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Imagining a New Future: Deciding to Hope

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the role of imagination and the decision to hope in the exercise of global citizenship. The first section of the paper is a sketch of the interplay of local and global movements in human history, posing questions about global citizenship. The second section is an introduction to the life narratives of two “world changers,” Sojourner Truth and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Their narratives are marked by themes resonant with the published narratives of global peacemakers and a recent collection of oral histories with just peacemakers; however, those other narratives will be analyzed in a later work. The present paper concludes with a theoretical proposition regarding imagination as a decision to hope, and a discussion of practices by which Sojourner Truth and Abraham Joshua Heschel draw upon imagination as a source for hope and a guide for transformative action.

Almost ten years ago, I wrote a chapter entitled “Imagine Peace: Knowing the Real – Imagining the Impossible” (Moore 2006). I argued that imagination is at the heart of peacemaking. In the past 10 years, the world has become even more violent. The gap between the rich and the poor has increased, and ecological devastation has become direr. Can we still imagine a flourishing future for the human family and the planet? Can we enhance global citizenship in a world that is so fraught with destruction? The central thesis of this paper is that *building a new future depends on imagination and a decision to hope, even in the midst of devastating realities*. Further, the very ability to imagine a new future is intimately tied to the ways we relate to the world in the present; it is related to our ways of knowing and our daily life practices.

This paper begins with contextual analysis and the challenge and possibility of global citizenship, expressed poetically. The heart of the paper follows: the analysis of life narratives to reveal the role of imagination in the lives of world-changers. World changers are often people faced with devastating contextual realities, who still make decisions to hope and to act transformatively, even as they face overwhelming injustice, violence, and ecological destruction. I argue that imagination plays a critical role in these decisions. The paper concludes with a discussion of practices that cultivate imagination for justice and peace.

Pondering Global History and Global Citizenship

In the beginning was wisdom and a world
And wisdom permeated, even created, that world
And the world was filled with wisdom,

But wisdom was flighty and hard to find
It shone in rituals and stories
And every tribe had its own – oh so beautiful – ways
 to sing and dance the wisdom of the ages!
People *evoked* wisdom and they *invoked* the Holy
But people loved their evocations and invocations more than the Holy
And each clan created and clung to its own.

Today we inherit all of those rituals and stories,
 And the clinging and creating.
We have the potential to receive and hallow the rituals and stories of our people
 And the rituals and stories of others –
 To hold these precious gifts of wisdom and to create anew
We have potential to embrace a larger world
 To be global, even cosmic, citizens,
We have communication that connects us
 Complex ideas that weave simplicities into brilliant complexities
 Trade that allows us to share and receive from one another
 Public deliberations that allow us to draw ideas from one another
 And create something new.

But the new we have created is torn with violence
 And with abundance held by a few while the many starve
 And with desecration and desolation of the environment.
Global consciousness has become *globalism*
Conflicts between clans have become global wars
Culture-sharing has become colonialism
Resource sharing has become resource hoarding
Reason has become a sophisticated way to objectify and dominate others
Critical thinking about culture creates justifications for one's own people,
 One's own values, one's own culture as superior to others.
In that milieu, is world loyalty possible?
 Is it even a value to hold
 when it is so easily distorted into dominance and destruction?
One is tempted to retreat to pre-modern worlds,
 But even those were isolated and insulated from one another.
At least the dangers were more contained
 And the simplicities were grounded in more embodied existence –
 Good efforts to hunt or grow food,
 to live in tune with one's people and the land.

But peoples of long ago were perhaps not so isolated as we think;
 Peoples crossed one another in ancient China
 In the lands of the Mediterranean
 In the lands of the Pacific
 In virtually every land.

And when they met, they sometimes warred
 They sometimes traded,
 They sometimes destroyed one another,
 They sometimes kept distance – as much as they were able
But they inevitably met, and when they did
 They reinvented themselves again and again.

Global citizenship is about reimagining and reinvention – meeting a new moment and being thrown into terror, meeting a new moment and choosing hope. Reimagining is dreaming a new world. In India, Mahatma Gandhi envisioned a world in which his people and *all* people were free. Exiled from Tibet, His Holiness the Dalai Lama envisions a world of peace. In the United States, Bill McKibben dreamed 350.org and it grew into a planet-wide organization with 20,000 rallies across the globe. Then he dreamed a movement of resistance to the Keystone Pipeline and a movement for fossil fuel divestment. Every act began with a dream – a glimpse of what was possible. Dreams are the clay from which new shapes are molded. But the dreams are not themselves the full story. If the world is to be made new, we need to draw upon ancient, modern and postmodern wisdom to reinvent a world that does not yet exist.¹

Global citizenship requires imagination, critique, suspicion, and a decision to hope. For this reason, we turn now to human lives, seeking to understand the dynamic narratives of “world-changers,” or people whom others admire as global citizens. Analyzing these narratives will point to possibilities for cultivating human imagination for ecological care, justice, and peace.

