

Never Gonna Break My Faith

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February 18, 2007

Mt Vernon Unitarian Church

Many of you here this morning may recognize the lyrics to this song:

*My Lord, I have read this book so many times,
But nowhere can, I find the page that says what I experienced today has any grace*

*Now I know that life is meant to be hard,
That's how I learned to appreciate my God
Though my courage may be tried, I can tell you I won't hide,
because the footprints show you were by my side*

*You can lie to a child with a smiling face, tell me that color ain't about a race
You can cast the first stone, you can break my bones
But you never gonna break, you never gonna break my faith
Faith and hope ain't yours to give
Truth and liberty are mine to live
Steal a crown from a king, break an angels wings
But you never gonna break, you never gonna break my faith*

These are the words to a song that was written by singer/songwriter Brian Adams, and performed by the 'Queen of Soul,' Aretha Franklin, Mary J. Blige, and the Harlem Boys Choir, entitled "You Never Gonna Break My Faith." The song, done in a gospel-toned format served as the soundtrack to a remarkable documentary about the life of the late Robert F. Kennedy, in a film entitled, "Bobby."

You also may very well appreciate the fact that I didn't sing this song – but read it, for I won't kid myself that I could never give the song justice to belt it out like Franklin, Blige and the Choir – and if any of you ever heard me sing before, you would be just as thankful that I didn't.

Ever since this song was first released in early December, I found myself becoming more and more attracted to it in some way. I have to admit, that I am a closet gospel music lover of sorts. The heart wrenching delivery of the words in a gospel tune, has often given me some spiritual pause of sorts, to where it was not only uplifting in just hearing the melody of the tune, but also a reflective moment for me to reflect on a point in time of my life, where the words often match the experience.

In fact, many historians believe that the creation of gospel music was born from the struggles of racial inequality to where Black Americans would use their voices to sort of 'think out loud,' what was coming from their hearts. It became their testimonies of sorts to serve as a model to others on how life's challenges carry a heavy load, yet song of passion would seek out the inner strengths of spiritual energy to carry on.

I was particularly drawn to this song, “*You Never Gonna Break My Faith*” as it shares a meaning of my life’s experience of being challenged many times, yet I relied on my faith in and spiritual beliefs to get me through not just those troubled times, but putting my faith in confidence that would help me ride through those bumps in the road; and also for the successes of my life, and the goals I set forth both personally and professionally to achieve.

While I have enjoyed a very successful life personally and professionally, those troubled times were there. Probably the biggest traumatic impact on my life was the passing of my first wife in 1996, which left me to raise my young nine year old daughter, while balancing my military career. I was prepared to get out at that unfortunate moment, but I had made a promise to my late wife in her final hours of life that I would continue my career in hopes of reaching a goal I had established early on to become the Coast Guard’s senior ranking enlisted member, the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard.

She and I had talked about this goal throughout our relationship and marriage, and it was her, who of all the things there were to talk about in her few minutes of consciousness before departing life was demanding that I held true to my goals, not only for her, but for the reasons I wanted the position. I had established some personal core values within myself as my work and personal ethic of people, passion and performance. I wanted to convey these thoughts and concepts to my service’s leadership, and my late wife knew that I was serious of this commitment. Therefore, she wanted nothing more out of this grieving and troubled time for me, but to keep focused, and never break my faith.

So, it is for this reason why the song, “*You Never Gonna Break My Faith*,” has kind of stuck with me. There have been times, whether I’m either driving my car, flying on a plane, sitting in my office, or even at home, that I would listen to this song repeated times, to allow my own heart to ‘think out loud,’ drawing some of my own inner strengths of spiritual energy to keep me emotionally filled with a sense of motivation to carry out my day with enthusiasm. In fact, I listened to the song just this morning on the drive to church.

This song has given me some pause to reflect upon the troubled moments of my life, and how faith has allowed for me to endure the challenges. I couldn’t help but think about an event that happened to me well over 30 years ago, in my young life when I reported to my first Coast Guard assignment after completing my specialty training in the field of telecommunications.

Here I am, reporting to my first assignment as a shipboard radio operator on a ship we referred to in the Coast Guard as a high endurance cutter that patrolled the North Atlantic seaboard. Back then, the Coast Guard was also responsible for providing ocean weather forecasts for the National Weather Service, and tracking icebergs that ventured into the shipping lanes. I was excited to say the least about being part of a principal mission of my service and to the country.

After my arrival to the ship, I was directed to report to the chief radioman in charge, who would be my immediate supervisor. I go down to his stateroom, all dressed in my blue uniform, did a quick inspection on myself to make sure I looked sharp, then knocked on his door. The chief opened the door, took one look at me, and said, “What do you want?” I started my introduction

in the manner I were taught in boot camp how to report aboard to a senior person, rattling off my rank, name and service number, “Seaman Radioman Vincent Patton, 405-979, reporting aboard chief!” The chief looked at me with some kind of amazement, and then slammed the door in my face.

