

Teacups, Tevye and the First Sixteen

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I'm just checking....because ..There is no more unlikely person to be receiving this honor than me. No amount of predicting, no Moneyball data could have landed this award and this woman on the same stage. So I am honored in the humblest of ways and because of the unlikely nature of this moment, I must take a moment for witness.

You need to know something of this story, because I am nobody but you. The you who took ownership of a conviction that has been given to all of us as a trusted legacy: religious liberty and the separation of church and state. I took it up and I won't put it down. Before this time, something as valuable and esoteric as religious liberty, well it was about the equivalent to an English china teacup in my life – respected as fine and valuable , like the Wedgwood Florentine or English Renaissance Royal Dolton in my cupboard, fine, fragile, beautiful ...and distant. Rarely thought of or used.

But that teacup, came off the shelf for daily use in 1978. I was a reading language arts teacher at Lamar Junior High School. A shy, but musically talented 8th grader was in my class, her name was Robin Murray O'Hair. This name will resonate with some of you who will remember her adopted mother/grandmother Madeline

Murray O’Hair. And for those of you too young to remember this name except for in a social studies quiz, I’ll remind you that she is best known for the [Murray v. Curlett](#) lawsuit, which led to a landmark [Supreme Court](#) ruling ending official Bible-reading in American public schools (in 1963.) Madeline Murray O’Hair was the outspoken founder of American Atheists and became so controversial that [Life](#) magazine referred to her as "the most hated woman in America".¹

Madeline had officially adopted her granddaughter as her daughter in order to have unfettered access to the public schools in their hometown of Austin Texas. Madeline came on day 1 of the school year, to the teacher’s meeting and made her signature pronouncement, (pointing at us teachers) she said, “You people, you solve problems...I , on the other hand, make problems. That’s how I make my living. This is fair warning - I will not be back at this school without a TV crew and a bull horn to point out the ways that you are violating my rights and the rights of my daughter.” She left us stunned.

It was a strange juxtaposition for me because I am a Christian, the wife of a professional minister and yet I was understanding my beliefs about religious liberty to be somewhat in line with “the most hated woman in America.” I really didn’t want that; not at all. I really didn’t want to defend the right of this 8th grade violin student to have her non-beliefs defended to the point that it inconvenienced all the rest of us. That didn’t feel fair. It didn’t FEEL fair...But my defending the right of this child to unbelief - it was JUST. And I had to come to terms with the difference between things” feeling fair” and “being just.” I had to think about my Baptist forbearers who were also ostracized for not being a part of the majority and who made a ruckus, inconveniencing a whole lot of other people

because of our/ their radical beliefs. I had to come to face the words “freedom of conscience” and know they were not just for me. Darn it. It is very hard to defend the right of someone who is hated.

There was tension and anger – especially from other parents - and of course as December approached, there was worry about the traditional Christmas activities. Along with Cynthia Sloan, I was the student council sponsor in charge of hosting the Holiday Lunch and Concert before the Christmas break. Each homeroom came to the cafeteria, decorated their tables with glitz from home and red and green paper, and then the kids went off to the gym for the concert to return afterwards for a big holiday feast and noon release time.

Last table decorated, last kid off to the concert – I sat on the steps to breathe. The doors came open - it was Madeline Murray O’Hair , with a TV Crew and a bull horn. She began to go down every decorated table until she found some offending item from a child “too religious.” She gripped the paper and with a flourish for the cameraman she scattered the children’s holiday to the floor.

I could take her beliefs, I could even on occasion defend her – but when she destroyed the children’s work for her purposes – I just wanted to actually hit her with my fists. It required the most restraint ever. We barely made it through that year without physical violence from teachers, students and parents. If she could just be NICE about her beliefs! But she wasn’t... Actually, her life and the life of her granddaughter, Robin, ended in murder.

Religious liberty and its expression is not sanitized and nice. This is one of the planet’s most important freedoms and if you think it is a Hallmark card, you are

not worthy of the name Baptist. Thankfully, religious liberty is not as fragile as a teacup.

One lesson I learned along this path is HOW to think about justice. It is not simply an opinion or a position. Justice, especially justice rooted in biblical foundations and morality, is a way of processing your thoughts and feelings, and often holding seemingly opposing truths together in a cruciform way. Remember “Fiddler on the Roof?” Tevye?

Tevye arranges a marriage for his daughter Tzeitel to a rich (but undesirable butcher) Tzeitel pleads with her father to listen instead to Motel the poor tailor, who intervenes with uncommon zeal to ask himself for Tzeitel’s hand . Seeing the love in his daughters eyes, Tevye weighs the prospects of the poor tailor as son in law.

AHH_ He’s beginning to talk like a man –

on the other hand what kind of match would that be?

With A poor tailor?

On the other hand he’s an honest hard worker

But on the other hand he has absolutely nothing!

On the other hand things could never get worse for him,

they could only get better!

But what about TRADITION?!

One of the most important things that our religious and biblical heritage does, is give us a WAY of thinking about JUSTICE when confronted with new problems because new problems invariably call for thinking about MORE than one side of an issue, especially in the realm of religious rights, freedoms and boundaries.

Like Tevye we need to cultivate the rhythm of “one the one hand- on the other hand” processing. We hear this echo in the Psalms – that move from exaltation to lamentation in 3 verses. We hear it in the parables of Jesus – is it the prodigal? Or the brother? in the Judean countryside - Is it the mount of transfiguration ? or the garden of Gethsemane? We see it in Peter – is it denial ? or the “feed my sheep” love?

