

SET THEM FREE

The Other Side of Exodus

Laurel A. Dykstra

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food cultures of countless countries and turns a blind eye to the kidnapping and murder of trade unionists at Coke bottling plants in Colombia.³⁶

In 1998 the assets of the three richest men in the world totaled more than the combined GNP of the world's least developed countries and their six hundred million people.³⁷ These are our modern-day pharaohs. The super-rich receive hundreds of times the income of those who are merely rich: and they are completely insulated from the daily realities of those whose lives they control. They do not owe loyalty to any government or nation. They have common interests only with one another. While Egypt's pharaohs ruled North Africa, today's pharaohs carve up the world to share among themselves. No slave leader could gain access to *these* god-kings.

Pharaoh's Heart

We will return now to the Pharaoh of the plagues. From the burning bush to the Reed Sea there are nineteen references to this pharaoh's heart. A recurring change in Pharaoh's heart triggers cycle after cycle of disaster and negotiation. In half of the incidents, YHWH is the causal agent: "the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart." Because of Christianity's emphasis on individual sin and repentance, Pharaoh's heart has become a biblical springboard for discussions of theodicy (God's use of evil for good), and human sin. Did God cause Pharaoh to sin? Some commentators have answered this question by suggesting that responsibility shifts from Pharaoh to YHWH. They say that Pharaoh began by hardening his own heart; in time he could not do otherwise and by the time God hardened his heart it was already inevitable. This explanation attributes agency to Pharaoh in those passages in passive voice, "Pharaoh's heart was hardened." Other readers see the hand of God in every passage and grant Pharaoh no agency at all.

What these interpretations reflect is the tension between different sources. The Bible does not present a single clear position on human freedom and divine control. In J material, God is an entity who demands to be known. The signs and wonders are designed so that Pharaoh and Israel may know YHWH. But as each sign is removed, Pharaoh deliberately chooses not to see God; he hardens his own heart. In P material, YHWH hardens Pharaoh's heart prior to each plague rendering him insensible to it. Thus the plagues are multiplied and YHWH's eventual victory is all the more glorious. The god of these passages is distant but very much in control. So to the question, Did God cause Pharaoh to sin?, the Priestly answer is yes. The J and P perspectives overlap and intertwine in the text as it stands. The Priestly perspective dominates because theirs was the later edition.

The problem of a hard heart, which appears nowhere else in the Pentateuch,³⁸ is further obscured by issues in translation. Biblical Hebrew is an embodied language; emotions and ideas are expressed in bodily metaphors that are not always translated into English. Consider the following examples.

Exodus 5:21 For making us loathsome to Pharaoh (Tanakh)
 For having made our smell reek in the eyes of Pharaoh
 (Fox)³⁹

Exodus 6:12 How should Pharaoh heed me,
 a man of impeded speech? (Tanakh)
 How will Pharaoh hearken to me?
 I am of foreskinned lips (Fox)

Exodus 14:8 the Israelites were departing defiantly, boldly (Tanakh)
 the children of Israel were going out with hand
 upraised (Fox)

Exodus 20:3 You shall have no other gods before me (NRSV)
 You shall have no other gods besides Me (Tanakh)⁴⁰
 You are not to have any other gods on my face (Fox)

The decision whether to translate a metaphor literally or to paraphrase involves trading off different kinds of depth and clarity.

“I will bring you into the land which I lifted up my hand to give to Abraham” (Fox). “I will bring you into the land which I swore to give Abraham” (Tanakh). Both of the above translations for Exodus 6:8 are reasonable. The first emphasizes the physicality of the divine—YHWH has a hand—but downplays or assumes knowledge of the legal and covenantal significance of raising one’s hand. The second translation accurately represents the meaning of the action, but eliminates its earthly physicality; YHWH loses a hand.

In the case of Pharaoh’s heart, the metaphor is most often translated literally into English, only occasionally do translators refer to “Pharaoh’s resolve.” Indeed in English we have a bias toward translating this metaphor literally because the heart is a symbolic organ in our language and culture as well. When the changes to Pharaoh’s heart occur, we observe that it becomes insensible to the workings of God, but we interpret this as an affirmation of what we already know about Pharaoh as oppressor: he was cruel and unmoved by Israel’s suffering.