So, I wasn’t sure what the problem was, as to why the chief slammed the door on me. Maybe it has one of those spring hinges and it just slipped out of his hand? So I stand in front of the door for about a minute, and then bravely decide to knock again.

This time when the chief opens the door, before I could give my spiel again, he abruptly says, “Listen, I didn’t ask for a nigger to be in my radio room. So, why don’t you go to galley and report to the chief cook, he’s got a better job for you!” Then he slams the door again.

My ship’s chief radioman, was an interesting guy to say the least. Born and raised in Coosa County, Alabama. Need I say any more? He proudly sported his “stars and bars” flag memorabilia in his stateroom, on his car, ball cap, you name it, he probably had it on there. I once saw him with a can of beer, where he taped a picture of the Rebel flag to it. It was clear that he wanted all that knew him of not as much of his southern heritage, but the intimidation of his symbols of white supremacy that he was not interested in politically correct decisions – especially the part about loving thy neighbor.

Okay, what do I do now? Here I am, an 18 year old Coastguardsman with only eight months of service. My first thought was getting mad, really angry because I heard clearly what the chief had called me. But, I took a deep breath, walked away, and as I started for the ship’s office to tell someone what had happened, and how do I get off this ship, as I clearly wanted no part of this guy.

I eventually got situated on the ship, which a host of encouragement from my fellow shipmates who felt sorry for me in having to deal with the chief’s racist comments. At that period of time in the military, there was little opportunity for redressing a situation, as the services human relations policies, though in effect which forbid discrimination of any type, was weak in enforcement. So, my only way to combat the problem was to just steer clear of the chief, and do my job.

My life with the chief didn’t get any easier for the next several months. Whenever he could, he would find ways to irritate me, in hopes that would say something to get out line, which would become his excuse to formally get rid of me. He would often call me ‘Steppin’ Fetchit,’ and other racist names, hoping I would get angry, but I would just ignore him. Interestingly, I found it was effective, as my silence irritated him even more.

My relationship with my chief radioman turned in a different direction several months later onboard the ship. While on my second Ocean Station patrol, I happened to be on watch and picked up a ‘Mayday’ call by Morse code from a then-Soviet fishing vessel, that was about nine hours sailing time from us. The captain of the vessel had been hit in the head by a tackle block while hauling in a catch in the George’s Bank area of the North Atlantic. This period in time, 1974 was still during the ‘Cold War,’era where there were tense diplomatic relations between the

US and the Soviet Union. Thus the decision for our ship to do a medical evacuation rescue was sensitive, and had to be cleared through the State Department.

Once the decision was made for our ship to head for the Soviet vessel constant communications had to be maintained during the transit. Because neither the crew on my ship spoke any Russian, and the Soviet vessel although had a few crewmembers who barely spoke English, though not comprehensive enough, voice communications over the radio was impractical. So contact had to be done by Morse code, which is a series of signals broken up in the phrases of “dit-dahs.” Morse code was known as the international maritime language, as all you have to do is spell out the words in dots and dashes on an oscillating key.

Prior to my enlistment in the Coast Guard, I was in the Boy Scouts, during that time I had earned series of merit badges in sending and Morse code as an amateur radio operator. So when I started my telecommunications training in the Coast Guard, I ended up increasing my send and receive speed to a rate consistent with the more experienced professional maritime radio operators. As faith would have it, this special skill came in handy, as I was the fastest code copier and transmitter in the radio room. That was something that my chief couldn’t bear to accept at times.

Because this rescue case became a highly sensitive national security issue, my ship’s commanding officer had to ensure that the assigned radio operators were 100% proficient because vital medical information had to be transmitted to the Soviet trawler to ensure the medical status of their captain’s condition. We had to relay medical information from our rescue coordination center in New York, where a medical doctor provided the diagnosis and prescribed treatment by radio to our ship, and we in turn had to communicate it to the Soviet vessel. One miss of a code transmission could prove fatal to the patient.

As I was heading down to my berthing area after spending a four hour watch in the radio room, just after relaying the mayday call information, my commanding officer, stopped me in the passageway. He put his hand on my shoulder with a look of desperation in his eyes saying, “Patton, I know you’ve been up there for awhile and tired; but son, I need you to go back to the radio room. You’re the best radioman on this ship that can keep up with Russian radio operators. I need you to find that extra stamina somewhere, and get back up there and do it. I’ve got faith in you!”

When you’re a 19 year old young man, in search of adventure – my captain’s plea was like music to my ears. I gave him a smile, and told him simply, “sir, not a problem.” Quite honestly at that point, I really didn’t know if I could do it. What I did know, I was needed, and I had to put my trust in my own abilities to do the job proficiently and successfully.

