

## Surprising the Opposition

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Story about elderly couple sharing a meal: a burrito/chips/lemonade

*Young man asks, "May I ask what you're waiting for?"*

*The elderly woman answers: "The teeth."*

One of the things that makes for a good story. The surprise ending! The ending to the story you weren't expecting to hear. I've entitled my sermon today, "Surprising the Opposition." Saying the word, doing the thing, taking the action that whatever challenge you face, an opposition you find inconsistent with your own values, or your sense of what is just or unjust...Do that which will come as a surprise to your opposition, and by so doing make possible the change you seek.

So, Between now and November 3<sup>rd</sup> I encourage you to do the thing, no matter how small or how great, that will surprise the opposition.

To get at what I'm encouraging you to do, I have three stories to share with you today. They're my sermon. First story is about a Politician. The second story is about a Patriot, and the third story is about a Patient. Three stories, a politician, a a patriot, and a patient. And no, they did not all walk into a bar together. That you would see coming. Lol These are stories for whom the opposition found the ending as, "Surprise."

I invite you to listen to these stories in a certain way, with a particular posture.

In her poem, "How to Listen," Joyce Sutphen writes,... **Forget everything you've ever done. Make no comparisons. Simply listen. Listen with your eyes, as if the story you are hearing is happening right now. Listen without blinking, as if a move might frighten the truth away forever... Your whole life might depend on what you hear..**

In her poem, "Councils," Marge Percy writes:

*Perhaps we should sit in the dark.  
In the dark we could utter our feelings.  
In the dark we could propose  
and describe and suggest.*

*In the dark we could not see who speaks  
and only the words  
would say what they say.*

I invite you to sit in the dark this morning as we listen to these stories. Listen as if they are happening right now. Stories that surprised the opposition. Our whole lives might depend on what we hear.

### ***A Politician***

Our story first story took place two years after the October War of 1973 between Egypt and Israel. There are many of us here who remember Egypt's war in reclaiming the Suez Canal. Two years after that war when The Suez Canal was in the hands of Egypt and handed over from the military forces to the civilian Suez Canal Authority, it was a joyous and celebrative time for Egypt, but born out of many losses of human life for Israel.

Two years after that war of 45 years ago this month, Anwar tells the story of what happened next. He writes in his autobiography, In Search of Identity, "...the bodies of thirty-nine soldiers were unearthed in the Canal Zone. The Israelis began to negotiate the price they expected to pay to recover their dead. "You won't have to pay anything," I said. 'This is a humane action for which we accept no payment; just come and collect the bodies' Indeed, the thirty-nine bodies were delivered to the Israelis with full military honors and, naturally, nothing was asked for in return. Some of their dead were given official military funerals as they were senior army officers. Again, in 1977, nineteen more bodies were unearthed in the course of the digging to deepen the Canal and, again, they were immediately delivered and given all due honors. Why did I do it? For the sake of peace. I believe that for peace a man may, even should, do everything in his power. Nothing in this world could rank higher than peace."

That act by Anwar Sadat to return the bodies of Israel soldiers was a first step toward the process of the peace accord eventually made between Egypt and Israel brokered by President Jimmy Carter. What surprise was there in Anwar Sadat's action? It was something not expected arising out of war with one's enemy, it was an act of compassion.

Compassion will almost always surprise your opposition. It will unbalance them and in the effort to regain balance there is the opportunity, the moment, to take the first steps in bringing peace between the two of you; to be reconciled. Whoever may win on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, remember this story. No matter the outcome, surprise the other side with your compassion and per chance we might take some steps towards peace in this land.

As Albert Einstein once reflected, "We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them."

As my dear friend and Rebbe Keller writes, "Our mystical tradition shares Einstein's insight; Rabbi Miles Krassen has articulated it by saying that the problems of *Asiyah* cannot be solved in the world of *Asiyah* alone. Instead, we must access the other worlds, opening to the flow of thought, imagination, association, connection, compassion and Divine energy that reside there. We need to get unstuck, and get a different view – from a higher altitude, and at a level where we are not quite so isolated from each other and from the Earth.