Exploring the Lives of World-Changers

In this section, we attend to human lives, focusing on two historical world-changers. This study is preliminary to another one in which I will expand the narratives to include other published narratives and oral histories. Here I invite attention to two people known widely for their global citizenship. Sojourner Truth and Abraham Joshua Heschel, from radically different backgrounds, were strikingly similar in their commitments to live in faith and make the world a better place.

Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth (c1797-1883) was born into slavery in New York as Isabelle Baumfree (Painter 1996).² At age 9, she was sold in auction, followed by a harsh life of daily beatings. She was sold twice more, and then promised freedom by her owner, who was seemingly influenced by the New York abolition movement (1799-1827). Isabelle’s hope for freedom was short-lived, however, and her owner retracted his promise. She immediately began planning her escape, determined not to abandon hope. With her infant daughter, she escaped in 1826. Sometime later, she learned that her 5 year-old son Peter had been illegally sold to a slave owner in Alabama. Isabelle sued for his release, with help of the Van Wagenen family for whom she worked at that time. She won the case (one of the first successful cases of an African American woman against a white man) and Peter was released.

Not long after this legal case was resolved, Isabella Baumfree had a Christian conversion experience. A few years later (1843), she had another religious experience, which inspired her to

change her name to Sojourner Truth. At that time, she dedicated herself to a life of preaching and working for abolition. She also became involved in women's rights, and was invited to speak in the first National Women's Rights Convention in 1850. Shortly after, she moved to Ohio where, in 1851, she delivered her famous "Ain't I a Woman" speech at the Women's Convention in Akron:

And ain't I a woman?
that little man in black there say
a woman can't have as much rights as a man
cause Christ wasn't a woman
Where did your Christ come from?
From God and a woman!

Through the rest of her life, Sojourner Truth continued to advocate for abolition and women's suffrage. In the 1850s, she became a staunch advocate for desegregation – riding on streetcars labeled for whites. She also worked politically to obtain land grants for former slaves, while advocating prison reform and repeal of the death penalty. She was a world-changer, who drew from the lessons of her own life to imagine a world that was better for everyone who had ever been oppressed by slavery, gender, poverty, or entanglement with the legal system.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

We turn now to a man who lived in another century, a different religious heritage and initially on another continent, Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972).³ Heschel's life was deeply grounded in his love of God and family. Born in 1907, he was the youngest of six children and the descendant of prominent European rabbis on both sides of family. As a boy, he had an excellent Yeshiva education, later studying for the Orthodox rabbinate. He then completed a doctoral degree at the University of Berlin and studied at *Hochschule fuer die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, where he later taught Torah and received a second ordination in the liberal tradition. Shortly thereafter, the Gestapo arrested Heschel and sent him to Warsaw, where he taught for almost a year. With encouragement from others, he escaped Warsaw six weeks before the Germans invaded Poland. As the Holocaust unfolded, Heschel's sister was killed in a German bombing, his mother murdered by Nazis, and his two sisters died in concentrations camps.

Shaped by his experience, Heschel emerged as a spiritual mensch in the United States. He became widely known as a public intellectual and teacher, first at Hebrew Union in Cincinnati, Ohio, and then at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. He also wrote bountifully, focusing on the prophets and on the God-human relationships in particular, as represented by *God in Search of Man* and *Man is Not Alone*. In the 1960s, he became absorbed by the Civil Right Movement, marching with Martin Luther King, Jr.

As a teacher, social commentator, and spiritual mentor, Heschel worried that religion was becoming irrelevant and oppressive. His response was to ponder the depths of his own spiritual tradition and offer that wisdom to the larger human community. In so doing, he returned repeatedly to a few key themes: the social-religious significance of prophetic witness, the precious gift of wonder and awe, the power of prayer as communion with God, and the gift of

Sabbath practice to the community and the world. He also made strong connections between his life of prayer and religious observance and his life of public witness. After marching with King and a throng of others, he famously testified, “I felt my feet were praying.”

Heschel was ardent in linking deep religion and deep concern for society. He wrote John F. Kennedy a telegram in 1963, saying “We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate negroes. ... The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.” This telegram later influenced the title of a collection of his essays, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (1996). In one essay of that book, he explains his involvement in the peace movement:

The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the Prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible (Heschel 1996, 224; originally published in 1973).

