

Quaker Message 11/5/23

Pearley Bee

When I was a small white boy of three growing up in the West Texas oil town of Midland a special bond of love and affection rose up between me and an African American woman named Pearley Bee. It was Pearley Bee who got me up and out of bed in the morning, bathed me, dressed me, held me in her strong and comforting arms, and took me outside and watched over me when I played. It was she who picked me up when I fell down or cried during these years of my early childhood. My French mother, who was in fragile health, spent her mornings behind closed doors praying. Her country, France, was under German occupation, her brother Alexandre a prisoner of war in a German prisoner of war camp, and so she spent her mornings behind closed doors praying for her country, her elderly father, her brother, her family, her friends, and for me.

When I was three years old I fell seriously ill, the doctor warning my mother that I might well not make it. My grandmother came down from Milwaukee to be with my mother and to help care for me. And so it was that when I cried desperately for motherly arms to hold and comfort me, the motherly arms I cried for were those of Pearley Bee, and not those of my biological mother nor my grandmother. Speaking of this in later years my mother would describe how embarrassed she had felt when, in the presence of my grandmother, I had done so.

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato once wrote: "Every heart whispers a song, incomplete until answered by another heart." The heart of the three year child I then was sang for the warm and motherly arms of Pearley Bee, and PearleyBee's heart, singing back, picked me up. Looking back on these early years of my Texas childhood, two things would stay with me for the rest of my life --, the love and affection that had awakened in my childish heart for Pearley Bee, and the breach that

had opened between my mother and myself that would only deepen over the course of her life as I made life choices she could not agree with or accept.

When I was twelve years my Dad, who was an exploration geologist, found work prospecting for oil in Venezuela. Although I read voraciously and could talk intelligently about a broad range of subjects, I had never bothered to work in school, and so my grades suffered accordingly. My parents, who worried about my lousy grades, accordingly sent me to live with a wealthy Southern planter married to a cousin of my father's so that I could go to the highly rated school attended by his children. Uncle Randolph, as I called him, was a descendant of the aristocratic Randolph dynasty of Virginia. He and his family lived in a porticoed mansion on a 99 acre estate on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. One of Robert E. Lee's sons had been Uncle Randolph's godfather. Lee's name, and the baptismal goblet Lee had given Uncle Randolph, was enshrined in that house like the Holy Grail,

Uncle Randolph soon took a strong dislike to me, and while he did not abuse me sexually or physically, he certainly did so mentally, constantly belittling me in front of his wife and children. For good measure, he grounded me after school to the yard surrounding his mansion while his children had the complete run of his 99 acre estate. The only person in the mansion that I actually liked and respected was Mary, my Uncle's African American cook. One day I cut my foot badly on an oyster shell and began to bleed profusely. Since I neither liked nor respected my uncle and felt uncomfortable with my aunt, the only person in the mansion I trusted to help me with my bleeding foot was Mary. While Mary bandaged me we chatted pleasantly. Since I was grounded to my uncle's estate and longed to get away from it I suddenly had a bright idea. "Mary," I cried out, "why don't you take me to the movies." Mary replied: "I can't, honey. I'm Colored. They don't allow colored in the movies." "Mary," I cried out in genuine distress, "that's not fair." "I don't think it's fair either, honey" she replied. "Mary," I cried out, "you shouldn't let them do that to you." "There's nothing I can do about it, honey" she said. "That's just the way it is." As I pondered this astounding news I suddenly cried out: "I've got an idea, Mary. I'll take you to the movies. The men down at the movie house will let you in if I tell them too, particularly since I'll be going

inside with you.” “It just wouldn’t work, honey” Mary replied sadly. I was disappointed with her, and thought she lacked nerve.

Every day after that, on returning from school, I always went to the kitchen to spend 10 to 15 minutes chatting with my friend Mary. My doing so got on my uncle’s nerves, and he sent my aunt to straighten me out.

“Tony,” she said. “You’ve got to stop spending time in the kitchen with Mary. Someone might see you there, and it would reflect badly on the family.” Since my uncle and aunt had very few friends, and even fewer visitors, none of whom had ever made the journey to the kitchen to pay their respects to Mary, this statement did not make a lot of sense. Since I had grown very fond of Mary, and was not about to betray my friendship with her, I kept right on seeing her as often as I had before.