Surprise your opposition with compassion.

### ***A Patriot***

The second story, a patriot. In this time when News Anchors and pundits speak from their living rooms, I'm always looking at the books on the shelves behind them. Almost all of them have at least one book of the historian, David McCullough. Do any of you look to see if you can make out the titles of the books on those shelves? This story comes from McCullough's book, The Pioneers.

It's a story of a patriot, a young man, named Ephraim Cutler. He was the son of Dr. Reverend Manasseh Cutler who held three doctorate degrees, one in law, one in medicine, and another in theology/divinity. Any of you hear of these men before? The story I want to share with you starts in the year 1787 and ends with the assurance that there would be no slavery in what was known back then as the Northwest Territory. Reverend Manasseh and his son Ephraim lobbied tirelessly to ensure that the territory would remain free from slavery. That territory is known today as the states of Ohio, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana.

The British conceded the territory in 1783 at the signing of the peace treaty with the Americans in Paris of that year. Reverend Cutler, along with a gentleman by the name of Rufus Putnam helped to instigate the settling of the territory by lobbying Congress to make it a slave free territory, known as the Newburgh Resolution. Mind you, there was no president, no George Washington as president, to the United States at that time, only Congress governed the country.

Remembering that the United States Constitutional Convention wasn't held until 1789, the decision as to what constituted, defined freedom in this newly acquired territory west of the Ohio River, was decided a whole two years before we even had a constitution in this country, not to mention nearly a whole century later the passing of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1865.

Fast forward from 1789 to 1802. Manasseh's son, Ephraim, and Rufus Putnam are basically novices to politics as they make their way as two newly elected delegates to the Ohio State constitutional convention. Early in the convention's deliberations the issue of slavery, and the prior prohibition of its inclusion in the Northwest Territory, was raised. And it was raised no less than under the encouragement of Thomas Jefferson, who wanted to see the prohibition of slavery eliminated in the Northwest Territory. His supporters introduced an amendment that was thought to be a compromise. It allowed for slavery up to certain ages, 35 years for a male and 25 years for a female. Easy to see what a slippery slope such a compromise promised.

Just as the debate was under way, and it was a heated debate indeed, Ephraim became ill, so ill that he had to be confined to his bed. While weak and hurting the vote at the convention was called. Now, what happens next makes the movie, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," pale in comparison. Rufus goes to Ephraim's room and as McCullough reports, Rufus exclaims, "Cutler, you must get well, be in your place, or you will lose your favorite measure." But it's reported that Ephraim wasn't able to get out of bed. So, his friends picked him up and carried him by stretcher to the convention so that he could cast his vote to keep slavery out of the territory and the state of Ohio. In his diary of the day he wrote, "I went to the convention and moved to strike out the obnoxious matter, and I made my objections as forcibly as I was able. It cost me every effort I was capable of making, and it passed by a majority of one vote only." That vote was his.

The way to surprise the opposition? Show up! Show up where and when they don't expect you to do so. Often, when we show up, we do so by being carried in the hands of our friends. It is in one another's hands and hearts that our country rests today and in two weeks from now. Show up.

### ***A Patient***

Our final story is closer to home to me, not that the other stories don't come close to where my political and spiritual life lie. This story is about a patient. It's about my identical twin brother, Doug. Let me fast forward quick. Doug was diagnosed with HIV in 1986 and he died in 1992. This story is not about his death. This story is a story of how living with HIV he surprised a force opposing him, and in so doing changed an institution. Are we still sitting in the dark?

The medical field, for those of you who may not have realized this, love identical twins. Why? They can learn a lot from us. Not that they are necessarily listening to us but because of the medical research opportunities our bodies and minds afford them. Like many research endeavors, the outcomes are never certain, but the hope is that the

knowledge gained by the research may per chance end up helping one's self and hopefully others in the long term.

