

“Release”

John Thompson

Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

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John Thompson:

The life of my friend and fellow artist, Winfred Rembert, is certainly a tale of release.

I met Winfred at a lecture he gave to a group of students and faculty perhaps 10 years ago. From the first encounter I was taken with this burly, single toothed, clearly hard-lived character relating his story. His telling was equal part release for him and both history lesson and cautionary tale for the young.

Winfred came from a different world than mine. Many of us here have led accomplished lives often with the privilege of stable homes, good education and frequent mentors. Winfred came from indescribable poverty, a shattered home, scarce education, and was surrounded by the oppressive racist culture where boys like Winfred were told, ‘You ain’t going to amount to nothing’ while his aunt was forced to agree, ‘Ain’t that right.’ That moment seared in his young mind marked the start of Winfred’s quest to ‘do better’. Winfred’s struggle to escape this poverty and oppression led him to untimely participation in a civil rights march that was broken up by the police and eager white vigilantes, leading to a dash for safety, an arrest and eventually a 17-year sentence to the Georgia penitentiary and the chain gang. His arrest, near lynching and conviction – without any legal representation – took place while I was a college student. It takes an hour to tell that segment of his life, it is an involved tale, including his eventual release after 8 years, that I am happy to share with you later.

And yet –despite his miserable early life, Winfred’s words have appeared in the New Yorker, he has met presidents and his work is on exhibition in the National Gallery and many other museums.

He expressed little bitterness for what he was suffered although he was plagued by enduring nightmares throughout his life. This remarkable man released himself from the resentment and hatred that might have consumed him – as well as releasing by his forgiveness, those that so cruelly tried to prove that ‘you ain’t going to amount to nothing’. Because of Winfred’s consistent push to ‘do better’. Their

wedding night they slept in a shack with so many holes in the roof they watched the stars. He and his beloved wife Patsy did do better raising 8 children along with half the neighborhood. Winfred's namesake grandson, Winfred Rembert III, earned a PhD and a permanent position at Stanford University. But caution – this is not a Disney tale of all good endings.

There seem to me to be two sides to Winfred's life. The one we can all admire and celebrate – this talented man who lacked any education yet managed to become articulate, loving, forgiving, demanding, incredibly talented.

The more subtle story is of his unique lack of bitterness and immense faith in the future. His family motto might have been, 'we make do'. There was always enough – not extra. Somehow food for all that showed up at the table, often with reduced portions. Having so little, varied pleasures large and small were fabricated from cast-offs. A daughter delights in telling how Winfred would tie them into the back seat of the family car to ensure they did not fall through the non-existent floor of the worn-out vehicle. She delighted in watching the pavement fly by beneath her feet. Toys were made with whatever could be found, worn out bicycle tires, repurposed wheels from anywhere, scraps of lumber and tin cans.

Life was always short on material goods yet never short of love. Somehow enough. Any money that came in from any source was soon spent. Patsy explained to me that 'when you grew up as poor as we did, when you have money, you spend it to prove you are not poor.' Savings were nonexistent. The yard and house gradually filled with 'stuff' bought during those moments of plenty before the plenty disappeared. Many star war toys among those possessions making up for what Winfred and Patsy never had before. And there was always song. Wonderful spirituals sung by friends and family – in church, at home or going somewhere.

The family reached far beyond the immediate neighborhood in their willingness to share and celebrate life. Kids with even less were a constant presence. The evening dinner expanded as required. Several have told of the family showing up with a whole pig to slowly roast and sharing with any and all. That became both an annual event and the occasional excursion to white friends' neighborhoods. Imagine – this smiling character showing up in a borrowed pick up with an entire pig carcass in the back – so pleased at the festivities to come – and completely relaxed about finding a way to keep the meat cool until the next day's roasting.

Winfred made friends with many, many people without bias as to color, employment, wealth or heritage. He simply enjoyed people. Winfred's belief in his own worth and dignity might be found in the words of Zora Neale Hurston, "Sometimes I feel discriminated against, but I does not make me angry, it merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It I's beyond me."

