

Better Living through Time Travel

Sometimes preachers like me wonder what we're going to talk about next Sunday. Should we take a beloved UU hymn and go through the verses, or do a potted biography of one of our heroes? The first crocuses are poking their heads up in the park, so should we do a service about the joys of springtime? As dry as such times are, it's possible to wish they were still here, because—in the last year—things have changed. It seems that now there's only one thing to talk or think about. The elephant in the room. I might plan to talk about daffodils, but there's old Dumbo over there in the corner, waving his trunk at me.

I was going to come up here this morning and talk about something I need to explore myself—managing disappointment. If I said that I am living through a time of grave disappointment, I know you'd understand, because you're feeling it too. You can probably guess what I'm talking about, but I won't elaborate. One of the first things I learned in ministry training was to avoid anything that smacks of party politics, and Mrs Lester didn't raise no fool.

But I will make bold to say that my disappointment, born of current events, has to do with an old question, one that comes around in the night like Marley's ghost: are we actually getting better, wiser, more human as a people? Or are we forever stuck in some dark place that has to do with the survival of the fittest, wherein empathy and compassion are just obstacles to our selfish projects?

When I ask myself that question, I get comfort from the fact that humanity does appear to have made some progress, at least in terms of its laws and constitutions. We don't let factory owners employ children anymore—having them do mill work for 12 hours a day in exchange for some substandard food and a place in a shared bed. At least not here but, if the idea bothers you, it's probably better not to look too deeply into why we can buy cheap clothes and out-of-season strawberries.

We've eliminated what is called “cruel and unusual” punishment—here in Europe, at least. There is no water-boarding allowed in our jails. We have decreed that everyone—here, at least—is entitled to medical care. We probably won't be arrested for criticising the government. We can do pretty much

whatever we like that doesn't harm anyone else, and we have CCTV to ensure that. Now, in many places, we can marry whomever we want, and we won't go to jail for having consensual sex with another person. All these things represent progress for the human race, despite their occasional dark sides and lapses.

Yes... but. As Anatole France said (and I paraphrase): "Ah the majestic equality of the law, which forbids rich and poor alike to steal bread and sleep under bridges."

Nevertheless, if I want to remind myself that things are—however slowly—getting better, I don't have to look any farther than my own family.

I grew up in the American South. My family were all proud Southerners, and my childhood was full of references to "damn Yankees", those northern types who were lacking in all cultural refinement, and who had treacherously trodden upon the flower of the old Confederacy.

The picture I'm going to pass around is what is called a daguerreotype. It's about 160 years old. It shows a stern-faced man with mutton-chop sideburns sitting next to a mousy lady in a bonnet. Her name was Mary Thompson, known as Molly, and his was Robert Ezekiel Lester. She was the daughter of a plantation owner who was killed, say the records, by "a drunken overseer" at their home near Thomaston, Georgia. He was the eldest of five brothers, and the owner of a turpentine plantation that straddled the Georgia-Florida line and contained over eighty miles of roads. He was my father's grandfather.

I don't know much about Robert Ezekiel as a person, except that he was reported to be a gentleman and a churchgoer, and a graduate of the University in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where I followed a century later. During the Civil War he was adjutant of the Florida cavalry, keeping the Yankees from flanking General Lee's army. His plantation became a state monument in the nineteen-fifties, and as a boy I was taken to see his military uniform and cavalry sword hanging in the entry to the statehouse in Tallahassee.

At the close of the Civil War, he is said to have donated the timber to build what was called a "Negro schoolhouse". This would have been after he

freed his slaves—all 66 of them--- just before the Yankees and carpetbaggers swept into his world and made it impossible not to.

My family was proud of Robert Ezekiel Lester when I was growing up. I just accepted it, and never gave it much thought until my mother's house maid, Carrie, gave me an insight. This was well before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, when Southerners could still sustain their desperate dream of racial superiority. Carrie had always been in my house, at least twice a week, a slight, dark figure with sinus problems who smelled like laundry starch. One day I was playing with a Confederate flag—we had been playing Yankees and Rebels all afternoon in the woods. She snorted at me. “What you doing with that redneck rag?” she said.

What followed was the first glimpse of truth I had ever had about the South. It ended when my mother came home; Carrie just clammed up. But she had told me things that were nothing less than radioactive in my ten-year-old head, ending with the statement: “People can't own people.”

