

## Journey to Justice

Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer, July 4, 2021

I'm tired of preaching this sermon. July 4<sup>th</sup> is not a holiday for people of color to celebrate independence in this country. It is definitely an excuse for barbecues and a day off...all of which are welcome, but for many of us, it is nothing more. I cannot celebrate the independence of one people at the intentional expense of another, particularly when the people on the losing side of that equation were my ancestors. American "independence" codified and nationalized African slavery and Native erasure and genocide. Independence from Britain gave a centralizing energy to the original sins of the United States and defined the identity of not just who the stakeholders and beneficiaries of this experiment were, but who was even human; we are still battling against this. The rabid and racialized "nationalism" of today sits on the foundations of a lop-sided concept of "independence." I'm tired of preaching this sermon.

So, I choose to reframe July 4 not as independence day but as "resilience day." I'm mourned out. And like many of us, I'm hungry for hope. Many of us people of color are yearning for ways to feel affirmed and forward thinking and hopeful in being as opposed to just outright depressed. Putting "July 4" in the context of resilience may be one way that this can be accomplished.

But we have to start by asking ourselves when we consider something that seems as innocuous as an "Independence Day":

- Independence from what?
- Independence for whom?

It would be useful at this moment to remind you that although I was born in New York City, I grew up in Framingham. One of the many landmarks from my childhood is Loring Arena...the skating rink near Farm Pond and close to the Hopkinton border. Today, I think less about the skating that happens there and more about the name Loring. The arena is named for Edward F. Loring, a prominent hockey coach in Framingham in the 1950s. Although I don't know that there is a direct relation, the name Loring puts me in mind of the fact that it was Judge Edward G. Loring in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who sent escaped slaves Thomas Sims and Anthony Burns back into slavery from Boston in accordance with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Judge Loring's actions precipitated William Lloyd Garrison's famous anti-slavery address where he burned a copy of the U.S. Constitution on July 4, 1854. To bring the whole thing full circle, that speech was given at Harmony Grove, in Framingham, on the banks of Farm Pond not far from where Loring Arena stands today.

Though even Garrison's route to an abolitionist stance was convoluted, his words and actions at Harmony Grove on July 4 still inspire me to reflection and resilience today.

Here are some excerpts from his speech followed by a description of his subsequent actions:

*Alas! Our greed is insatiable, our rapacity boundless, our disregard of justice profligate to the last degree. We have degenerated in regard to our reverence for the higher law of God, for what is morally obligatory, for the cause of liberty. Theoretically, the government is of the people, and for their good, but in fact, it is in the hands of party demagogues, who cajole and flatter, entreat and threaten, lie and deceive and who are themselves the tools and vassals of the Slave Power, ready to do its bidding, no matter what the crime or the peril may be.*

*Constitutional restraints are as cobwebs; the representatives are the betrayers of the people; the most high-handed acts of usurpation are submitted to with slavish servility; the revenues of the government are turned against popular liberty, and wielded to one end – the security of slave property and the acquisition of slave territory. The condition required of every man holding office under the government is a ready acquiescence in whatever the Slave Power may dictate.*

*The boldest and most astounding plans are openly avowed for the unlimited annexation of foreign territory for slaveholding purposes. Cuba, Hayti, Mexico, South America, Brazil, the Sandwich Islands, etc. etc. all are designed for ultimate absorption by the Slave Power, which scorns the moral sentiment of the world, and defies the retribution of Heaven.*

*Such is our condition, such are our prospects, as a people, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1854!*

Then Garrison proceeded to burn a copy of the Fugitive Slave Law...to wild applause

Then Garrison proceeded to burn a copy of the decision by Edward G. Loring regarding Sims and Burns “return” ...to more applause.

Then (now quoting the July 7 issue of Garrison’s paper the Liberator)...

*“Then holding up the U.S. Constitution, he branded it as the source and parent of all the other atrocities, - a covenant with death, and an agreement with hell,’ – and consumed it to ashes on the spot, exclaiming, ‘so perish all compromises with tyranny!’ And let all the people say, Amen!’ A tremendous shout of ‘Amen!’ went up to heaven in ratification of the deed, mingled with a few hisses and wrathful exclamations from some who were evidently in a rowdyish state of mind, but who were at once cowed by the popular feeling.*

*Charles L. Remond, in an eloquent outburst of feeling, defended Mr. Garrison’s act, in burning the United States Constitution, declaring that he did so in the name of three million slaves, with whom he was identified by complexion. Mr. R. was loudly and almost unanimously applauded.*

Resilience. And let me be clear, I am not talking about *resistance*. They are very different. Resistance implies that one has a position of value to hold on to to begin with. I don’t know that resistance makes total sense in the context of being dehumanized and erased. Resilience however is something accessible to and worth encouraging within everyone regardless of how they are regarded by society or how they have been taught to regard themselves. Resilience

can offer a way to hold the paradox of our lived experience today. Resilience also leaves room for joy and invites recognition of the power of generative energies. Resilience moves toward something glorious.

Indeed, resilience is not just about the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> or even 20<sup>th</sup> centuries...

Resilience is absorbing the discovery of mass graves at “Indian schools” in Canada TODAY knowing there will be similar discoveries here in the United States and continuing to rise, thrive, protect, laugh, honor and cherish Native cultures.

Resilience is receiving the trauma of war, whether that is air strikes in the Middle East or racialized police violence in the suburban streets of the United States, but equally trusting and receiving the love and embrace of communities that cherish humanity as sacred.

Resilience is making sure that our holidays are not just orgies of capitalist expression and western leisure privilege. That instead they are true “holy-days” inclusive of reverence and reflection for the dear price paid for any kind of independence.

The fact of the United States gaining independence from Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century deserves to be noted. But it is a small part of the independence experienced by its progeny. With that independence in 1776 came the greater responsibility of both understanding and teaching future generations, what independence is and growing into the full potential of the meaning of that word. We haven’t figured it out yet and we haven’t lived up to it as a country.

Independence...universal independence...will mean we have a societal system in place that has the capacity to hold all of this...past, present and future.

And so, I invite you to celebrate July 4 as Resilience Day. Resilience like when my ancestors began proving over and over again that they would thrive, regardless of the oppression. Resilience when the native people of this land were not defeated but were instead called into the most horrific act of martyrdom and divine prophecy, because Native wholeness continues to be all of our conscience and all of our potential. Resilience when European ancestors and those who gained benefit from the colonial project, are invited into a relationship with the totality of their histories and the dual legacy of sheer brilliance and pure barbarism.

Let July 4 be Resilience Day...because our work is not done. Independence has not yet been achieved. To paraphrase Fannie Lou Hamer, we are not yet free until all of us are free. May it be so.