

Last year when I was driving to work on Rt 32, probably near the bridge over Rt 29, NPR aired a piece on a Tiny Desk Concert that the rapper named Common had given at the White House in 2016.

Common is an unusual name and can be difficult to talk about, since you can't see the capital 'C', when I speak. Hopefully you will soon hear a proper noun instead of an adjective.

Pause —————

One of the songs NPR played really struck me. It is titled *Letter to the Free*. It was the first time I had heard the song, but I remember saying to myself, "that song would make a 'great' Channing worship service topic!" *Letter to the Free* won an Emmy for Outstanding Original Music and Lyrics.

Pause —————

For those of you who don't know Common, he is a rapper, actor and activist, who grew up on the South side of Chicago in the 70s and 80s. When he was born, he was named Lonnie Rashid Lynn. In the early 90s he chose the rapper name "Common Sense," and used that name for his first album. Common Sense was starting to get recognition when he was sued by a reggae band that was also named Common Sense. The suit forced him to change the name that he loved. He decided to shorten it to Common. At first he didn't like the "Common" without the "Sense." No rapper wants to be common. You need to be unique and to stand out, but he kept the name Common, even though he is anything but a common rapper.

Pause —————

Common has written two memoirs. The first is titled, "One Day It'll All Make Sense." Maya Angelou called it "A magnificent read." Every chapter starts out with a letter from Common to an important person in his life. In the letter to his dad he wrote,

“When you told me that you chose to call me Lonnie Rashid Lynn, because you wanted me to have Christian and Muslim names together, that inspired me. Because of that, I walk in the way, Dad, accepting people for who they are, knowing God is in them, whether they are Buddhist or Muslim or Christian or Hindu or Yoruba. Becoming a Spiritual Seeker has been one of the most powerful lessons of my life. Because of it, I’ve found God all around me.”

Pause and take a drink —————

His second memoir is titled, “Let Love Have The Last Word.” This book is about diving deep into love and ways to get to know love. You may have noticed that this service is named after this book.

Pause —————

As a side note, for those of us who remember Jillian who was the Channing Music Director about a decade ago. Jillian once told me that she wished to marry Common, and I’m pretty sure she was serious about that wish.

Pause —————

Returning to our anthem song, *Letter to the Free*

Letter to the Free is about the direct connection between this country’s engagement in chattel slavery and our current system of mass incarceration. I grew up thinking that slavery was a stain on our country. I thought the U.S. and the rest of the world had gotten past thinking that slavery can be tolerated. On March 25, of this year, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a landmark resolution declaring the transatlantic slave trade and racialized chattel slavery as the “gravest crime against humanity.” The resolution passed with 123 votes in favor. Sadly, the United States was not among them.

Pause —————

The lyrics of *Letter to the Free* went by quickly in our anthem, so I want to go over a few lines more slowly. I will hold this mic when reciting lyrics.

Hold up a mic —————

Blood of black being, a pastoral scene
Slavery's still alive, check Amendment 13

Put down the mic —————

I did check into the 13th amendment. It can be broken down into two main concepts:

1. The Ban on Slavery

It made it illegal for one person to own another person as property anywhere in the U.S.

While the Emancipation Proclamation declared enslaved people in rebelling states free, it did not apply to the border states, Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri and West Virginia. It also did not end the legal system of slavery nationwide. The 13th Amendment made that ban permanent and universal.

2. The Exception for Prisoners

The text of the amendment includes a specific exception: forced labor is allowed “as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.” This means that while traditional, ownership-based slavery is outlawed, individuals legally convicted of a crime can be required to perform labor as part of their sentence.

Pause —————

Back to the Tiny Desk Concert. I found it interesting that Common performed at the White House. Later I learned that it grew into a big controversy. Michelle Obama invited Common to an evening celebrating young people and poetry. Some political commentators objected to his invitation. They called him a “vile rapper” for his lyrics about violence, committed against innocent citizens in Cincinnati. More than a dozen black men had been killed while in custody of the Cincinnati police department. I hope my telling you about this doesn’t make me a “vile preacher.”

Hold up a mic —————

For now we know, the new Jim Crow
They stop, search and arrest our souls

Put down the mic —————

I think we all agree that slavery is bad, but what about mass incarceration? After all, keeping “criminals” away from “good people” seems ideal. During another commute to work, I heard an NPR interview with Michelle Alexander, the author of *The New Jim Crow*. I was fascinated to learn about how America incarcerates more of its citizens than any other country in the world. *The New Jim Crow* deserves its own service, so I won’t go into that, but I do want to read a transcript of an interview that Michelle Alexander had with Krista Tippett, the host of *On Being*. I think this interview of Michelle does a good job of capturing my surprise about Common singing *Letter to the Free* at the Obama White House.