Heschel continually made connections between his religious tradition and the issues of his time, as in his speech to the Conference on Religion and Race, 14 January 1963:

- (1) At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses [audience laughter and clapping]. Moses' words were: 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let my people go that they may celebrate a feast to me.' While Pharaoh retorted: ‘Who is the Lord, that I should heed this voice and let Israel go?’
- (2) The outcome of that summit meeting has not yet come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses.
- (3) Let us dodge no issues. Let us yield no inch to bigotry, let us make no compromise with callousness.

For Heschel, the connections between religion and global citizenship are obvious and deep.

Rabbi Heschel never ceased his efforts in race relations, and his world-changing efforts later extended to building interreligious relationships. He worked closely on Roman Catholic-Jewish relations with Cardinal Augustin Bea, a German biblical scholar who had witnessed the effects of the Holocaust and who headed the Roman Catholic efforts to reconcile with Jews in the Second Vatican Council. Then, in 1972, Heschel was invited to participate in an interfaith conference that included Muslims. He was in frail health by this time, but he insisted on making a final trip to Rome. He left a profound mark on interfaith relationships, as he had continually made a mark on race relations.

These two brief narratives reveal Sojourner Truth and Abraham Joshua Heschel as survivors of enormous hardships; yet they both found deep meaning and purpose in their faith traditions. These two world-changers reinvented themselves all through their lives, they imagined that the world could be a better place, and they gave themselves fully to those visions, drawing from the wellsprings of their faith traditions and trust in the Holy. These themes are

congruent with those in other narrative accounts of peacebuilders (Gopin 2012; Kiser 2008; High 2014; Lederach 2010). They are also congruent with the oral histories conducted at Boston University with 9 peacemakers – 3 Jewish, 3 Muslims, and 3 Christians.⁴ Each story is unique, but the themes are strikingly similar. How do these stories inform global citizenship and the roles of imagination and hope?

Imagining a New World: Practicing Global Citizenship

These narratives reveal the intimate relationship between imagination and hope, and the relation of both to life practices. The lives of Sojourner Truth and Abraham Joshua Heschel support the original thesis: that *building a new future depends on imagination and a decision to hope, even in the midst of devastating realities*. Both made many decisions to hope over their lifetimes. Sojourner Truth imagined a life beyond slavery, and she escaped with her infant daughter. She imagined the possibility of freeing her son, and she worked with others to bring a law suit, which she won. As a young man in Germany and Poland, Heschel imagined that Jews in different denominations could be friends, and he developed lifelong friendships to reinforce his imagination. Later he imagined that U.S. race relations and human rights could be changed, and he decided to march; he imagined that interreligious relationships could be improved, and he set out to make it so.

Beyond support for the primary thesis, the narratives also affirm the secondary thesis: that *the human ability to imagine a new future is related to our ways of knowing the world and our daily life practices*. Sojourner Truth and Abraham Joshua Heschel did not plan their lives in advance and take unwavering steps toward preconceived goals. Their lives were filled with experiencing, questioning, and wondering. They experienced horrors of this world, haunting existential questions, and the wonders of God. Their practices of knowing were thus rich and complex: remembering, relating, rethinking, repenting, re-envisioning, and reconstructing.⁵ These practices led them to reflect deeply on their own experiences and the fate of their people, and also to imagine and live toward new possibilities.

Remembering – remembering the traditions of one’s people and the traditions of others

This paper began with a poetic exploration of the historical and contemporary context; we began with remembering traditions. Both Truth and Heschel were deeply affected by the traditions they inherited and the mystical experiences of the Holy that their traditions opened to them. Their relations with God led them into an ever-expanding range of social consciousness and an ever-expanding range of action. For Sojourner Truth, the preaching of her faith and the advocacy for slaves and women were parts of one whole. As she became increasingly engaged in proclamation and advocacy, her own sense of the issues expanded, and she found herself advocating also for civil rights, desegregation, land reform, and prison reform. Her religious fervor and her social passion were of one piece, propelling her into radical action in the legal system, political debates, and public witness.

Similarly, Heschel was deeply grounded in his tradition, which was the orienting focus of his social passion. He cultivated a sense of wonder in God’s presence, and that wonder fed his respect for the religious traditions of others; it also awakened him to the plight of others. This

man who had lost most of his own family in the Holocaust and who knew persecution and exile, allowed his own experience to awaken him to the hurt of others. He could not resist joining the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, and his own religious traditions gave him the insights to interpret that march and all it stood for. Similarly, he built relations with people in other faith traditions because his wonder before the Holy awakened him to the wonder of others.

