

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
17 May, 2009

Free to Be

How many of you can complete the title of this sermon? *Free to Be ... You and Me*. That's probably those of you born around 1970, and the hippie parents of that generation!

Marlo Thomas – *That Girl!* – cut an album (on vinyl!), conceived of a book, and started a revolution. She wrote, “I want this book to belong to you; and even more, I want you who read this book to belong to yourselves. We have made this book in the hope that it will start you a few steps, or a leap, in that direction. Those of you who are looking for Wonderland or Prince Charming or a sleeping or even sleepy princess will not find them here. The world we care about here is the most adventurous, the largest, the most wondrous of all...”¹ The world to which Marlo Thomas and a cast of writers, poets, visual artists, and musicians was giving voice – words and pictures and songs – was a world in which the women were strong and the men were pretty, and vice versa; a world in which “Sleeping Beauty can stay awake and look at her life with her eyes wide open, and the brave prince can relax and enjoy his life without continually having to prove his 'manhood;”² a world in which everyone was exactly who they were meant to be: peaceful, joyful, and free.

Early in the book, Shel Silverstein introduces us to a girly-girl – a “tender, sweet young thing” - who insists that life is always “ladies first.” All good until our imperious anti-hero, out on safari, encounters a pride of hungry tigers. “Ladies first,” she insists. The final illustration shows four very fat tigers, rubbing their full bellies.

It continues in this vein; you're getting the idea. GraceAnne Andreassi DeCandido, a mom, and lecturer in children's and young adult literature, in that order, gave *Free to Be ... You and Me* to her son, Keith, on his fifth birthday, in 1974.

1 Marlo Thomas et al, *Free to Be ... You and Me*, p. 9

2 Letty Cottin Pogrebin in *Free to Be...You and Me*, p. 12

“It burst into our consciousness like a fireworks chrysanthemum,” she writes, “startling and brilliant. It said things we were just beginning to articulate as parents. Boys can play with dolls. Girls can play baseball.... Housework [is just no fun], but ... less icky if everyone helps. Everyone should help. War is not healthy for children and other living things.”

“We as young parents,” she continues, “were looking for a new paradigm. We wanted stories where the princess rescued the prince, or the dragon, or herself. We wanted [stories about] 'William's Doll,' and mommies at work. We wanted the [allegedly] generic 'he' to be 'he or she' — we knew that children heard 'he' and thought 'boy,' no matter what grammarians said. We wanted our son to have stories where both parents cooked, like his; where both parents cared for him, like his; where aunts and friends made families, like his....

“Looking at that original edition is pretty [astounding]. Little boys and little girls are made of the same things – care and love; none of this sugar-and-spice or puppy-dog-tails stuff.... It may be surprising to you that these ideas were ... radical at the time.”

Here's radical: poet Elaine Laron's *No One Else* “actually insists” that no one can tell you how to feel. It begins:

Now, someone else can tell you how
 To multiply by three
 And someone else can tell you how
 To spell Schenectady
 And someone else can tell you how
 To ride a two-wheeled bike
 But no one else, no, no one else
 Can tell you what to like.

An engineer can tell you how
 To run a railroad train
 A map can tell you where to find
 The capital of Spain
 A book can tell you all the names
 Of every star above
 But no one else, no, no one else

Can tell you [whom] to love.³

Reviewing the newly-released thirty-fifth anniversary edition of *Free to Be ... You and Me*, GraceAnne Andreassi DeCandido concludes,

“I was a little surprised at how fresh the text remains.... Judith Viorst’s *The Southpaw*, a delicious exchange between Janet, who wants to pitch, and her 'former friend,' Richard, who is trying to keep girls off the baseball team, appeared on torn scraps of notebook paper in the first edition; now it’s in e-mail, but [it’s] just as funny.... In *Zachary’s Divorce*, [a story by Linda Sitea,] his mother says, 'It’s not your divorce Zachary, it’s Daddy’s and mine.'⁴ We expect, now, to hear inclusive pronouns and have shelves full of plucky princesses and gentle princes.... But ... it is a definite goodness to see that crying is a part of living, that baseball and cooking are not gender-specific activities, and that friendship between the sexes is not only possible but desirable.”⁵

Two more especially beautiful, fresh pieces: First, author Phil Ressner's *Dudley Pippin and the Principal*. Dudley has been wrongly accused of disrupting his classroom, and is compelled to stay after school. He's very angry. On the way home, he runs into the principal.

“Did you do it?’ [the principal] asks.

