulder, but I'll give it my best shot.

The world however isn't exactly warm to the liberation of those who dare to cross the gender binary. For half a century, my gender-conditioning was so robustly masculine, so inflexible, so comprehensive, and so permeated with a plethora of highly gendered roles, responsibilities, relationships, sanctions, boundaries, and images of a certain kind of self – gentlemanly, caring, professional, religious, fatherly, strong, determined, brave, even fearless – that any notion of liberation was far removed from my consciousness. When it comes to gender as a key factor in our identities, we are all "processed". Our societies have had centuries to learn how best to condition people to be slotted in on either side of the gender binary, but certainly not in the middle. The possibility that gender was not a binary, or that people's sex could change to match their gender, was unthought and unthinkable. Even the notion that someone – me – whose body was once sexed as male, but whose core identity was and is female, was beyond comprehension

for many people. In reality, for a substantial majority of the world's population whose bodies and identities align comfortably together (people whom we label as "cisgender"), the phenomenon of being transgender remains incomprehensible or at least highly suspect. Our authenticity – our "being there" – is questioned from the very start, and often with an awesome vehemence and not a little fear.

Still, being authentic does involve understanding where I have come from, and how I was raised. I was fortunate to have been brought up by very caring parents, but I was thoroughly – and often lovingly – conditioned to be Stephen. In retrospect, the evidence that I was actually Chloe was everywhere – as it so often is in hindsight – but I wasn't sufficiently "being there" in my awareness to notice. Being Stephen was a sophisticated, highly polished, and ultimately empty act, but so many of the pieces that I brought to that act were genuine, valued, meaningful, and important. Today, when my body and my hormonal chemistry is so completely different, much of Stephen still remains in this woman called Chloe and is still a part of my "being there". Only now it is so different. Those parts of Stephen, which I hope in their authenticity are the best parts, are now liberated, empowered, and integrated in ways that would have been unimaginable before. And so many components from the manly Stephen years are now revealed to be fundamentally and cheerfully feminine at their core. Those parts now nest comfortably into my life, my wholeness, my being. Femininity is part of my "being there", and feminine sensibilities help me to make sense of my world and my place in it.

What's it like being Chloe, some people ask (and many others – I suspect – would like to ask)? It's an easy question to answer. I feel alive, and "here", in authentic ways that I only approached once before in my pre-Chloe life. Tragically, that one pre-Chloe moment of "being here" happened in 2007 when I finally decided that my path forward only allowed one choice in escaping the pain, dissonance and hollowness of being utterly unable to "be there/here" and offered only one chance at liberation. At that low point, I decided to take my own life. It humbles me now to think how much peace came into my deeply confounded and wounded life when I reached that decision, but fortunately God had other plans for me. I was called to a very different, utterly transformative sense of "being there" when I fulfilled a promise I had made to a friend to visit her trusted counselor. That counselor asked me the one question no one else had

ever asked me – and one which I lacked the consciousness and clarity of mind to ask myself. She listened to me intently in that one 40-minute appointment, and asked me simply: “Have you ever thought you might be a woman?”

That was – and will probably always be – the biggest single question of my life, and it was my calling to “being there”. It was my start to being liberated to be myself, wholly, and honestly. That question both saved my life and changed it, even if it was just the opening door to a long, expensive, painful, awkward, but completely wonderful gender transition.

So...I promised earlier to return to discernment, identity, and values. Despite the complexity of those topics, I will be brief.

Discernment, in a Quaker sense, depends not only on being personally reflective, contemplative, and introspective, but also on drawing upon the spiritual gifts of others. We can and must “be there” as a faith community, being present and available to each other and to the larger world. Discernment also leans heavily on wisdom, and wisdom is earned through diligence, determination, discipline, and hard work. Fortunately, we have each other to lend us strength and encouragement while on that path, as we are also called to assist others in their discernment. What we discern may often be unsettling, even if transformative. We need each other’s love and support to “be there” through this process of growth and personal integrity-building, but that’s only possible when we are authentically present and available to each other. It’s a high calling; we each need to “be there” in order to liberate each of us to find our own path forward. That path is our liberation, and our liberation may often be part of the liberation of many others too. We are in this together.

Which finally takes me to values, and to identity itself: our self; our wholeness, and where we stand. Values are the stepping stones to “being there”. Our task and our joy is in calling out and making explicit each of the most significant values that have shaped us over years and decades. In shining the light on these values, secular and spiritual, local and universal, we challenge ourselves to evaluate each. We liberate ourselves to decide which values we will cling to most tightly, and which to discard as irrelevant or even discordant to our sense of self. This

interrogation of values-made-explicit gradually helps each of us to draw our own unique map of self and world, in progressively more refined detail, despite the on-going edits and erasures.

And with a map, “being there” is so much easier. Liberation gives us the map, and liberation follows as we use the map in our respective journeys.