Relating with self, earth, and human family

A second practice is relating with oneself, with the earth, and with the human family. Violent relationships led Sojourner Truth to walk out of slavery. More positive relationships with another white family helped her to sue for the freedom of her son Peter from slavery. Brief encounters with President Abraham Lincoln allowed her to advocate for abolition with the highest levels of government. She worked for land grants for freed slaves, recognizing that freed slaves needed to build new lives in relation to the land. Sojourner Truth's relationships with diverse peoples expanded her action to include women's suffrage and advocacy against the death penalty. Throughout her life, her practices led to new relationships, which led to new practices.

Similarly, Heschel moved toward ever-expanding relationships within the Jewish community of his childhood, the academic community of his training, the Jewish communities and friendships of his adulthood, civil rights leaders, and people of other faith traditions. Both world-changers were nourished by relationships, which included intimate relationships as well as encounters with others quite different from themselves.

Rethinking the status quo

A third critical practice is rethinking the status quo – dominant ecological and social structures and dominant systems of thought. Truth and Heschel rethought the status quo at every turn. Truth refused to believe that slavery was a necessary or inevitable way of life; Heschel counteracted dominant assumptions about materialist worldviews and the alienation of peoples from one another. Every time they practiced one kind of rethinking, whether about slavery or civil rights, they opened themselves to rethinking something else. Every act of rethinking expanded the range of their concerns, opening them to an ever-expanding perspective on global citizenship, and to the reimagining and reinventing that go with it.

Repenting and mourning – repenting of the destructions by one's people

In the three remaining practices I will be briefer because the seeds of these practices are foreshadowed in the first three. Repenting and mourning are important elements in the practices of Truth and Heschel, and their mourning over abuse, injustice, and destructive social structures motivated all of their actions. Global citizenship not only breeds repentance and mourning, but also humility. We are small creatures in a world of huge need, and we ourselves participate in many of the most dangerous ecological and social problems, with and without our knowledge and with and without our consent. Repentance and mourning are ongoing.

Re-envisioning the future in light of the best of the past

What we see in Truth and Heschel is an ongoing practice of engaging the world, seeing it through sober eyes, and discerning the ancient and modern wisdom that will guide the possibility of new visions for the future. For Sojourner Truth, this was expressed in her preaching and speaking, as in “Ain’t I a Woman?” For Heschel, it was expressed in his voluminous writing, and also in his teaching, speaking, public commentaries, and marching.

Reconstructing the world

What we also see in Truth and Heschel is an *ongoing practice* of reconstructing the world wherever they found themselves. This practice was so important to Heschel that he traveled to an interfaith gathering at the very end of his life. Both of these people engaged in reconstructive practices as long as they lived, and their legacies continue to inspire global citizenship. Truth and Heschel not only imagined a better world, but they decided to hope in the midst of the overwhelming devastations of slavery (Truth) and the Holocaust (Heschel). In so doing, they contributed to actual changes in their worlds. They also stir our imagination and challenge us to decide for hope.

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¹ Some philosophers have placed hope in the emergence of the axial age (roughly 800-200 BCE), which has been described as a liminal period of global history during which civilization-shaping movements took place in religion, culture, and patterns of human thinking (Jaspers 1968; Cobb 2015). The span of the axial age is debated, but most agree that major cultural shifts took place between 600 and 300. Cataclysmic changes took place in the ways people thought about and shaped their civilizations, whether in India, China, or the West. The emergence led to greater awareness of worlds beyond one's own, increased critical analysis of cultures and religion, new understandings of

the Holy as concerned with the whole earth and not just one's own people, and newly emerging ethical norms that responded to the whole known world and not just to one's own tribe. According to Karl Jaspers (1968), and echoed by others, axial civilizations across the globe developed new capacities, grounded in reason. These new capacities generated major cultural developments and inspired humanity in general toward a greater sense of the whole (Salamun 2006; Cobb 2015). We need to recognize, however, that many of these civilizations also developed the capacity to overtake and dominate in empires of impressive grandeur and oppressive destruction.

One can see why some inheritors of axial civilization and religion suspect the inheritance and long for the pre-modern, simpler sensibilities. The pre-modern and post-modern almost touch as the pre-modern images and ideas are dimly discerned and brought into dialogue with postmodern questions.

² Precise footnotes to be added later.

³ Footnotes for this section to be added later.

⁴ These oral histories will form the base for the second phase of narrative analysis, building on the work of this paper.

⁵ This analysis of their ways of knowing bears resemblance to the practices of knowing that I describe in *Teaching as a Sacramental Act* (Moore 2004). Analyzing these connections is left for a later work.