Pause —————

For a little context, Michelle Alexander met Vincent Harding about a year and a half after *The New Jim Crow* was published. Vincent Harding, was one of the founders of the field of Black Studies. He was a close friend and spiritual advisor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and he wrote King’s ‘Beyond Vietnam’ speech.

This is Michelle Alexander speaking:

Hold up The New Jim Crow —————

The message of the book was finally breaking through. It came out right after Obama was first elected, and our nation was awash in “post-racialism” and “we have overcome,” and we now have our first Black president, and we don’t need to talk about the ugly racial history. The first nearly two years, it was difficult to get an audience, but finally the message started to break through, and instead of talking to small groups of activists, there were suddenly hundreds of people showing up in churches and auditoriums. I should have been overjoyed. People kept saying, “Aren’t you so happy? It looks like things are really changing.”

Pause —————

I was actually sinking into a real depression. At first I thought it was just exhaustion. I started noticing that as I walked off the stage, sometimes to thunderous applause, I would hear this voice echoing in my head saying, “All sound and fury and signifying nothing.”

It was when I was sinking into this place of hopelessness that Vincent Harding invited me to speak at Iliff School of Theology. I gave my new Jim Crow speech and walked off that stage with that same sinking feeling. Afterwards, Vincent pulled me aside, and said, “Thank you, daughter, sister, niece, Michelle, for your work and your research and for indicting this system. But I think there’s a deeper message here that you are struggling to name and claim, perhaps even for yourself. And I think that deeper message is what Jesus was trying to say when he said,

‘What you do unto the least of these, you do unto me.’

Pause —————

That's the message. That's what this is all about. It's not about building bigger and better movements or power struggles. If we don't awaken not just to our racial history but if we don't awaken to who we are, that we belong to each other, to the oneness of all. Without that awakening, we will ensure that these cycles of oppression and domination and exploitation and control are born again and again. We must awaken to who we are to one another."

Put down The New Jim Crow —————

Take a drink of water —————

Hold up the mic —————

A cruel hand taking hold
We let go to free them so we can free us
America's moment to come to Jesus

Put down the mic —————

I like the imagery of a cruel hand for an unjust system. When a harsh force grasps you, it traps you in a dynamic of dominance and submission. Holding onto resentment, seeking revenge, or participating in an oppressive system traps both parties. Letting go of that control and anger is an act of grace. It breaks the cycle, giving the oppressor a chance to step away from their destructive behavior and find redemption.

Hold up the mic —————

We ain't seen as human beings with feelings
Will the U.S. ever be us? Lord willing!

Put down the mic —————

The words “will the U.S. ever be us?” are what launched this service. I said out loud in the car, “now that’s what I’m talking about.” This is exactly what I’ve been feeling the last few decades. The joy of coming together with people, even people who aren’t like you, feels much better than tearing someone else down. Why would anyone choose hate over love? I guess hate induces power-over, so if you’re into that, I can see choosing hate.

On further reflection, it has occurred to me that I may be totally misunderstanding that line. He might be asking if black and brown people will ever be considered part of the U.S.?

Maybe both interpretations are right and maybe there are other interpretations that I haven’t thought of that are also right.

Hold up the mic —————

We staring in the face of hate again
The same hate they say will make America great again

Put down the mic —————

I have nothing to add or interpret in those lines.

Hold up the mic —————

No consolation prize for the dehumanized
For America to rise it's a matter of Black Lives

Put down the mic —————

I don’t think that America can consider itself great until we start seeing everyone as human. But prisoners? Are they human? If prisons were full of humans, then the assumption should be that the prisoners will be treated as a population of humans.

In 2017, Common visited four state prisons in California. His intention was to go and talk to the men and women who were incarcerated, but mainly he wanted to sit and listen to their stories. While there he met some of the most enlightened human beings, who were serving life without parole for various crimes. He found it life-enriching and sobering.

He was also visiting prisons to perform for the residents. He wanted to bring a little light to them.

When he went to the California state prison in Lancaster, it was too windy for him to perform. He noticed that state and city legislators and administrators were there, so he took the opportunity to discuss actual policy changes, based on real face-to-face conversations with the prisoners.