When the civil rights movement started heating up in the sixties, it pretty much cut me off from my family. Carrie was still there, but she had become a kind of subversive element; my father lowered his voice when talking about race, which was all anybody seemed to talk about at the time. My family, who considered themselves “genteel”, started using the ugly epithets formerly only employed by “white trash.” I was on the other side, a traitor to my history, marching in demonstrations and singing “We Shall Overcome” in the shower to madden my mother. It was a good time and a bad time. There was some kind of watershed of consciousness, in which an insight that now seems perfectly natural burst upon us like a natural phenomenon. It was so simple as to be absurd, yet so divisive as to destroy families like mine.

When the full implications of my history dawned on me during my time at University, I stopped talking about it. My friends were all politically active university students with long hair and short tempers towards racists. I found it increasingly hard to believe that everyone else in my family could hang on to a racist world view, and do it not shamefacedly, like the slinking hillbillies in pillowcases known as the KKK, but proudly, as if it were a badge of distinction.

Now, all these years later, I think I'd like to jump in a time machine and have a conversation with Robert Ezekiel Lester. Sit on the front porch and sip a mint julep and listen to the cicadas. I'd like to see if I could make the obvious insight of my youth work for him. I would be very persuasive and logical. He would probably run me through with that cavalry sword I have seen hanging in the glass case. It would be an exercise in futility, of course, because Robert Ezekiel was a man of his times, locked into a worldview as pervasive as the air he breathed.

Which makes me pause. If old Robert Ezekiel was a person of his times, then what are we? If the insights of only four generations have made such a difference in the way we think, what does that say about the three or four or fifty generations that will follow us? Doesn't make sense that we are partway along a time line, and that the things we do and say and believe now will one day seem either as quaint or as sinister as the life of Robert Ezekiel Lester? If someone four generations in the future were to appear one evening as we were watching the news, what would they think of us?

They might ask us what on earth we were thinking when we kept sucking oil out of the ground and burning it until the sky became a big, invisible reflector oven. They might ask us if we really raised animals in terrible conditions—battery cages and feed pens—in order to kill them and eat their flesh. They might ask what was wrong with our heads to believe that the act of love between people could be criminalised, or that people could be forced by laws or conventions to dress and act like members of their birth gender. They might ask why we all kept killing each other over dreams of rule and order based on the ancient myths of nationalism.

I don't know what reply I might have. I would certainly blame someone else: the big corporations, regressive political parties, maybe the Alt-Right news channels. But what I'd probably say to their questions would be something like "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

That little fantasy makes me think that the past can be harnessed to save the future. I don't just mean things like ensuring that we don't leave piles of radioactive materials that have a half-life of 100,000 years lying under the soil. I

don't mean only that we should ensure that our descendants inherit a climate they can survive in. Those things, certainly.

But I mean something broader and more challenging, as well. We can see little buds of awareness all around us. Wanting to join with other nations to create—not just a so-called “trading bloc”, but a mutually dependent and responsible society. Little forays into joining forces instead of trying to outdo each other before they are driven back by nationalism and self-interest. Doesn't this provoke the thought that one day all the nations will belong to one single entity—the Earth? We hear the occasional plea from some politician or statesman to make the business of governing into the attempt to create a fair world where belonging is guaranteed just by being born, before they are derided as sinister socialists or mere starry-eyed dreamers.

Isn't it possible to imagine such a future, and use it as a moral compass for decisions taken today? Couldn't Robert Ezekiel Lester have anticipated the arrival of Martin Luther King? And—even without someone appearing in a time machine to challenge him—couldn't he have just stopped for a moment and thought, “Someday, things will be different. Maybe I'd better help them along.”

But, even more than that, couldn't our time travel provide us with the one thing we show that we lack, over and over? Couldn't it provide a route from endemic arrogance into the sweet condition called humility? Couldn't the fact that we don't know everything yet help us develop patience and empathy?

Maybe. But I'm still feeling disappointed. Something tells me I'd better get used to it. Something tells me that human progress is like the worm trying to dig his way to the surface, gaining two inches, tiring, and then falling back one. We get tired, and the surface seems impossibly far away. But one day, the worm crawls up two inches and—voila!—he reaches the air and the sunlight, and doesn't fall back. So we'll just have to take a break and then get back to it.

Keep your eyes peeled for your great-great grandchild, though. And when she turns up on your front porch, better listen to what she has to say.