

Let Freedom Sing
Rev. Jonathan Morgan
January 15, 2017

“Watch Your Step Oh My Son. Let us leave this darkness.”

I can still hear that powerful voice... rich, deeply resonate, uncontained by the walls of any home. You knew when Ryan was in the house. His laugh—an intoxicating mix of child-like wonder and booming thunder—was offered easily and often. And his smile...your day was always brightened by the warm embrace of his radiant smile.

Ryan Speedo Green, Speedo as everyone knew him, possessed an enormous, glad-hearted, unbridled, spirit... which could not be contained.

Speedo was a grateful, generous, courteous 6 foot 5 inch, 300 lb., size 17 shoe, 20-year old African American giant of a man and friend of our eldest son, Nathan.

Speedo, a name given to him by his father Cecil, a part-time body builder and a bit of a clown.

Lisa remembers the challenge of trying to feed Ryan during his frequent visits—her love of cooking was matched by his appetite! She remembers fondly how he would move with such deliberate intention to offer a hug goodbye—gingerly embracing as to not crush the object of his affection. Speedo was easy to love...and remember.

Speedo sang several times in our church. He would admit now that his gift was still a bit unpolished, his volume stuck at eleven when a subtler approach might better match for the piece he was offering...none-the-less no one forgot his voice.

This was the Ryan Speedo Green we remember... and believed someday would make his mark. We had no idea.

You see, we knew him before his musical education was complete. Before he would compete in the New York Metropolitan Opera audition for young and promising talent, against 1200 young artist from the very finest conservatories. A contest he would win much to his surprise and delight, singing the beautiful Aria from Verdi that began with the words I offered at the start of this morning’s message: “Watch Your Step Oh My Son. Let us leave this darkness.”

Now, at the tender age of 32, Speedo is captivating audiences at the Met and prestigious opera houses throughout Europe singing in major roles. So, we are no longer surprised when we hear his voice on NPR being interviewed by Terry Gross of Fresh Air or see his beautiful smile on the Daily Show with Trevor Noah.

Although we knew something of his troubled life and challenging childhood: his early years living in a shack in southeastern Virginia; his difficult and complicated relationship with his mother and mostly absent father; truly we had no idea how far the arc of his life had bent over time.

This morning, we celebrate the life of one of our countries greatest leaders, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. We celebrate his inspiring vision for our nation; that someday we will live up to and into the full

measure of its creed. We remember and give our heart filled thanks for the civil rights struggle he championed, and sacrificed with his life, to move steadily forward. Sadly acknowledging that the journey is by no means complete. King's vision might be on the horizon but it is still a long ways off, due to setbacks experienced along the way. There have been too many of late... the degrading impact of racism is still holding down far too many men, women, and children of color—a gaping wound on our nation's psyche. And so, that is why we must sing the song of that hope, *We Shall Overcome*, praying that someday this vision might be brought into proper focus and at the core of our nation's soul.

In preparing for this morning, I read again one of King's famous quotes: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." And I thought of Speedo.

Over the years, I have recited these words from King knowing their truth for they resonated within the inner spaces of my soul. Yet, I never fully understood the impact of their meaning until recently when I read the more complete story of our friend, Ryan Speedo Green as beautifully and powerfully depicted by the author, Daniel Bergner, in his book, *Sing for your Life—A story of Race, Music and Family*. The story of Speedo's life. It is an inspiring story of how love found its voice in song and overcome the threatening shadows of hate before it destroyed the very life that gives life to that voice. I highly recommend the book.

This morning, I offer one account of how love overcome hate in Speedo's life. It started at a very low point, when Ryan was twelve, and the depravation and abuse and neglect by those who should have loved and cherished him, precipitated reactions that were uncontrolled and deeply frightening.

He recalled one of those outbursts while confronting his mother at the age of twelve. He said, "I was thinking, I wanted her to fear me as much as I feared her, as much as I felt her wrath. I hated my life. I was past the breaking point. I wanted her to feel like I felt when she would scream at me that I robbed her of her career and that she wished that I would never have been born as she beat me with a belt."

These outburst of uncontrolled rage continued through much of his young life. After numerous attempts to quell his angry and violent outbursts, a young preteen Ryan was delivered, with shackles around his cuffs and ankles, to a facility of last resort for troubled boys. The DeJarnette Center, with its forty-eight cells and several chambers for solitary confinement; named after Dr. Joseph DeJarnette.

Dr. DeJarnette was a crusader for the American Eugenics Movement of the first half of the twentieth century, a proponent of Virginia's Racial Integrity Act, an open admirer of Nazi accomplishments...and a poet to boot. Let me offer one of his sonnets:

Oh, why do we allow these people
To breed back to the monkey's nest,
To increase our Country's burden
When we should only breed the best?

Oh, you wise men take up the burden,
And make this your loudest creed,
Sterilize the misfits promptly-
All not fit to breed!

Then our race will be strengthened and bettered,

And our men and women be blest,
Not apish, repulsive and foolish,
For the best will breed the best.

Yes, pulled out of the pain-filled tragedy of his childhood, Ryan was placed in an institution that honored the legacy of such a man. That could have been the end of a beautiful life. The silencing of a beautiful voice that brings joy to so many now. The end of Ryan Speedo Green.

So, what changed? When did he go from an angry abused boy, the object of racial degradation, the young man who was kicked out of no less than four preschools for his uncontrolled and violent behavior, to being the radiant light that he is today?

It changed when Love entered his life. When someone offered Ryan the love and care he craved and taught him that he was a beautiful and gifted child of God he began to find his voice.

A teacher, Mrs. Hughes, who took all the toughest students to help them discover their true potential and who was unfazed when Ryan greeted her on his first day by throwing a desk at her. “Perhaps you would like to learn from the floor since your books are already down there.” She replied calmly, returning to her teaching to prove that she was unfazed by his behavior. By the end of the day, Ryan had righted his desk and was sitting beneath the poster of Martin Luther King Jr., the words from his “I have a Dream” speech printed out in marker.

Mrs. Hughes had posted the lines partially because it mortified her to recall the church minstrel shows she’d been featured in as a girl, tap dancing proudly with the men around her in blackface. It was partially because just about all the students channeled to her by the superintendent were black, and she wasn’t. And partially because of the phrase, “Content of their Character”. She wanted these kids to focus on those words. She needed them to consider who they wish to be. They had to feel that they could construct themselves from this juncture forward, that they had the ability to do this. Whatever had been said about them in the past, whatever judgments they had absorbed, along with the stigma of being exiled to her room, did not matter.

“Read this please,” she asked Ryan pointing to the poster, “and memorize these words: ‘I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but the content of their character.’”

That was the start. Through the loving support of Mrs. Hughes who would later recommend that Speedo be sent to a special school for musically gifted children, he was able to redirect his rage and put it into his love for music. His life changed forever and our lives the richer for it!

“Watch Your Step Oh My Son. Let us leave this darkness.”

Friends, we enter a week filled with uncertainty. We fear there may be shadow times ahead and we worry that those on the margins will be forgotten or lost or dispatched with cruelty. We wonder if we are about to take several steps backward on our journey toward King’s vision.

Let us pray for guidance and strength. Let us pray for clarity of thought and purpose. Let us remember, through the example of Ryan’s life, that there is always hope when courage meets injustice. Let us sing our song of freedom until hate releases its victims and the world will finally know God’s all-encompassing love and Grace.

Let us pray...

Loving God, we know we still have far to travel before all will know the full measure of their worth on this earth. Help us always to remember that the power of the universe knows our name. Give us a song to sing and send us on our way to raise our voice for justice... because we believe. Amen.