

I'M HERE (From 'The Color Purple')

Week #1 of Our 2-Week Broadway Musical Series

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Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: So, this morning we're going to talk about: How do we handle life through tough times? How do we handle life through the adversities? How do we handle life through the worst challenges and the most painful experiences that we go through?

How many people have ever been through struggle and pain, and it was so long-lasting, that you wondered, would my life get any better or is this as good as it gets? Anybody ever had that experience? And how many people have ever felt so overwhelmed and gone through so many hardships that you kind of felt like giving up? Anybody? And how many people ever wondered if you really had it in you to get over the next obstacle and keep pushing ahead and ever get to your dreams?

One of the things I love – and I think we all love – is reading inspirational stories, seeing inspirational movies and hearing inspirational songs, because I think it triggers something in us that inspires and awakens us and give us hope that we, too, can handle and overcome the things that we are going through... The things that at times make us want to give up or feeling like maybe life will never get better or "I just don't have it in me."

So, today, this is what we're looking at. We're looking at the song "I'm Here," from the musical version of *The Color Purple*. How many people saw the movie or the play, *The Color Purple*? So, this is the closing song in the Broadway musical.

Let me give you a little recap of it. It is a 40-year span story of a 14-year-old African American young woman named Celie, who is profoundly abused by her father and impregnated twice. Those two children that she loved and wanted to keep were given away. She was then married off to a man who was even more abusive than her dad. And her sister – the only person that she loved or treated her well – was kind of ripped away and separated. So the two kids and her sister were totally separated from her and she was just isolated in this abusive situation, and she just felt absolutely unloved, alone and helpless that her life would every get better.

To tell you the vastness of the level of abuse and negativity she went through, the opening scene has her playing with her sister. And the father is coming to get them from playing and the father says to her, "*You have the ugliest smile this side of creation.*" Several times in it, she is referred to over-and-over again as "*ugly*," that she is "*so ugly*." She is told that she's "*no good*," told that she'll "*never amount to anything*." Her father didn't even allow her to learn how to read. So, she becomes so timid and so shy and is so paranoid about her smile that every time she does smile – the rare times – she covers it. Always, every time when she smiles, she covers it and hides. And she lives a very timid life, taking anything anyone does to her, and not speaking up at all.

So, you can feel her sense of hopelessness and powerlessness in this situation. And so, it was painful watching that movie, but it also gave a lot of hope and inspiration admiring her faith, admiring her courage and her strength, and seeing her ability to evolve and grow and expand to a level that – by the end, interestingly – all the things that were most important and she desired absolutely comes together. And, I think, it's because of the way she handled that horrendous adversity in her life.

And so, what we're going to do this morning is look at the song "I'm Here" and the context and the plot of *The Color Purple* to see what it has to teach us about how we can get through the adversities and difficulties and challenges that we experience in our lives.

The first one is to make sure – even through the negativity – that we keep our mind as focused and positive as possible. And that sounds simple and easy, but it's not as easy as we think. How many people ever had something very painful or horrible happen to you, and you couldn't get it out of your mind? And you just complained and whined and felt sorry for

yourself? Or got bitter or negative or called a “dirty so-and-so” and all kinds of names that make “dirty so-and-so” seem like a compliment?

[Congregation laughs]

And then you start listing all your grievances of all the people who hurt you all the things that went wrong and all the ways you suffered? Anybody ever just bathe in negativity and wallow in self-pity about something? Okay, about five of us. That’s perfect.

[Congregation laughs]

And so, it is to me kind of remarkable how, with all that she was experiencing, the things she focused the most on was the love of her sister – the one person she felt loved her and cared for her in her life – and the love of her two children, that she didn’t even get to be with! But wants them to know how much she loves them, even if they don’t know her. And, she hung on to those things over and over again, where she could have easily drifted into complaining about how poorly she was treated and hating the individuals that had done that to her and were doing that to her.

There’s a wonderful story in Scripture that I think gives a wonderful picture and analogy of it. It’s Jesus walking on the water, and there’s a storm and the disciples are in the boat. And Jesus calls Peter out of the boat, and he steps out and he’s on the water. And as long as he looking at – as long as he’s looking at the Christ – he’s able to stay above the storms and stay above the water. But then he gets distracted and starts looking at the storm instead. He takes his eye off of the Christ and puts in on the crisis, and immediately he begins to sink into it and has to get back into the boat before he drowns.

And the point of that is, that when you’re focused on God – or focused on the good – you can stay above the storms of life. But once we start focusing on the negativity – focusing on what’s not working – we tend to sink into the problem and get consumed by it, obsessed by it, and keep thinking and regurgitating it to the point that we cannot see the good.

