

Free and Clear?

January 14, 2021

Rev. Dave Dunn

UU Metro Atlanta North

Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said, “The misconception which has haunted philosophic literature:... (DD: and how we live our lives)... “throughout the centuries is the notion of ‘independent existence.’ There is no such mode of existence; every entity is to be understood in terms of the way it is interwoven with the rest of the universe (Alfred North Whitehead).”

More than anything, what we have, and who we are, are to be understood in terms of everything else. We might have free will yet that free will is always exercised in a dependent, rather than independent, context.

You were born into a certain situation....a certain family, in a certain town, in a certain place, in a certain country, etc. You went to certain schools. You were influenced by certain people, teachers, experiences, places, etc. Or maybe you had none of those things. Maybe, at the other end of the situational spectrum you were born into a completely different context...but whatever the situation, it was a context that was, itself, related to the rest of the universe.

Many of former Georgia Senator Kelly Loeffler’s campaign ads were peppered with the words “America is built upon freedom.” Not to pick on her; she’s merely the last politician, in a long line of politicians independent of party, who has made “freedom” the backbone of campaign ads. In doing so, she was merely tapping into the hero stories of the self-made man/woman; a version of the American dream immersed in the idea that through hard work alone, one can pick themselves up by their bootstraps and achieve anything, etc.

America is built upon freedom? I think the indigenous people who lived here, and the African slaves who were brought here might have something to say about that. Much of the American wealth in the old south was dependent upon slave labor.

We had a civil war to reckon with our myth of “freedom” and upon whose freedom, or specifically a lack of it, America was built. The Union won the war. Slavery ended with the 13th amendment; citizenship and equal protection came with the 14th amendment. Right to vote, for most, came with the 15th. Yet Reconstruction fell apart after the election of 1876 and laws that protected African-American’s rights to vote, hold office, serve on juries, receive equal protection were no longer enforced and the American South fell into a state of Jim Crow terror, mass incarceration and legalized slavery. And the terrors inflicted upon people of color were not merely confined to the South.

MLK led the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s and sought to put an end to Jim Crow and re-establish voting and workers rights. Yet we’ve all benefited from the civil rights

movement. It has resulted in civil rights, voter and worker protections for us all. The “freedoms” we sometimes take for granted are dependent upon what others have bequeathed to us.

Not to say that these freedoms are infringed upon. Attempts are always made to push back against freedoms.

My mother-in-law was a direct beneficiary of gains of the Civil Rights Movement. As an African-American woman, mother of three daughters, she earned a bachelor's degree in education at Univ of Indiana. As an elementary educator in Gary, Indiana, she once had Michael Jackson as a pupil. She later earned a PhD in education at the Univ of Memphis. She then taught in the education department at the Univ of Pittsburgh. In the 1980s she changed careers and began an executive career in the banking industry, rising through the ranks and eventually became a VP and Regional Manager of a large bank in Pittsburgh. She then became the first female President of a minority-managed bank in Pennsylvania before again changing careers becoming an executive at the Duquesne Light Company (analogous to Georgia Power). She ultimately became their General Manager of Public Affairs. She served on the boards of the biggest, most impactful, organizations in Pittsburgh: UPMC, Hospitals, Port Authority Transit (analogous to MARTA), Community Development Corporations.

She didn't suffer fools lightly. You had to be on your game. She'd repeatedly correct her grandchildren saying, “ ‘Umm’ is not a word.”

None of her success would have been possible without the Civil Rights Movement. Some critics might say, “Yes...but she likely went to the front of the line due to “unfair” policies like Affirmative Action.” She most likely did benefit from such policies, yet such critics don't seem to understand that Affirmative Action was necessary for her to get the positions she would have gotten to, had she been white.

My father grew up in the working-class Pittsburgh neighborhood of East Liberty ('Slippery). After serving in the Army Air Force in WWII, he became a direct beneficiary of perhaps the largest welfare program in US history...it is still in existence to this day: the GI Bill. The conservative policy wonks of today would never call it a welfare program but let's call it what it is. It is a government program – a giveaway. And it has been a good thing. Among other things, it has enabled thousands, perhaps millions of Americans to get tuition free education, low interest housing loans. It gave my father the opportunity to move up into the middle class. I am a direct beneficiary of that welfare program. By the way, the GI Bill was written such that most all African-American veterans of WW II were left out, excluded. After serving our country as patriots they returned home to Jim Crow South and northern racism.

Elizabeth Warren says...

There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. Nobody. ... You moved your goods to market on the roads the rest of us paid for; you hired workers the rest of us paid to educate; you were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. You didn't have to worry that marauding bands would come and seize everything at your factory, and hire someone to protect against this, because of the work the rest of us did. Now look, you built a factory and it turned into something terrific, or a great idea. God bless. Keep a big hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is, you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along.

So, no, America wasn't built on individual freedom. It's not that simple. It was built on the idea of freedom, a vision of freedom; but the reality is different...more complicated.

Was America built on rugged individualism? Greed? Ingenuity? Exploitation? Wisdom? Yet success...and failure, for that matter, is not a solo act. Nothing is free and clear.

Since the attack on the Capitol I've heard people say, "This is not who we are." Yet, again, indigenous people and people of color might have something to say about that. They'd likely say, "Ahh yes, we've seen this before." This is not who we are? Well, maybe we're just getting acquainted for the first time.

Sociologist Randy Blazak, who studies hate groups related a conversation he had with political activist Angela Davis:

"She said the election of Trump is the last gasp of white-male supremacy. We've made progress on race, gender and sexuality, and this is the big pushback" (Randy Blazak, The Sun, March 2020, p12).

He asked [feminist icon] Gloria Steinem about the Trump cult and "she said, 'When a woman is being beaten by her husband, she is most at risk of being killed by him when she's trying to escape. That's what's happening to America right now.'" We are escaping our abuser, and he's trying to kill us (Randy Blazak, The Sun, March 2020, p12).

The good news however is that those who attacked the Capitol don't represent the 74 million people who voted for Donald Trump. Yes, Trump has his base and they can be capable of doing real harm...yet the attackers are a small minority of that 74 million.

In light of all this...and I know that many of you may not agree with me...But I believe most Americans, deep in their hearts, want to create a better society. We may disagree as to what that better society might look like. We may disagree regarding the ways and means to create

that society. (That's democracy.) We may all be confused and uninformed as to what it means to be an anti-racist, a patriot, a progressive, a libertarian, a conservative...whatever; but I believe that the vast majority of Americans don't intentionally wish ill will upon one another.

And that is good news!

In the early 2000s I was working in England for several months. One day an English co-worker said to me, "You know what I like most about Americans? When they say, 'Have a nice day,' they mean it."