My experience with Madeline taught me that I was not finished with justice and an exploration of religious liberty until I had thought in a Tevye rhythm.

This type of processing and moral deliberation is counter to our culture. It is not an answer but a WAY of finding justice. This is why it is so important to MODEL deliberation at church. HOW to think morally about a subject like religious liberty; and How to arrive at JUST responses. It feels awkward and you feel inadequate to process this way – but it is what justice requires...especially where religious liberty is at stake.

In 1978, I made a firm commitment that in my Sunday school classes, on women’s retreats, at VBS, at youth camp and in my personal conversations , I was going to talk about religious liberty and separation of church and state. If this indeed is one enduring legacy to the world from my heritage, I’d better speak up deliberately.

That decision led me through these conversations in a private life to engagement publically with elected officials. For more than 35 years, I have met in offices with countless aides and explained the Tevye type issue from my Baptist church lady perspective – religious liberty, church & state. More modern day conflicts with American Atheists find me opposing their position which calls for public spaces to be religion-free zones. As Charles Haynes wrote recently

...separation taken this far is no friend of religious liberty...religious people and religious institutions have a right to participate fully in the public square. The First Amendment does not guarantee atheists or anyone else “freedom from religion.” The First amendment does, however, guarantee “freedom from a government imposed religion – a core condition of liberty of conscience.

Religious liberty is the universal freedom of religious conscience and that freedom goes beyond internal thought and extends to action.

The Baptist Joint Committee is embarking on a new education campaign to equip you and your congregation to know more and do more for this precious liberty. When asked to help, say “YES.” Volunteer. Be a witness.

Practice your liberty of conscience and God will use the conversation. In an increasingly pluralistic culture, among the polarized ideological discourse from both the right and the left, with well-funded and vocal advocates – the public square NEEDS to hear the deliberative thoughts of sincerely religious and faithful people saying, modeling, simple but profound statements of conscience.

“I WOULD LIKE IT IF MY BELIEFS WERE EVERYWHERE, BUT I WILL NOT ASK FOR STATE SUPPORT, DIRECT OR IMPLIED.”

On the other hand

“DO NOT SHAME ME OR TRY TO REMOVE MY RIGHT TO RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION. MY FAITH EXPRESSION DOES NOT COERCE YOU.”

In speaking of tolerance, Helen Keller said “....it is the greatest gift of the mind; it requires the same effort of the brain that it takes to balance oneself on a bicycle.” That from a blind woman.

Do you know the First Sixteen?, The first sixteen words of the Bill of Rights:
Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;

That gem took Tevye thinking on steroids - to work this out word by word, phrase by phrase. The world vies for and against this kind of freedom. It is like a balancing blind woman on a bicycle.

There are lawyers like Brent, Holly, Melissa Rogers, Buzz Thomas, Doug Laycock – but they cannot protect religious liberty or adjudicate a secure future for freedoms.

Albert Einstein, was a true and unpredictable voice on this topic. He said “Laws alone cannot secure freedom of expression; in order that every (one) man

present (their) his views without penalty, there must be a spirit of tolerance in the entire population.”

This is our chapter - You are the VOICE; it is your voice, that needs to speak .

Talking through your own confusions and passions towards justice – God’s kind of biblical justice.

In July 2001, a panel of the 4th U. S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the constitutionality of the Virginia's minute of silence law. This action in Virginia set off a flurry of copycat laws across the country including Texas. By 2003 our family friend and State Senator Jeff Wentworth of San Antonio was quick to introduce a copycat minute of silence bill. Convinced that the law would be upheld because Va law had been, he had imported the identical language.

Like all education bills, the language for this new minute of silence law would be added to the Texas Education Code. There was a small reference in the bill to the chapter, paragraph and section where this language was to be inserted. It was just a series of numbers in the prelude to the bill. I went to talk to Senator Wentworth about the bill language and its implications for classrooms and religious freedoms.

One problem with his proposed bill was that the section of the code into which the minute of silence language was to be inserted was a very limiting section of the Texas code and although seemingly identical to the section cited in VA , the implication if put in this section of the Texas code would be to restrict the minute of silence, not allow for the broadest use of it. It took six presentations to him to go back and forth to show him the vulnerable sections of this law and convince

him that we couldn't just rely on a copycat of Va to be sufficient. What did I know, I wasn't a lawyer? But I could model thinking about the issue from more than one angle.

The bill passed in 2003, and predictably was challenged in court by 2006. Unlike the unreviewed copycat version passed in Illinois, the Texas law was upheld by the circuit court. 2009, six years and two court challenges later, I got a handwritten note from Senator Jeff Wentworth, it briefly said "Minute of silence upheld. Thanks for keeping me working at it." I felt a little like the poor tailor that gets the girl.

What matters? What is worth your time and thoughts and conviction? We live in a world full of competing ideas and plenty of distractions that we must say "No" to in order to say "Yes" to other things. In the past 35 years I have worked on scores of religious liberty bills and issues – championing some, dismantling others and amending the daylight out of bad bills when necessary.

We treat our most sacred freedoms like they are distant teacups, not really ours except in some decorative sense. We will exercise our bodies to Hip Hop abs and P90X. It's time to put some energy into exercising our freedom of conscience for religious liberty and lift our voices to defend the religious rights of others here and around the world.

Justice requires action. Jesus said so.