Dudley shook his head.

“I knew you didn't do it,' the principal said. 'Your teacher must have made a mistake. It wasn't fair...'

“Dudley nodded.

“I bet you'd like to cry,' the principal said.

“No,' Dudley said, and began to cry.... He cried a long time.

“That's fine,' the principal said when Dudley was through.

3 Elaine Laron in *Free to Be ... You and Me*, p. 112

4 Linda Sitea in *Free to Be ... You and Me*, p. 127

5 GraceAnne Andreassi DeCandido, “A Second Look: Free to Be ... You and Me,” *The Horn Book Magazine*, January/February, 2009

“I'm sorry,' Dudley said.

“What for?' the principal [asked]. 'You did that very well.'

“But only sissies cry,' Dudley said.

“A sissy,' the principal said, 'is somebody who *doesn't* cry because he's afraid people will call him a sissy if he *does*....’”

“Then he took a little blue flute out of his pocket. 'Say,' he said, 'just listen to this nice tune I learned yesterday. It's lovely.'

“And he began to play, and the music was sad and joyous and it filled the quiet street and went out over the darkling trees and the whole world.”⁶

Imagine, if you weren't, being raised on that.

Here's one last piece – and these are just a small sampling – poet Carol Hall's *It's All Right To Cry*. This one was originally sung by Roosevelt Grier, who was a professional football player and needlepoint crafter; he's now a minister.

It's all right to cry
Crying gets the sad out of you.
It's all right to cry
It might make you feel better.

Raindrops from your eyes
Washing all the mad out of you.
Raindrops from your eyes
It might make you feel better.

It's all right to feel things
Though the feelings may be strange.
Feelings are such real things
And they change and change
And change....

6 Phil Ressner in *Free to Be ... You and Me*, p. 88

It's all right to know
 Feelings come and go.
 and it's all right to cry
 It might make you feel better.⁷
 Imagine, if you weren't, being raised on *that*.

*

Today is not only the glorious fifth anniversary of equal marriage in Massachusetts; it is also The International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, also known as IDAHO. IDAHO's appeal to the United Nations and the World Health Organization begins, "Every day, people who live at variance [with] expected gender norms face violence, abuse, rape, torture, and hate crime[s] all over the world, in their home[s] as well as in the public arena.... The basic rights of trans people are being ignored or denied in all nations, be it out of ignorance, prejudice, fear, or hate.... Overwhelmingly ... trans people ... face daily discrimination, which results in social exclusion, poverty, poor health care, and [few] prospects of appropriate employment."⁸

Here's what strikes me about these words. Try substituting "women" for "trans people," from the early days of *Free to Be ... You and Me*: Every day, women who live at variance with expected gender norms face violence, abuse, rape, torture, and hate crimes all over the world, in their homes as well as in the public arena.

Go further back in time, and try this: Every day, African Americans who live at variance with expected racial norms face violence, abuse, rape, torture, and hate crimes all over the world.

Now this: Every day, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender, and queer people who live at variance with expected gender norms face violence, abuse, rape, torture, and hate crimes all over the world, in their homes as well as in the public arena.

It's high time for IDAHO, time for this International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, time for the next generation of *Free to Be ... You and Me*.

⁷ Carol Hall in *Free to Be ... You and Me*, p. 90

⁸ "Reject Transphobia, Respect Gender Identity: An Appeal to the United Nations, the World Health Organisation [sic], and the States of the World" see International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission at iglhrc.org/cgi-bin/iowa/article/takeaction/partners/867.html

Still fresh, poet Dan Greenberg writes,

Don't dress your cat in an apron
 Just 'cause he's learning to bake
 Don't put your horse in a nightgown
 Just 'cause he can't stay awake.
 Don't dress your snake in a muu-muu
 Just 'cause he's off on a cruise.
 Don't dress your whale in galoshes
 If she really prefers overshoes.

A person should wear what he wants to
 And not just what other folks say.
 A person should do what she likes to –
 A person's a person that way.⁹

My spiritual companions, on this anniversary of a barrier-shattering milestone in civil rights history, let us join with Unitarian Universalists everywhere in rededicating ourselves to the covenant of the first principle of Unitarian Universalism: to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every being. “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”¹⁰ May we be strung on the bow of that moral arc; let us affirm that every being is free to be, and may our hearts and minds and hands be arrows of love, service, justice, and peace.

⁹ Dan Greenberg in *Free to Be ... You and Me*, p. 47

¹⁰ Rev. Theodore Parker