I could talk for hours about all that makes Winfred and his family singular and extraordinary – that is not to say without dark sides and many difficulties as a whole and individuals. The Rembert remarkable achievements still leave many in the clan impoverished, under educated and under employed. Money is always lacking.

The period of his arrest, imprisonment, near lynching and work on the chain gang can never be completely told nor understood. Much of that story can be found in wonderful documentaries and in the extraordinary memoir that won last year's Pulitzer Prize.

What I would like to share with you in our sacred space here is the beauty and stories – joyous and painful - told in artwork I am privileged to share with you. I experienced Winfred's entire process – from selecting the leather, drawing the picture (and he always called them pictures), transferring the drawing, carving and working the leather – a tap, tap, tap -commonly at night when he tries to be awake to avoid his nightmares, and finally the painting with leather dye. He was always exploring and experimenting, looking and learning, seeing what others did not – and remembering it all. Winfred's need to make work about the black experience is not singular. The large painting on your right is Bob Freeman's outpouring of anguish at the news of the George Floyd murder. How completely different from Bob's celebrated work depicting the affluent black culture he knew as a child.

Mitchell Rembert, Winfred's son, worked with his father in his declining years and is emulating his father's technique to make his own statements. The unframed picture next to Bob's is Mitchell's statement that while Civil War raged on over slavery and oppression little change came to the black population who continued to slave in the fields even today.

Winfred's work here today include:

Three small pieces in which Winfred knew everyone in the paintings. They include a scene from his childhood with Buck Rogers, a classroom scene with his beloved Miss

Pratt—the only teacher who thought he was worth anything, and an extraordinary piece that is an intelligent human being carrying surveying tools in his hand (as Winfred did) with a steel collar around his neck and a chain. He’s still enslaved.

This baby, the prized piece of my possession, is Winfred’s self-portrait.

I was blessed to bring Winfred to Mass College of Art where he made prints with the students for a week. This piece is the cotton field—the cotton field where you worked from dawn to dusk, “cain’t to cain’t”, you can’t see in the morning and you can’t see at night. He picked cotton all day long. If you’ve ever seen one, cotton fields are beautiful. But if you’ve ever picked cotton each one of those pods has razor-sharped edges to it. It is a constant battle to keep yourself from bleeding out.

This is an unusual drawing I have of his. He just gave that to me one day. Most of the drawings were crumpled up and tossed so they’re fairly uncommon.

These two pictures, again a Mass Art print and this, are part of an “All Me” group. He spent seven years on a chain gang. This is self-portraits of all the people he had to be while he was working.

And the rest of the pictures—and he called them pictures, they weren’t paintings—everybody here he knew. You look at the children here who were expected to pick as early as 5 years old as well as the adults. Mama could pick up to 200 pounds a day. 200 pounds in the searing sun! Just extraordinary.

Happy to talk with you. Thank you for the time. An extraordinary life. Read the book please.

Rev. Dr. Stephanie May:

Over the last number of years, John has shared stories about Winfred Rembert and showed me pieces of Rembert’s extraordinary art. However, only recently did I finally read Rembert’s memoir, *Chasing Me to My Grave*. And, as John said, no, it’s not all Disneyland.

Knowing a bit about Rembert’s life of imprisonment and time on a chain gang, I began the book imagining that today’s theme of release would connect with the

experience of winning his freedom after these events. What surprised me, however, was the description of his youth on Hamilton Avenue as life-changing release.

As a three-month old infant, Winfred's mother handed him over to her aunt, Lillian Rembert. With Lillian, whom Winfred called Mama, Rembert lived and worked on a cotton plantation in a situation of financial dependency—firmly held within racial hierarchies and physical hardships rooted in slavery. Eventually Mama and Winfred moved to town with the help of Mama's son, J.T. Although expected to continue picking cotton with Mama, a youthful Winfred ran away to explore the town of Cuthbert, especially the juke-joints of Hamilton Avenue. Here Winfred learned to run a pool hall, dance, and, most of all, enjoy the vibrancy of life on Hamilton Avenue. Crediting his young friend, Johnny Frank James, with introducing him to day to day living on Hamilton Avenue, Rembert writes:

Johnny Frank James. I don't know what happened to him, but I do know he took me and introduced me to things I had never seen before, all the life that I never even knew existed among Black folk, and White folk too. That was a *big* thing in my life. It was like I busted out of a paper sack. I had been locked inside a different world. I couldn't go nowhere unless the White man said I could. But I had strength enough to cross over that invisible line that was holding me. I had strength enough to walk out of [the cotton fields] and to walk away, and I walked into [Johnny]. He introduced me to another world, a world other than picking cotton, a world I didn't know was there.

It was like I busted out of a paper sack. Can you picture that?

John says Winfred always referred to the images on his leather as pictures. This same language appears again and again in the book. If you were to close your eyes and allow your mind to wander over the people and moments that changed your life, what pictures come to mind?

Can you picture the first time you saw your beloved? Can you picture the room you walked into where you felt welcomed? Enlivened by the company of those around you? Do you stumble over the pictures with the searing memory of heartbreak, of loss that changed everything?

We may not all have the talent or skill to portray what comes to our minds eye like Rembert did, but I suspect we all carry such pictures within us. Pictures drawn with

the contours of images, yes, but also of sound, smell, taste, touch, and, most of all, of emotion.

Rembert's life journey contains volumes of emotion that are hard for me to fully comprehend as a white woman. What does it feel like to grow up black in the degradation of the Jim Crow south? What does it feel like to be nearly lynched and to survive? What does it feel like to dig ditches beside a Georgia highway in the heat of summer? And then, on that same hot day, to meet and begin to fall in love with the woman who one day becomes your wife?

For a time in his youth, Rembert explains, he did feel bitter for the losses and injustices in his life. Yet, in the memoir you can feel how experiences of love and kindness, of possibility and hope, of dignity and agency release his own abundance of love for life, for people, for the wonder of his own story.

In the March on Washington speech, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. challenged the audience, "*not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.*" Rather, King preached non-violence and love. A message that Winfred Rembert exemplified in so many ways. Again and again Dr. King spoke of the "brotherhood" of humanity. The picture in his head was of a multi-racial, equitable society ruled by non-violent love—a picture of the Beloved Community.

Fighting for racial justice is about love and dignity. For black folks, yes, and for all who struggle in systems of oppression and inequality. And, fighting for racial justice is also about freedom for white folks who have been taught to hate, to limit their love with quiet assumptions and hidden fears.

When King spoke on the Mall at Washington in 1963, he spoke of those who had fought for freedom 100 years before as the Civil War raged. Here we are 60 years after that speech still talking about police brutality against black lives. Here we are 60 years later in a town where just three weeks ago racist graffiti was publicly scrawled at the high school—graffiti targeting the African American Superintendent of Schools using the very word Winfred heard again and again and again in his childhood in the Jim Crow South.

Saying that white people "have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom," Dr. King declared, "We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back." The work of freedom, dignity, and equality that King and Winfred Rembert

struggled to achieve is not simply in the past. It is work that remains alive *here, now* in *this* town in *current* events.

What can we do, you might ask. I ask that too. What *can* we do? What *can* we do to promote anti-racism training and messages for kids and adults in our community? What *can* we do learn more about what people of color experience in our communities—the towns we live in and, yes, in this congregation? What *can* we do to better understand what it means “always march ahead” in the direction of more equity, inclusion, and diversity?

Can we do anything?

Perhaps we can start today by pausing for a moment in front of these pictures by Winfred Rembert, Bob Freeman, and Mitchell Rembert to consider again both the pain of the struggle and the power of the resistance for racial justice in our nation. What *can* we do? Perhaps we might take a cue from civil right activist, lawyer, and songwriter Faya Ora Rose Touré who said,

“It takes faith. You have to believe that the mighty river is filled drop by drop. You have to put your drop in the river and somebody else will put in their drop, and then eventually one day those drops will make a river.”

May we have such faith to act *here* and *now* to change the pictures future generations might create.

So may it be. Amen.