In my early twenties or late teens, when I was injured, I felt very hopeless about my life. And one of the things my Mom would also do was to tell me her favorite Scripture, which was *“Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”* The first book she ever gave me was called *The Power of the Subconscious Mind* by Joseph Murphy. The second book was *Discover the Power Within You*.

And she had this belief that you’ve got to guard your mental house from negativity, and keep it focused on God and keep it focused on the good. She said, *“No matter what happens in life, you’re responsible for what you put in your mental house and to continue to make it good. Because,”* she said, *“you can either have your mind work for you or against you.”* We can obsess and freak out and be negative and overthink stuff and get anxious, or we could focus on what is good, what is positive, and what is working. She let me know that my mind is the greatest asset in any adversity. It’s how we use its power.

John Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, said these words: *“The mind is its own place and in itself, can make a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven.”* And so, right now, in your mind: Would you say your mind is doing a good job of making a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven? Because, it is what goes on in our minds that really begins to create the kind of experience and the kind of life that we are having.

So, let me give you one great crisis situation that gives such a good four-step example. I’ve used it before but I love it so much. It’s the story of the loaves and fishes. So, Jesus is about to speak to 5,000 people, and there’s only a couple of loaves and a couple of fish, and there’s just not enough food. So, it’s a bit of a crisis of “not enough.” So, he does four things. Anyone know what he does? Okay I’ll tell you!

[Congregation laughs]

The first thing he does is he tells all the people – it says, “sit down on the grass.” Remember, “*Leads me beside the still waters and the green pastures?*” Grass represents peace. In a crisis, when things aren’t working or going well, the best thing you can do is to just calm down and relax: not panic, not freak out, not blame, not wallow in negativity. Just to calm.

And the second thing he did is he looked up. He looked away from the negativity, and he looked up to Spirit. He looked up to a higher perspective: to a higher power. Emmet Fox has a little pamphlet called, “The Golden Key.” And he says if you’ve got any struggles – from financial to legal problems – the best thing you can do is not to worry, but to think about God. That any thought of God, any thought of love, any thought of peace – that any thought of Spirit – will literally lift you and open the possibility of a solution coming into your life.

And so, Celie, two of the things she did was to focus on the love of her sister and her children, focus on what she’s got. She even says that in the song, “*I got my sister, I’ve got my children*” – even though they’re not here, I’ve got them) – “*I’ve got my house, I’ve got my hands.*” She was focusing on the good that she has. And that’s what the third one is: to look up at Spirit, to acknowledge the good that we have now – as they did with the bread that they had and the fish that they had.

And then the fourth thing is to open a space for a solution and possibilities. To not go to that place of hopeless: “*Oh, there’ll never be a solution, it will never work out.*” To open a space spiritually: even if you don’t know what the solution looks like, at least be open that there is a solution and better possibility. I always believe that the person who knows how to use their mind the best can navigate through any difficulty. The person that knows how to use their mind the best will actually rise as high as they are wanting to go.

So, I want you to think about a challenge in your life. Think of an adversity, think of a thing that’s really kind of got a grip on you and I ask you: how well are you using your mind? Are you focusing on the positive or the negative? On the physical or the spiritual? On what you’ve got or what you don’t got?” And I’ll bet every one of us knows that we could probably do a better job in using the power of our mind to stay focused on the positive and the good. And not that you don’t have some moments when you cry and release; that’s important! You don’t pretend! But the majority of the time, are the predominant thoughts you’re thinking thoughts that are positive on the good that we’ve got? And positive on being focused on Spirit?

There’s a wonderful line in Isaiah that says, “*He will keep you in perfect peace whose mind is stayed upon Thee.*” That the more our mind is focused on God – the more our mind is focused on good – we actually create a pretty good consciousness and environment for greater things to come forth.

I think if we all bear in mind the power of the mind, and then make up our mind to use our mind and have the presence of mind to not let it slip our mind, or boggle our mind or lose our mind -- or change our mind – but focus our mind and keep that in mind, it will blow your mind! I really think so!

[Congregation applauds and laughs]

Sorry about that little bit... hope you don’t mind!

[Congregation laughs]

But anyway, your mind is your greatest asset: it can make a heaven of hell. So how are you using it in crisis? Remember again, Jesus had them sit down and relax, look up, focus on the good, and open a space for a solution and something greater.

The second that she did – and I think it’s important – is when Scripture says, “*Be transformed by the renewing of your mind,*” transformation is about change, expansion and growth. And all that includes also learning; seeing things from a different perspective, a higher perspective. Having a set of insights and understanding of – when things don’t go well --

to ask the question: What is this trying to teach me? What is this trying to show me? What direction is it calling me to look at or new perspective to come up to?"

People always think that, if difficult things happen, it is a tragedy. I don't think it is! It's when we don't learn from it is what the tragedy is. I believe three things happen when tragedies or struggles happen. We can either let it take us down and ruin our life or affect our life. It can leave us unchanged. Or can learn from it, and rise and gain even greater things.

