

Which Train Are We On?

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Text – *A Litany for Survival*, by Audre Lorde

A week ago Saturday morning, I crossed the Memorial Bridge by car towards Virginia, and hundreds of people were walking the opposite way to the D.C. Mall. I did not see any faces that were not white. Most were dressed in red, white, and blue--like a 4th of July flashback--and they carried a lot of signs. I wondered what was going on, until I saw the T-shirts that read “Take Back America” and “Restore Honor.”

At the same moment, I was tuned in to KPFW, where mostly African-American listeners were being asked to get on a train, and to join a different march. The DJs kept saying, “Get on board, and let it ride!” Callers were naming ancestors and elders they would bring along in spirit. The names rang out with much emotion, some dating back to slavery, or the time of segregation, some currently their parents and grandparents. I was traveling west over the Memorial Bridge, invited onto a train that honored one kind of history. Thousands were traveling east in the opposite direction, riding a very different train, naming a different history.

They were headed to Glenn Beck’s march at the Lincoln Memorial, because he said, “I believe we’re approaching a last call, [so] all aboard.” These folks were proclaiming patriotism, and answering a plea to “get behind the shield of God.” They were expressing “firm reliance on divine providence” from the Declaration of Independence. They were asserting “Divine Destiny” and lining up 200 ministers to be part of a “Black Robed Regiment,” modeled on those clergy who stirred up the militias for the American Revolution.

As I drove to Alexandria and back, I kept listening to the radio. People were gathering at Dunbar High School, to ride this freedom train to the Mall, in the counter-march. I was

actually shaken by the sight of so many pledging to “Take Back America,” fearful of the rhetoric and angry about that message. I went home and changed clothes. I got my backpack, put on my walking shoes, and got on board. I knew I wanted to be with allies that afternoon!

It took awhile to catch up—over 10,000 people were making their way slowly down from Dunbar, across Constitution Ave to the site of the Martin Luther King Memorial. It was very hot, and the march was about 4 miles long. As was most publicized, there were members of the National Action Network with Rev. Al Sharpton--and *a/so* the National Council of La Raza, labor unions such as SEIU 32B-J and LI-UNA, LGBTQ activists from the Human Rights Campaign and the Task Force, civil rights veterans, lots of students of all colors. Senior and disabled citizens were walking with canes and rolling in wheelchairs. Kids ran along with their hand-made signs. DC Vote placards were everywhere. When we finally gathered at the MLK memorial site, just fencing and grass at this point, I remember the feeling of unity: we were diverse, we were in solidarity with each other, and we had marched together with a different vision for our country.

It’s wise to know that the first train of red-white and blue exists and is building steam, to understand what they want, and how they plan to get there. That train is offering a whole lot of people what Washington Post columnist Ruth Marcus called “the church of Glenn Beck.” As she says, this “new form of fusion politics, [is] melding the anti-government, anti-spending, anti-tax fervor of the Tea Party with the faith-based agenda of the religious right.” Even though it’s led by a Mormon, which is causing some cognitive dissonance! I don’t think our job is to knock them off their track, or even engage in endless point/counter-point about very different futures. Our best way forward is to get our progressive train so full that we need to add on car after car after car. As Mother Jones told us--that fiery labor organizer who lived to be 100--don’t mourn, organize.

Mr. Beck has also been saying he doesn’t like community organizers, that people should run from churches who preach about social justice, merely a front for socialism

and Marxism. But let's explore our own definitions for a moment! We envision building a world that is more messy than homogenous, more earthly than divine, more involved in the rough-and-tumble of building power than in piety for the sake of the individual alone. We are willing to use our hands in this world for action, for the sake of the whole train, for all the passengers.

When I was a community organizer in New York City, my mentor in the IAF, Mike Gecan, told a story about a group of citizens who went to speak about an affordable housing issue at the Land Use Commission. This Commission was notorious for holding very long hearings, hours of monotony as you waited your turn with picnic baskets, newspapers, novels or knitting. There was a little gate that led up to the dais, with a sign that said "do not enter." Yet people in suits kept going through the gate, whispering in the ears of the staffers and members up on the platform, and back again to the waiting crowd. As organizer with this group, Mike watched for a while, and then asked a veteran leader, an intrepid priest in the tough South Bronx, to go up and just ask when their issue was on the agenda. The priest said no, he couldn't do that because the door said, "do not enter." So Mike went through the gate, and found out they were not even on the list for that day. Go home, the staffer told him, and you are on at 11:00 tomorrow morning. Mike went and told the group of church leaders, and they did just that, saving hours of time. All of organizing, my mentor used to say, is to get folks to stand up, and walk through the gate that says "do not enter." Organizing is simply the act of asking for a place at the table, demanding a voice in the debate, taking your seat on the train, no matter how much those with power don't wish to yield.

On our train, we don't need to all identify the same way, believe in the same divine destiny, or stand "behind the shield of God," as Mr. Beck put it. Which train are we on? Not the train of would-be warriors who gather to restore honor and keep homogeneity alive. Our train makes space for those who were never meant to survive. In her powerful poem, Audre Lorde reminds us of those who cannot indulge the passing dreams of choice. Those of us who stand upon the constant edges of decision, crucial and alone. As she says, we seek a "now" that could breed a different future, like "bread in our

children's mouths." We want their dreams not to reflect the death of ours, but to be bold and audacious, riding all the way to the highest challenges of leadership, to the White House and everywhere else.

Our hope, as religious and ethical progressives is to create a promised land in the here and now of the beloved community. If this "liberation theology" is political, so be it. I see it as no "perversion of the gospel," as we heard this week. Rather, if we are looking to the essential sayings of Jesus for inspiration, it is the very heart of the good news. For in the Christian New Testament, Jesus was nothing if not radically inclusive. His message aimed at those in power, was meant to exhort and inspire those at the margins. He unsettled the status quo, and challenged those who valued wealth and control above all.

When we say that our progressive train invites all to board, we draw on many religious traditions and faith practices to proclaim oneness, not a single Christian truth. We are one not because of a particular creed, or collective manifest destiny, but because we are already joined in the web of creation—wounded, yet resilient, struggling, yet alive. Never meant to survive. The more things change, the more they stay the same, no? Liberation theology is unpopular in certain quarters today because it would continue to upset the way things have been. It is the harbinger of the way things are becoming--as this nation changes, as the faces in our country look more diverse, multi-racial, multi-cultural.

At this congregation, we know which train we are on: one that celebrates and cultivates diverse, spirit-growing, justice-seeking community. We choose to get on board at a church that welcomes all souls. I'm glad we are *here* on this Labor Day weekend that ushers in a new church year. May we ride strong, and gather many others for the journey. Amen.