In English the heart is an organ with many associations; hearts sing, bleed, break, weep, dance. They can be warm, cold, soft, hard, empty, full, troubled, easy. In the Bible, the Hebrew noun *leb*, which means heart, can also be translated as: “seat of vitality, inner self, mind, character, disposition, loyalty, concern, determination, courage, morale, intention, purpose, attention, consideration, understanding, self, interior, middle, life, or person.”⁴¹

In English, the heart is the seat of compassion, love, and affection, a role that Hebrew reserves for the womb, kidneys, or bowels. In Hebrew, the

heart is the seat of courage, resolve, and intention, more like guts or mind in English. The assumption that a hard heart means cruelty is therefore an artifact of language.⁴² In English a hard heart is cruel; Pharaoh has a hard heart and we already know Pharaoh to be cruel, so readers of English mistakenly assume cruelty to be the meaning of the Hebrew metaphor. This illustrates what a delicate and complex process translation is. The expression “lost in translation” does not apply here so much as the reverse; in translation, something is added. This linguistic bias affects how the rest of the metaphor is translated as well.

There are two verbs to which Pharaoh’s heart is the object, *kabed* and *chazaq*; for the most part, J material favors *kabed* and P/E *chazaq*. The verbs are synonyms, subtly different, but close enough that most Christian translators feel comfortable rendering both as “hardened.” The Tanakh, the Jewish Bible, does not use the word hardened at all; *chazaq* is translated as stiffened, and the verb *kabed* and the noun *leb* are incorporated into a paraphrase, “became stubborn.”⁴³ In general, translations of *kabed* emphasize stubbornness, but translations of *chazaq* emphasize strengthening, on the whole a positive action. In English a strong heart is very different from a hard heart. Pharaoh becomes less a stock villain, and perhaps easier for first-world readers to relate to, when what appears to be senseless cruelty is understood as the distortion of an essentially good or neutral trait. This is important for our first-world, Egypt-identified reading. Under pressure, Pharaoh does not increase in cruelty; he strengthens his commitment to the values of his culture and class. First-world Christians have little in common with a genocidal tyrant, but much to learn from a threatened man deeply entrenched in a death-dealing ideology and way of life.

FIRST-WORLD HEARTS

Few of us have reason to identify with the absolute power that Pharaoh wields. Nevertheless, we can use the theme of Pharaoh’s strengthened heart to explore how even the most ordinary of us get stuck in first-world privilege and how that keeps us insensible to the wonders of creation and the urgings of God’s prophets. What are the values of *our* culture and class that prevent us from doing justice? What is it that keeps our first-world hearts from functioning as they should?

Rather than rehashing a familiar metaphor by talking about hearts and hardening, let us look at other possible translations and paraphrases. Remember the various translations for heart (*leb*): “seat of vitality, inner self, mind, character, disposition, loyalty, concern, determination, courage, morale, intention, purpose, attention, consideration, understanding, self, interior, middle, life, person.” The most frequent translations for the verb *chazaq* are: “be strong, become strong, strengthen, be firm, be severe, be

hard, support.” The most frequent translations for the verb *kabed* are: “weigh heavily, be honored, honor, be heavy, be dull, harden, increase.”⁴⁴

Using these translations, there are many possible and enlightening paraphrases for what happened to Pharaoh’s heart. Pharaoh dulled his mind. He rigidified his understanding. I will make him stubborn. He honored his inner self. Pharaoh’s character was strengthened. He made his heart heavy. YHWH increased his courage. Pharaoh firmed his loyalty. His resolve grew strong. YHWH supported his determination. I will use four of these paraphrases as starting points for exploring first-world dysfunction.

First-World Despair

And Pharaoh made heavy his heart.