So for the next nine hours straight with only a couple of bathroom breaks, I tapped out Morse code messages to the trawler, relaying what the medical doctor had told them to do to keep the patient stabilized, and at the same time sent several reassuring messages on my own, telling the Russian radio operator that we were enroute at flank speed, and would be there soon.

In the end, we saved the trawler captain's life. It was a trying situation for me, someone who at this point, had only been in the Coast Guard for less than two years. I endured severe ridicule, hate and challenges from my supervisor, the chief radioman, but somehow was able to maintain. I credit a lot of my own resolve in dealing with my chief to my upbringing, where my parents often told my siblings and I many times, to use your talents, your mind and your faith to work for you. You solve nothing by stooping to the same level as the person who berates you.

After our ship returned to homeport after this event, I begin to leave the ship to go on liberty, when I noticed on the pier stood my chief and a lady which appeared to be his wife. I said to myself – he's probably going to make fun of me in front of his wife with his usual racial epithets. At first I started to turn around and head back to the ship, wait awhile until the chief and his wife were gone, but something told me to keep going. As I stepped onto the pier and started to just walk by the chief and not give him eye contact, he called out – "Patton, get over here!"

Having just experienced the highlight of my life from this past patrol, I was on an emotional high of sorts, and just didn't want the chief to ruin my little happy moment. So I decided to just walk up to him and get it over with on whatever insulting comment he was ready to say. To my amazement, the next set of words out of his mouth almost made me faint. The chief said, "Patton, this is my wife Linda. Linda, I want you to meet the best radioman in the Coast Guard." After that he began bragging about my role on the medivac, and calling me a 'model Coastie.' The words out of his mouth were unbelievable, as this wasn't the same man I had met over a year ago who slammed the door in my face, not wanting me working for him because of my color.

Certainly things were different after that with my chief and I. Although he still had a long way to go to cleanse his soul with bigotry and hatred he had harbored for so many years – it was clear that he was making a conscientious effort at it. Years later we would meet again, and it was at that moment some 13 years later did he actually say, "I'm sorry." He told me how those troubled moments taught him a lot about himself, and the meaning of self discipline, courage, and the will to succeed. It was indeed another shining moment for me, as I felt that another "angel had been born," in the chief shucking his ugly personality of hate and bigotry.

Life is all about challenge. We as human beings have this deep seeded desire to succeed. We work hard at putting our best efforts into all that we do. We desire the need to excel. It's part of Abraham Maslow's theory on 'Hierarchy of Needs' to fulfill our self-actualization. Why? Because we want to, or have to? And just what does faith have to do with it?

The Webster Dictionary defines the word faith as: *confidence or trust in a person or thing; belief that is not based on proof; belief in the doctrines or teachings of religion; and the observance of obligation; fidelity to one's promise, oath, allegiance, and so forth.*

From a theological view, the Bible however has a more interpretive meaning – one that you have to live and experience faith to believe it. I found the scriptures rather interesting in numerous passages describing the elements of faith, what it means spiritually, and how faith itself has defined the religious beliefs of many denominations.

There's a passage I found in the Old Testament, from the book of Proverbs, chapter 3, which says, "*Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.*" It's a wonderful example of what I interpret how faith is part of your personality.

Just as intriguing is seeing a passage from the New Testament in the 11th chapter of the book of Hebrews, states, "*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.*" This to me, addresses the personal trait of confidence, as well as visualizing our own personal goals of life.

As some of you know, I achieved my goal as the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard in 1998, turning a long time dream into a vision, and into a goal. It was not without hard knocks along the way, similar to this story. But you know, the real success story was not so much about my achieving my goal, but rather the experiences that I have encountered during that climb, both professionally and personally.

Noted African American educator, Booker T. Washington said it best in one of my favorite quotes I often refer to, "*I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.*"

Success is not done solely on ones own. Looking back to the lyrics of the song, "*You Never Gonna Break My Faith,*" there's a portion of words that I found to be quite appropriate in summarizing this sermon and testimonial: "*Though my courage may be tried, I can tell you I won't hide, because the footprints show you were by my side.*"

Our very own Mt Vernon Unitarian Church covenant professes that "love is the teaching of this church;" encompasses all of us to love one another, and to be there as the shoulder to lean on, or the hand to hold when times are difficult. It's about our liberal religious uncommon denomination with diverse beliefs and understandings, but we stand together as one voice with the common theme that no one, or no event can take away our faith.

Faith is a part of us. It defines our spiritual journey. Faith is you, no one can take it away. Lean on it when you have to, use it need to, call on it as your source of strength and courage. It is our mantra of life.

Blessed be. Amen.