Uncle Randolph soon took action to stop these visits. He sent me to a child psychologist for an evaluation and reported to my mother that I was emotionally disturbed, and that it was for this reason that I was spending so much time in the kitchen with Mary. He could no longer keep me in his home, he added, telling my parents to send the air-fare back to Venezuela so that he could fly me home as soon as he got the money. My panicked mother flew up from South America, seized me out of my uncle’s home, and went to see the child psychologist, who gave her a copy of her actual report. In it the psychologist had said that I was a well adjusted, normal, and perfectly healthy 12 year old. Uncle Randolph, in a word, had falsified the report to get rid of me. Uncle Randolph then went on the offensive turning my German-American family against my mother, reporting her to be a hysterical French woman who had over-reacted to the situation, and that it was her bad influence that had been the real cause of my wayward ways with “colored” people. And while my deeply hurt mother did not deny that Uncle Randolph had behaved despicably she did blame me, while a guest in his house, for violating the most fundamental tenet of the Old South, the one that separated white people from Black.

“You **were** such a good little boy,” my mother would say to me in the aftermath of the debacle with Uncle Randolph. “How did the pure gold turn into vile lead?” She would follow that question with the following one “How do you show love?” the correct

answer being: “With deeds, not words” – my deeds in this case not justifying words of love. “Where did I go wrong with you?” was a refrain she would repeat from then on for the rest of her life as I made life-choices she and my father could not agree with, adding the conscience-stricken words: “I’ve been a bad mother.”

In Uncle Randolph’s world the template defining white supremacy in America had been laid nearly a century before by the Justices of the United States Supreme Court in their 1857 Dred Scott decision. While all of the signers of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 had declared it to be self-evident that all men are created equal, the Dred Scott Court Justices, a majority of whom were descended from slave owning dynasties, ruled it to be self-evident that black people were so inferior to whites that they had no rights that any white person was bound to respect, adding that they could be sold for their own benefit, thus freeing whites from all legal and moral responsibility in their treatment of dark skinned people. There were now in effect two Declarations of Independence, one for those who found it self-evident that the Creator had endowed all men with equal rights, and the other for those who found the opposite to be self-evident, namely that Black people had no rights of any kind that any white person was bound to respect. When an obscure Illinois lawyer named Abraham Lincoln read the words of the Dred Scott decision, as he later said, it roused him from his moral slumber, and he decided to do something about it. He ran for the U.S. Senate in 1858, and for President in 1860. Three years later, at Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln set forth in words the world would never forget the authentically timeless truths of the Declaration of Independence, a nation dedicated to the universal principles of equality, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to which the Founding Fathers had pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

I would never have been able, as an isolated white youth in the Old South, to make good on my promise to take Mary to the movies. Ten years later though, at the March on Washington, the ground had shifted dramatically as I and a quarter of a million other Americans listened to Martin Luther King deliver his “I have a dream speech.” Quite suddenly we were no longer 250,000 isolated individuals or groups looking for ways to do the right thing. We had become a vast national movement

numbering in the millions. It was no longer a question of what isolated individuals could do, but rather what all of us working together could accomplish. We now had the power to change the face of America, and so we did.

Today, 60 years after the March on Washington, America finds itself once again split along lines of racial, social, religious, economic, and political division. Two thousand years ago the Roman philosopher Seneca wrote the following epitaph for the Roman Empire. "More cruel than war," writes

Seneca, "vice has fallen upon Rome, and avenges a defeated universe." And as Seneca prophesied Rome did indeed fall, as all empires are necessarily fated to do.

In today's world has not vice, in the form of cruelty, greed, deceit, white supremacy, global corporate profiteering, and environmental devastation, descended not only upon the United States, but upon all the nations of the earth. Are not we, the ordinary children of our desperately overburdened planet, its seriously endangered universe? Do we really believe that our nation and other similarly powerful nations can become and remain great by building their dreams of greatness on foundations of sand? And if not, what can we, as Quakers, along with good-hearted people of every faith and religion, do in these troubled times? Is it not by keeping on keeping on as we always have, courageously living up to the promise of our Quaker values, building bridges of justice, compassion, peace, and love across the barriers of separation that divide us. The Living Spirit of the Universe is Good Hearted, and thus it is that Good Hearted people are everywhere of one religion. As Jesus teaches, over the passage of evolutionary time it is not the predators who ravage and destroy the earth who inherit it, but the Good, the Kind, and the Gentle Hearted who restore and redeem it.