

## **Oracles of Concord**

**Rev. Gary Kowalski**

**April 19, 2020**

On this day, April 19, in 1775, the American Revolution began. The night before 800 British regulars garrisoned in Boston began to march on the town of Concord, Massachusetts. A few months earlier, the Provincial Congress, formed when the colonist's elected assembly had been disbanded by the British governor, had gathered in the meetinghouse of the village First Parish and formed committees of Minutemen to begin preparations for the common defense. They decided to store munitions in Concord, far enough away from Boston for secrecy but close enough for convenience, and it was to seize this storehouse of weaponry that the English general had set his troops in motion.

The redcoats would have been surprised to learn that William Dawes and Paul Revere were riding ahead of them to alert the local militias. In Lexington, Revere stopped at the house where John Adams and John Hancock were sleeping that night and sent the two patriots scurrying through the woods to safety.

By 2:00 am that morning, about a hundred and thirty men had gathered on the Lexington green, under the command of Captain John Parker, a forty-five year old veteran of the French and Indian War. How the fighting erupted is unclear. Later, each side would claim the other had fired the first shot. However it started, the Americans were sorely outgunned and outnumbered. When the British gave their victory salute half an hour later and resumed their march, eight Americans were dead, most shot in the back.

The first to sound the alarm in nearby Concord was the minister, William Emerson, ringing the church bells. He was soon joined by neighbors from outlying farms. When the British entered the town, the Americans withdrew to a hill overlooking the old North Bridge. The redcoats began to ransack the town in search of guns. When they set fire to a Liberty Pole and a plume of smoke began to rise above the rooftops, the Minutemen lost their patience, seeing their own homes might be burned. As the Americans advanced, the British soldiers crowded at the end of the bridge, firing warning shots and then a direct volley into the colonist's ranks. The Minutemen returned fire, and the British--the best trained army in the world--broke and ran.

A few days later, Emerson wrote in his journal, "This month remarkable for the greatest events taking place in the present age." The men who were there were not only the founders of our country, but also the forebears of our faith. John Adams and John Hancock were both early Unitarians. A bell forged by Paul Revere hung in the steeple of the Unitarian congregation I served in Burlington, Vermont, and of course it was the Unitarian poet of a later generation, Longfellow, who made Revere's midnight ride a standard recitation for school children everywhere. Theodore Parker, the great nineteenth century abolitionist minister who helped fund John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry was the grandson of Captain John Parker of the Lexington regiment. The first Parish in Concord where the Provincial Congress and then Continental Congress convened was then and remains a Unitarian church today, and William Emerson, who shouted to his countrymen, "if we die, let us die here," was the grandfather of Ralph Waldo, whose "Concord Hymn" we heard as the opening words for this morning's service, a poem commissioned for the 50th anniversary of that historic battle and inscribed on a votive stone you pass today as you walk onto the wooden bridge where it all started.

By the rude bridge that arched the floor,  
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled  
Here the embattled farmers stood  
And fired the shot heard round the world.

It started there, yes, but thankfully didn't end there. Concord was just a skirmish, an opening salvo. There were so many other titanic battles to follow: not just for independence, but to end human slavery, to secure the rights of women, to abolish child labor, to vanquish Jim Crow. Martyrs died in all these struggles. And activists are still risking their lives, their fortunes, their sacred honor to finish the revolution that started on April 19, to bring us closer to that beloved community of equality and justice and freedom.

Which brings us to the present. For as Thomas Paine observed, "panics, in some cases, have their uses; they produce as much good as hurt. Their duration is always short; the mind soon grows through them, and acquires a firmer habit than before." Perhaps our own minds will be enlarged from this fight against a common enemy. Perhaps the disruption in our daily routines will help us reconsider our priorities, of what things matter and which people truly deserve our time and attention. Perhaps as our bodies gradually learn to heal and fend off this virus, our body politic may also find some healing. For one of the few things that truly changes people, I've found, is grief. For good or ill, for better or worse, suffering changes people.

In cultures around the world, mythologist Joseph Campbell observed, it is the undergoing of an ordeal that produces a change in identity, the passage from one stage of being to the next--and the ordeal involves receiving a wound, like Jacob wrestling with the angel. So, for example, birth is an ordeal for both mother and child. Coming of age, the bridge from childhood to maturity, is an ordeal, for the girl the beginning of

menstruation, for the boy circumcision or other male rites of initiation. And what holds true of the individual applies to society. In collective terms, our revolution was an ordeal that forged a new identity for our nation: afterwards, we were no longer subjects of a king but citizens of a republic. The Civil War was an ordeal: 600,000 dead not just to cleanse the stain of slavery, but also to forge a new consciousness where people no longer thought of themselves primarily as Virginians, or New Yorkers, but as Americans, belonging to the United States. Selma, I think, was another ordeal that seared the conscience of North and South alike and at great sacrifice changed our country for the better. And only time can tell, but covid-19 may be another ordeal. Before the end of this pandemic many will have grieved loved ones lost to a microbe that makes no partisan distinctions, that infects red and blue states alike, conservatives as well as liberals. Many will have come to understand that we are all vulnerable, all mortal, and all interdependent on the social fabric of postal workers and grocery clerks and school teachers, as well as scientists and doctors and first responders who are fighting in the trenches of this epidemic. And out of that shared suffering may come a new sense of compassion for one another.

Maybe the lock-down will make a difference in Concord, too. Had you visited the town two months ago, you would have found an upscale suburb full of chic restaurants and smart boutiques, its citizens busy getting and spending, more engaged with their smartphones than with their neighbors, so that the author of *Walden* who once lived there might be moved more than ever to say that “our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things.” The Old Manse or parsonage where Concord’s minister stood at his desk to write his two hour sermons, knowing his homily wasn’t long enough until his feet started to hurt, is a museum now, closed temporarily by the coronavirus, but with a gift shop attached where until recently for two dollars you might have bought a copy of the Declaration of

Independence and the Bill of Rights. What you couldn't buy, of course, is the spirit behind them.

The goal of true freedom--a culture of democracy where each person has a sense of dignity and worth, a commonwealth of independent thinkers and readers, a nation that cares more for its principles than its pocketbook, an enlightened citizenry concerned for the general welfare, working in concert to form a more perfect union--these things sometimes seems farther away than ever. Defeating the British, it turned out, was easy compared to the task of governing ourselves wisely and well. But it was the Unitarians of Concord who showed us where every revolution has to start -- from inside ourselves.