Learning from the things that happen to us is such a vital part of growth. We think it's supposed to come easily. No! We are in an unfolding process of spiritual evolution and expansion, and the full expression of our soul and spiritual potential. And that requires us learning and unfolding. And the difficult parts in our lives are a key part.

I think one of the areas of learning that I think is the greatest learning ground for understanding – and so many things – are relationships: are the people in our lives. When you think about it, without people, we wouldn't really learn to forgive or have compassion or experience love or encouragement or support. In a way, people are a vital part of things. Whether it is to love and encourage us, to see the good things in us we may not see, or to help us to heal things that need to be healed. Or maybe to trigger some pain to help set boundaries; to help us say, *"No, that is not something that I want to be part of my life."* In whatever way it is, all relationships and all people give us the learning we need to expand.

I met Mary Kupferle. She was a Unity minister and she wrote a book, and one of the lines in her book is, *"If God brings you to it, God will help you get through it."* And one of the things about it is, God will bring you the right people you need to help you learn to rise above and to be transformed in that situation. How many have people you love – you adore you admire – that you're just so uplifted by them in so many ways? Anybody? How many people have people you can't stand, that irritate you?

[Congregation laughs]

That suck the life out of you and drain you? Okay. I would say equally, *"If God brings you to it, God will help you get through it."* The people that show up in our lives – I believe there is like a soul contract – whether it's a reason, a season or a lifetime, those individuals came to help us on our journey to grow our souls. To fully express our spiritual potential. The question is: Do we have a mindset of a learner? Learning is one of the greatest gifts that we have. We think we're supposed to get it right the first time. No! It's a process of learning and learning and learning, and continuing to just keep expanding.

And one of the important things is Celie, in this, did not transform alone. There were people who came into her life: two of the main characters. This first is Sophie, played by Oprah. Oprah's character. One of the things is, she was so abused and so accustomed to getting beaten and being treated so poorly as a woman, that... There was a situation where Oprah's character, Sophia, her husband beat her, and she beat the heck out of him. And it was the first time she saw a woman stand up to a man. And that had a huge impact on her. Not in the moment; she didn't run out and do anything. But have you ever someone do something that you want to do? Who were an example or an embodiment of something that you never gave yourself permission to believe? That you could be that good, that you could be that successful? So, suddenly her mind and her awareness of possibilities of a different experience in life and relationships was shown by one person.

I remember when I joined Toastmasters... It was a time when I didn't think I could do anything; that hasn't changed a whole lot, but at least I've got a couple of things@

[Congregation laughs]

And I joined Toastmasters and there was this guy named John Roberts, and he used to win all these competitions. And then, he didn't know it, but he became my mentor. He had such a style about the way he spoke. It was like, *"He's good... I want to be like that!"* And he'd win all these awards. And I came in second one year and I thought, *"I'm going to beat him one day!"*

[Congregation laughs]

“I’m going to get so good!” What I did, I wanted to learn from him. And so I’d say, *“John, how do you (da da da da da)?”* I wasn’t trying to mimic him; I was trying to understand. And, one thing he said, *“Richard, any time you get an opportunity, say ‘yes.’ Speak, speak, speak and you will learn. Set your intention to keep speaking and you’ll get better.”*

So there are people in our lives that we have as role models. There are people in our lives who show up – like Sophia did – to show us something greater. He was something for me to work towards. We have people in our lives, and I don’t know if we always consciously learn from them or utilize them in either form. I’m sure there are people who have pressed our buttons, but they’ve have shown us, *“Okay; that’s not okay. There’s a behavior, and that’s something for me to move on from or let go.”* All of the people in our lives come to teach us at a soul level, but the question is: we need pay attention. We need to consciously do that learning, and we need to understand what there is for us to learn and be taught.

The second person for Celie that helped her transformation what a lady named Shug. And she was a flamboyant, gorgeous, performer and singer. She was incredible! And she came to their home, and she wasn’t well, and Celie took care of her. And I thought it was interesting, the juxtaposition of this flamboyant, outgoing, beautifully, fabulously dressed singer and this lady that was so shy and thought she was ugly, and covered her mouth over everything, and was so meek became friends.

At the night club one night, she announces that she wrote a song for her friend, Celie, her sister. And in the song it shares about how similar they are. And one of the things you learn is that, even though she’s gorgeous, she has some real painful stuff with her father rejecting her and disowning her. And we realize that every one of us comes into life with beauty and ugliness; with joyfulness and pain; things we need to heal, things we need to learn, things we need to let go... All of us. And it was such a beautiful thing. And there’s a line in it – and she’s singing right to Celie – that says, *“I think I’m something, and I hope you think that you’re something, too.”*

After the performance – because a fight broke out at the bar ...