We do not know anything about the state of Pharaoh’s mind, we are twenty-some hundred years from the texts’ final editors, who were themselves six hundred years from the events they recorded. The ancient world was far more concerned with spiritual than psychological realities. Mental health is a recent and culturally specific preoccupation. However, the notion that Pharaoh’s heavy heart and dull disposition lead to his failure to act for justice and to his eventual downfall, rings true. In the United States, one in ten adults is diagnosed with depression.⁴⁵

The people of the United States on the whole are not a joyful people. We are not spiritually at peace. We are a troubled, turbulent people, breeding addiction, abuse and poverty among ourselves . . . there is little real joy these days in the United States and a great deal of suffering and shame.⁴⁶

In Canada, northern Europe, and Australia the situation is much the same. When we consider the globalization of poverty, the rate of environmental devastation, and the increasing precariousness of the lives of all but the mega-rich and their retainers, that is not surprising. Depression is perhaps the most healthy reaction to the state of the planet.

For many people of privilege, however, this necessary and human grieving turns into despair, and that is where perceptions become distorted. People with access to telephones, photocopiers, the Internet, automobiles, frequent-flier miles, video cameras, and more habitually perceive themselves as unable to effect change.⁴⁷

I’m only one person, what can I do?

The problems are so huge it depresses me to think about them.

You can’t fight city hall.

Who am I to impose my version of reality.

It makes me sad but I can't do anything about it.

Me? I'm just a middle-aged woman: a housewife and mother. I'm a nobody.⁴⁸

Rabbi Michael Lerner describes this social and spiritual pathology as *surplus powerlessness*.⁴⁹

Rather than being galvanized to action by our sadness, we take a kind of voluptuous pleasure in our despair, reveling in the comfort of our own discomfort. Or else we medicate ourselves against it and in so doing become both accomplices and victims of the voracious mental health industry where drug companies control safety testing and hospitals prescribe medication to manage more clients with fewer staff, all in the name of greater profit from suffering. This does not mean you should not take medicine if you are sick, but if all of us are sick and we pay the same people for medicine, it is time to ask some questions.

In our despair, we perceive not only that we are unable to act, but that we are excused from acting: "I'm already depressed, I can't possibly deal with some horrible justice issue on top of that." Any action that would affirm our own capacity for change and claim some of our own authority becomes a chore or a punishment. Unable to act, neither do we respond to the demands of those who do act. God's prophets—unwashed tree-sitters, angry young black men, illegal aliens, transgender warriors, domestic political prisoners, and all their sisters and brothers—come to us like Moses came to Pharaoh. Like Moses they seem to us wild, arrogant, and irrelevant; they don't say please and refuse to follow proper channels. We do not know them or their gods, and through the haze of our despair they are easy to disregard.

Every increase in the weight of Pharaoh's heart brought him closer to death. For the very vulnerable, the impoverished, the homeless, the poor of the third and fourth worlds,⁵⁰ the connection between despair and death is swift and clear. But the affluent are cushioned from this as from every reality. The deaths that result from our despair and consequent inaction are either slow, or removed from us. A dead lake still looks pretty, an extinct species is merely absent, and it is not *our* children who are shot in the streets. So we sink deeper into despair.

German theologian Dorothee Sölle says that despair is a luxury we cannot afford.⁵¹ It seems clear that we cannot afford despair, but from our disposable diapers to our recreational vehicles, most middle-income North Americans have lived all our lives beyond our means in terms of what the earth will bear. We know no other way to live. This connection between the state of our hearts and the state of the environment is highlighted in a different way by feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether. Ruether points to a deep wounding of our spirits. She contends that human creativity is diminished significantly by our impoverishment in terms of inter-

actions with other species. Engaging with creation is a spiritual act, but for most of us our contact with nonhuman life consists mainly of the purchase and consumption of factory farmed, chemically and genetically altered, hyper-processed plants and animals. Most North Americans recognize one thousand corporate logos and fewer than ten species of plants.⁵² We are becoming as isolated as Pharaoh behind his palace walls. The less contact we have with other forms of life, Ruether says, the less able we are to see, think, and use our imaginations.⁵³ The less able we are to act.