In 1987, there was absolutely no treatment on the horizon for HIV/AIDS. However, the National Institutes of Health, that institution for which Dr. Fauci is and was director for infectious diseases, headed up a research project to see if transplanting the bone marrow from a HIV negative twin could reverse or slow down the replication of the virus in the HIV positive twin. Btw, Fauci looked younger and less worn down back then the one time I saw him walk through lobby at NIH.

Again, this story is about Doug; not about me. One of the protocols of the study was for each of the twins to have their blood drawn each time they came in for an exam. In the phlebotomy room there were 8 chairs from which patients could choose to sit in to have their blood drawn. All, except those who were HIV+. They were always directed to sit in the 8<sup>th</sup> chair. I was allowed to sit in any of the chairs, but not Doug. He was always directed to the 8<sup>th</sup> chair. One day, Doug, when directed to the 8<sup>th</sup> chair, said, "Thanks, but I'm going to go sit in a different chair today." The phlebotomist's response was immediate, "No, Doug, you must sit in that chair," and pointed to the chair labeled with the number 8. When he refused, telling the phlebotomist, and then the doctors and nurses, that it was discrimination against those living with HIV to instruct them as to where they must sit. He told them that the only reason the HIV+ patients had to sit in chair number 8 was so that the staff could tell people waiting to have their blood drawn for other research studies, didn't have to worry about contracting HIV when having their blood drawn because all of "those patients" had their blood drawn in chair number 8. Patients not HIV+ could sit in any of the other chairs. In fact, it became commonly known at NIH, by staff and patients, that anyone sitting in chair #8 was HIV+. This is what was going on, even at NIH, nine years before HIPAA became law.

Doug reminded Dr. Fauci's staff, which I'm confident went up the ladder to Dr. Fauci, is what they should be telling patients who were not HIV+ is that medical staff follow CDC precautionary measures, like not re-using needles when drawing blood, and the use of PPE. Therefore, no worries about contracting HIV by sitting in the same chair as a person who is HIV+. Again, this was in the days when people thought one could contract HIV by sitting on the same toilet seat.

NIH's response? "Doug, chair #8 is our protocol for this bone marrow study. Sit in that chair or you and your brother will be dropped from the study." Now mind you, again, this study was our only hope of extending Doug's life, or paying \$250,000 for a bone marrow transplant on our own which was obviously out of the question. That's what they cost back then.

I'm going to fast forward in this story. The bone marrow transplant happened, and it may have helped extend his life a bit. It happened because in the midst of all the hard feelings, conversations about phlebotomy's protocol, while I was riding on the Metro in Washington DC on my way to NIH for another round of lymphocyte extrusion I picked up the Washington Post on the seat next to me. I began to read an article about an Episcopal Priest who was the Ethics Department Head at NIH. I can't remember the article, but I clearly remember getting excited and told Doug he needed to call that priest, and he did.

In what must have been an incredibly busy day for that priest, that ethicist, the article being published about him that very day, he took Doug's call. And in hearing Doug's story simply said, "Doug, you're right. Chair #8 is discrimination and that is going to change. It will not change before the time your bone marrow transplant is scheduled, but I promise you, it is going to change soon now that I know about that chair." A few months later, chair #8 protocol was gone.

Surprise your opposition, who at times may be your only hope, by your refusal to deny your own worth and dignity, allies will come to your aid, and even institutions, blinded by their own good aims, will be changed. Remembering that it was Reinhold Neibuhr's position that, "...many things an individual will not do, a group will do together to further its fortunes (NIH's budget and prestige) and, of course, those of its members (doctors/researchers). It is, therefore, perfectly possible for the same persons to act quite morally, or respectably (saving people's lives), according to the customs and values of their society (scientists), and yet in relation to other groups and particularly to the other groups themselves (people living with HIV), to act unethically."

Surprise the propensity of such societies, no matter how noble, their good aims may be, with your worth by refusing to sit down in a labeled chair, or by sitting down on the stool at a lunch counter, or refusing to move from the chair you're sitting in at the front of the bus, and allies will come with you. It is then institutions change.

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A politician, a patriot, a patient, surprising their opposition with compassion, showing up to the party, and refusing to deny their own worth. So, may it be with us.

Blessed be and Amen.