They got into a circle with people who are locked up without parole, the governor's chief of staff and others. They all had the opportunity to ask questions and to listen.

When the inmates introduced themselves, they would say something like, "I'm Mike, and I killed John and Derek Jones." They each would say the names of the people they killed. Common asked why they say their victims' names? One inmate replied,

"we want to humanize them; we should humanize them. And I recognize that at the time, I didn't look at him like a human being. That man on the other side of the thing I did, the crime I committed, I didn't even look at him as human. I want his family to know I now look at him as a human being. I want to humanize him for myself, so that I feel more humanity in me"

All the men in the circle shared how much regret they carried. Carlos said to Common,

“Imagine you did something at seventeen years old and you have been trapped in here ever since. Think of the things you wouldn’t have done, for that one act, for the rest of your life.”

Common said, “some of these people have taken other people’s lives, and they recognize the weight of what they’d done, but at a certain point, there has to be some type of healing and forgiveness, and shutting down the senseless cycle.”

Pause —————

I think *Letter to the Free* expresses well the need for us all to do better and the benefits that come from such changes. It was in working with that song that I discovered Common’s two books.

Hold up ODIAMS —————

Hopefully, “One Day It’ll All Make Sense” applies to this service, but

Hold up LLHTLW —————

“Let Love Have The Last Word” is this service.

Put down LLHTLW —————

While reading “Let Love Have The Last Word”, I finally understood what Jillian meant when she professed her love for Common.

It is about a way of being that brings people together and makes life worth living. Most of what follows are direct quotes from his book. God is central to Common’s being, but when I read excerpts with the word god, please hear the word that is central to your being. God, Goddess, Spirit, Universe, Mystery, Humanity.

It may not always be obvious when I am quoting his book, but in general, if it is about love, it is Common's words. I'll start with an easy one and I think you'll catch on.

Holding up LLHTLW —————

"When I first thought about writing a book on love, the idea itself seemed too big. Others have done it of course. I had to ask myself, would I focus on love's presence or absence? Am I referring to love of God, love of self, love of parents and children, or of a romantic partner, or of community?"

Put down LLHTLW —————

Take a drink of water —————

Hold up LLHTLW —————

"Though each of us is at the center of our life, our world, we still live with one another. We're dependent on one another, whether we admit it or not. We rely on one another. And without the day-to-day practice of loving other people, and ourselves, love itself remains just an idea. In love, all things are possible. With God, there is nothing we cannot overcome. But deep and serious reflection is required; now I understand why few people bother diving so deeply into love. It's painful. It's terrifying. The deeper you go, the more you learn about yourself, and the deeper you dig, the wider the hole, the more love you can contain within; it's not easy work."

Put down LLHTLW —————

In a world where conversations don't need to happen in person or even by using our voices, we find ourselves more easily connected with other people, while being more physically isolated from them.

Hold up LLHTLW —————

“Living in love, with love as our daily driving force, can transform and affect lives. There is no other way to save ourselves from anxiety and fear. From a single point in time, and with belief in one human emotion, granted to us by God, we can chart for ourselves a new path, a new way to live in our modern technological world. Everything feels so fast these days – even time.

But maybe here, you and I can slow down, carve out time and space for ourselves, and wonder, what kind of world we can conjure in our imaginations. With love, maybe you and I can begin the slow work of rediscovering our value as individual people, as a community. Our higher selves call forth to do this work.”

Put down LLHTLW —————

Take a drink of water —————

Hold up LLHTLW —————

“In order to transform my life in love, with love in my mind and soul, I must start with loving myself fully. Speaking of the order of things, and what comes first, my relationship with myself predetermines what I’m willing to accept from other people, and what I’m willing to reject in the name of love. Loving myself, engaging in this daily practice of loving myself, will better prepare me to identify love in other people, and will also help me spot those people I would be better off avoiding altogether. A life lived with love remains an imperfect one, but such a life would be uncompromising in love, authentic, real, hopeful and progressive toward the future.”

Put down LLHTLW —————

And now I will end with a quote from Common, quoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. quoting Arnold Toynbee:

“We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against damning evil. Therefore, the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word.”

May it be so, and Amen

Benediction:

Love is a daily practice and it calls for us to step to it every day, to choose love every day, as though we didn't choose it yesterday, and the day before, and I think that's how it really works.

Let love have the last word in any situation, no matter the person. There's no other way to approach it than as an intentional practice. Saying let love have the last word is not just a declaration — it is a statement of purpose, and it is a daily promise.