Dumbing Down

Pharaoh dulled his mind, he hardened his understanding.

The second Pharaoh's deliberate refusal to know YHWH, and his predecessor's denial of Joseph, have modern parallels.

We First World Christians . . . see and hear more information about more things than any people in history, we are the most educated, economically powerful, and socially mobile people in the world, yet most of us experience a profound sense of confusion and paralysis when it comes to how power is distributed in the real world. This is the most crucial contradiction of imperial culture. The more US hegemony is unrestrained, the more citizens feel impotent to change the world. Instead of staying awake to structures of racism at home or displays of militarism abroad, our eyes grow heavy, sedated by the mediated reality of the Dream Factories. Our credulity nurtures a willful ignorance of the complexities of modern capitalism, a benumbed apathy, a preoccupation with the trivial and a fascination with spectacle. This vicious spiral of dependence, delusion, and denial has led to near-complete loss of vision: We see the world neither the way it is nor the way it could be.⁵⁴

Intelligent people with a wealth of resources believe that issues such as global economics are beyond our capacity to understand, have sound-bite attention spans, and are increasingly disinclined to critique or question the constructed nature of the "information" we receive through the corporate-owned media.

This final point was driven painfully home for me in November of 1999. After the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization, I returned to my community, only forty miles from Seattle, to describe my fairly typical experiences: dance, cultural work, remarkably diverse participation, peaceful protest, good analysis, creative negotiations, angry encounters with WTO delegates, standoffs with police in riot gear, some violence (overwhelmingly on the part of the police), and rock solid jail solidarity. Good, intelligent people who know and trust me were convinced that the televised riot they had seen in their living rooms was the sum total of what

had happened in Seattle. They would not or could not believe my personal account.

A phenomenal amount of first-world mental energy is spent on not thinking. One of the most disturbing examples of our dumbing down is the way that we talk about racism in North America. Racism is the systematic disadvantaging of people of color in all measures of what constitutes the good life—housing, income, safety, respect, leisure, meaningful work, and so on. In public at least, the vast majority of people will say that racism is a bad thing and that they are opposed to it. School systems, corporations, and governments produce and promote festivals, posters, and campaigns focused on tolerance. Almost without exception they portray racism as personal prejudice based on skin color, independent of any political power or economic structure. Intolerance is the problem; tolerance, then, is the solution. This model completely fails to address the historical roots of racism in North America: conquest, slavery, colonialism, immigration, and nationalism. Neither does it address current economic and social inequities. Nearly one-third of all African Americans and Latin Americans in the United States live below the poverty line.⁵⁵ Discussion of racism, and in fact all ethical discourse, is kept at an individual level so that the moral imperative is to be tolerant, or nice, not to seek societal change.

The way that we persist in racism by denying its existence is perhaps the most blatant and pervasive example of our dulled attention, but we are equally fatuous in dealing with issues of class, disability, gender, sexuality, and so on. In Exodus, one-third of the time Pharaoh's heart is simply hardened, not through divine intervention, nor through his own action. "Pharaoh's heart was hardened." This passive-voice hardening is an apt metaphor for the benumbed first-world refusal to acknowledge our participation in the structures of injustice like racism, ableism, classism, and homophobia. We perceive them as things that "just happen." "That's just the way things are, you can't change it."

Privatized Spirituality

Pharaoh honored his inner self, he strengthened his spirit.

Pharaoh was so full of a sense of his own rightness that there was no room for self-doubt. When *kabed* is translated as "to bring honor," it suggests that Pharaoh was glorifying and enriching some part of himself. When first-world people "honor our inner selves" with a rich interior life of prayer and spirituality, our personal relationship with the divine can actually keep us from the work of justice.

Recently in North America there has been a resurgence of interest in all things "spiritual." This hunger is born of the alienation and destruction of communities imposed by corporate culture. But capitalism swiftly co-opted spiritualists' legitimate critique of materialism and sold it back to them and

their followers in the form of overpriced feathers, crystals, meditation tapes, magic, yoga classes, and incense, most of which are fast-food versions of other cultures' most sacred wisdom.