[Rev. Maraj and congregation laugh]

... They went back to Shug’s room and she put on some of the flashy, “blingy blingy” clothes on Celie. And she made her stand in front of a mirror and look at herself and made her smile. She actually looked at her face in a mirror and smiled for maybe the first time. And she told her how beautiful she was. And she said, *“Nobody’s ever loved me.”* And Shug said, *“No; you’re lovable and you are so beautiful.”* And to see her take it in for the first time that she was beautiful, that she was loved, that didn’t have to hide her smile or hide herself – that she was valuable and worthy – was just one of the most incredible things. And if Shug didn’t express that love to her, she wouldn’t have been able to take it in.

And, in many ways, I think that’s the thing we all want to learn the most is: Am I okay? Am I worthy? Am I lovable just the way I am? To not think that I’m defective and I’ve change this and be like this, and look like that... But to really get to the core of just loving and accepting who we are.

There a wonderful parable: the Parable of the Prodigal Son. You know, the father has two sons and one asks for his inheritance and he goes to a distant place and he spends it all. And then he is eating slop with the pigs. And then there’s a line that I love so much that says, *“And then he came to himself.”* And he rose up and he returned to his father. And when he returned, there was a big celebration.

But that’s what really all happens in here. [Points to his heart] See, he came to himself which means: He realized that I’m more than this. I deserve more than this. That I can make better choices than this. That I can live at a better level and a different version of myself than I’m currently living. And, he was able to come to himself and realize his worth, his value. That even though he’s made lots of mistakes, it didn’t matter. He gets to choose now. It means: It’s a point of awakening

or re-awakening. And that's what she got: she got to restart and re-awaken to a level love and truth about her own value. But she had to learn and grow into it.

The then the final thing I want to share is that, when we do get to that place, things start to happen and change and move. So finally Celie realized that she deserved a better life than being beaten. She deserved a better life than thinking she's ugly. She deserves a life of love. And so, some cool things started happening... because when you change your consciousness, the world and the Universe begins to shift and move and change in great ways.

The first thing is: somehow through a certain process, she realized that her husband had been hiding letters – because she thought her sister was dead – had been hiding them for 30 years. But it became revealed to her, and she found them and read every single one of them, and knew she was okay.

And then the second thing is she had the courage to speak up at a family dinner and say, *“This is not okay; this is not okay!”* And had the courage to get up and leave the house and leave her husband. And he grabbed her, and she looked at him and he realized this was not the same woman he'd abused for 30 years.

[Congregation laughs]

And he took his hand off her and let her leave.

And then the third amazing thing... She found out that her dad wasn't her dad, but that her real dad had died and left her an inheritance of a beautiful house and a lot of land. So isn't that that cool how, spiritually, she got the courage to step away from a situation not knowing where she'd live, and the Universe provided it.

And then the fourth amazing thing was: she was reunited with her sister, who was in Africa, and ended up coming back. But, here's the fifth bonus thing. The immigration paper came to the house where her abusive husband was, and he took the paper and went down to the office and paid for them. And so the abusive husband of all that time actually played a part of reuniting the sisters. And, in the movie, you see them reuniting, and he's off in a field and he's smiling.

And the point I'm saying is that, when you show up to the truth of who you are – when you step in to the level of self-worth and value and truly love yourself – things begin to change. The lesser things fall away; you attract greater things. And there are ripples that will transform other peoples' lives. As she rolls up, even against him, something in him awakened to realize, *“I can be better than I was, too.”* That there is more in him than how he demonstrated. And that may not have come up until she was able to step out. And, at the end of the movie, when she's leaving, he does freak out and get angry and he says, *“You're ugly! You're ugly and you'll amount to nothing!”* And she said, *“Yeah, I might be ugly; I might be this... but I'm here.”*

And, it was her declaration that I am owning all my beauty; I'm owning all my flaws, and I'm fully showing up for life. That I'm fully, fully, showing up. So, that affirmation of “I AM HERE” is about bringing all of you – proudly and joyously – and appreciating and knowing that you have value. That you are meant to be here. And that's what she did.

Life isn't easy. There's adversity and challenges that make us all want to give up or think that life won't get better, or think we don't have it in us. But if we follow the truth of using the power of our mind to focus on the good and focus on God and not let it slip into negativity; if we are willing to learn from the lessons and the people – from those who love us to those who challenge us – what we are meant to do and expand; and then come to an awakening of the truth of who we are, and show up with our true value, our lives will change.

I think life is calling all of us to show up in a better version and a better way. I don't know what that next level for you is. It might be to show up with more gentleness. It might be to show up with more compassion. It might be to show up with more strength and firmness. I don't know what it is, but I guarantee you, beyond it is something greater. The world is just waiting for every one of us to declare, “I'm Here!”

God bless you all!

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Thank you to volunteer Laura Wright for transcribing this message