As North Americans we are also vulnerable to the Western cult of the individual and the myth of the meritocracy. From this perspective, prayer, knowledge of the divine, and personal insight can and must be individual achievements. We honor our inner selves. Privatistic piety is shaped by economic individualism so that somehow personal salvation and worship can seem completely separate from the corporations we work for, the plight of the homeless, or the destruction of forests and indigenous people.

This kind of spiritual triumphalism, in which prayer is divorced from action, is not limited to Christians nor even to the overtly "religious," but Christianity is more prone than some religions because we have come to emphasize belief over identity or practice. This is particularly ironic in light of the fact that many of Christianity's central texts—the Prophets, the Gospels, Revelation, as well as Exodus—are profoundly political, economic, and social in nature. Our scriptures demand action, yet most liberal Christians are politically and socially indistinguishable from their non-Christian neighbors. Indeed, in the United States and Canada, most Christians whose faith does impact their politics, promote a right-wing agenda profoundly at odds with the radically inclusive, morally loose, anti-empire texts they claim to follow. This similarity to liberal Jews, atheists, and others can offer a certain satisfaction to liberal Christians: we have more in common with them than with the fundamentalist or literalist members of our respective traditions. But when being indistinguishable from our neighbors means that all of us are cutting a deal with empire and exploitation by ignoring the justice-making aspects of our traditions, then sameness is neither good nor even benign.

This false separation of spiritual and political is maintained in Christianity by reducing our history's and scriptures' systemic and pervasive demands for justice to the practice of charity. Charity is the opposite of justice; it diminishes the oppressed by defining them as passive recipients and honors the already privileged, describing them as generous and benevolent. Indeed, charity without concrete action to change the conditions that make it necessary is nothing but the exercise and maintenance of control.

A more secular example of spirituality that substitutes for any kind of praxis is the phenomenon of "issue entertainment." Hundreds of thousands of us pay to see lavish spectacles of human suffering like *Angels in America* or *Schindler's List*. With our ticket price each one receives the right to leave the theater feeling like a "better" person. We have neither lived the reality nor acted to change it, but somehow the thought, "I'm doing something about the issue, I saw the movie," doesn't sound as ludicrous as it should. Vicarious feeling substitutes for real-world action.

One evening on Granville Street in Vancouver I watched people leaving the theater. The performance was *Rent*, a musical about the difficulty of

making ends meet. Affluent theater-goers streamed out into the night past the upturned palms and empty baseball caps of homeless street kids. For the price of a pair of tickets a kid could have spent a month in one of the residential hotels across the street.

People are hungry for meaningful spiritual engagement, and spiritual practice is important and necessary. I have watched committed activists burn out, burn up, and go home because they do not have a spiritual base or they do not know how to pray. Movements for social change have been incredibly harmed by leaders who have no way to deal with the damage they have experienced and so reproduce it. As one often guilty of forgetting contemplation for action, I call activists to reclaim prayer with me, but I think that ours is the more uncommon failing. When a rich interior life excludes or substitutes for a rich political life, when liberation is a personal phenomenon and “political” is a dismissal, then this is the religion of legitimation. We honor ourselves like Pharaoh, and it keeps us from knowing God.

Traditional Values

Pharaoh's resolve was strengthened, he firmed his loyalty.

As YHWH's immanent victory and Pharaoh's eventual defeat become increasingly evident, Pharaoh digs in and becomes ever more obstinate. He strengthens his commitment to the old order. As in Exodus, the lifestyles of the affluent and indeed all of us are threatened by the deteriorating state of the planet. One response has been a shift to the right, a return to so-called traditional values in many areas of North American life: economics, sexual morality, education, and so on.

For those who most resemble Pharaoh in terms of wealth and power, the return to “traditional values” has global implications. The influence of the super-rich in North America does not stop at national borders. For these modern-day pharaohs, strengthening their resolve or hardening their hearts takes the form of neo-liberal economics or savage capitalism. This perversion of the liberal economics envisioned by Adam Smith removed all checks and balances; the competition of the free market is replaced with monopoly capitalism in the form of mega-corporations that have no longer to answer even to nations. Through the for-profit international lending institutions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, wealthy individuals and corporations imposed structural adjustment programs on indebted nations. Each structural adjustment package called for sweeping economic policy reforms intended to channel more of the adjusted country's resources and productive activity toward repayment of debt, to privatize public assets and services, and to open further national economies to the global economy. Restrictions and tariffs on both imports and exports were reduced, and subsidies were offered to attract foreign investors.⁵⁶ The

effect of these changes is to override local government authority and make any form of economic organization other than corporate capitalism illegal. It is one thing to believe your system is better, but to outlaw any alternatives is quite another.

And Pharaoh summoned wise men and sorcerers (Exod. 7:11). Like Pharaoh, the super-rich consult wise men and sorcerers. Milton Freedman and Alan Greenspan are oracles of globalization. Paid brains in high-powered think tanks like the Heritage Foundation are the authors of soulless policies that translate into misery for the already struggling. With a terrible arrogance they assume that the interests of white male business can determine and implement the wants and needs of the diversity of the world's nations and peoples.

Those of us who are not of Pharaoh's status find ourselves in some middle level of the Egyptian power structure. "It is pretty clear where we fit in the exodus story is among the functionaries in Pharaoh's court rather than among the workers in the slave labor camps."⁵⁷

For us, hardening of our hearts manifests itself in a simplification and idealization of the past. Every sound bite for decency and old-fashioned values is newspeak for crushing those who already cry out. Cleaning up the streets means open season on the homeless; getting tough on crime criminalizes youth of color; back to basics in education spells gross funding cuts, especially to kids with disabilities; family values promote hate crimes, book burning, and the alarming suicide rate of queer youth; welfare reform is nothing but punishment for poverty.

In the Catholic Worker house where I live, I bore witness recently to one of the bitter ironies of this traditionalist backlash. I heard a homeless grandmother argue vehemently that "the United States may have its problems but it is still the best country in the world to live in. In other countries their governments tell them what to do." This woman has been living on the streets and in inadequate shelters for a period of years, and every day her country tells her what to do: shut-up, go away, and disappear.

A Story to Conclude

In the way of most diseases, the problems with our first-world hearts are due to either underfunctioning or overfunctioning. The underfunctioning heart fails to perform as it should: the despairing heart fails to hope; the dumbed down heart fails to think. On the other hand, the overfunctioning heart persists in a single activity in an exaggerated manner to the neglect of all else. Privatized spirituality substitutes for political engagement, and those who have strengthened their loyalty to traditional values consider it a weakness to acknowledge criticism. Each of these patterns reinforces another. Despair at the state of the world and an exaggerated sense of powerlessness cause us to retreat into willful ignorance about the workings of the world in which we live. Both neo-liberalism and apolitical spirituality

depend on this deliberate refusal to see and know the world around us. Then we use individualistic piety and aggressive faith in the salvific power of old ideas—biblical literalism, capitalism, family values—as an antidote to our despair, filling up our emptiness with imagined glory. And so we first-world Christians are caught swinging back and forth between grandiosity and despair,⁵⁸ becoming more and more entrenched in patterns that harm ourselves and others.

But the cycle can be broken. We will end this chapter with a counter-story to Pharaoh's heart—a story of first-world Christians who came together and defied each of the four manifestations of heart trouble that plague us. They were hopeful, thinking, active, and looked clearly at past and present.

The year 1999/2000 saw new hope in North American activism. People all over the continent were galvanized by a series of giant protests, in the United States and around the world, aimed at interfering with and drawing attention to structures of global capitalism: the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. Faith-based activists were among the thousands bringing an adamantly this-world spirituality of action to the streets. For months beforehand we schooled ourselves and others in nonviolent direct action, jail solidarity, legal issues, radical puppetry, street medicine, consensus decision making, and the meaning and elaborate workings of the structures we opposed. On the days of action, blocking streets, staring down tear gas, singing in jail, and kneeling before buses, we proved ourselves powerful and effective beyond our dreams.