

Even our heroes have failed at some point

Highland Views

Chris Highland

Guest columnist

Some of our great reformers and revolutionaries, heroes we look to for inspiration, were unfortunately failures, at least on some level. This should be expected of human beings, yet should also be a cautionary tale for those who venerate the past more than engage the present and march into the future. Many of our most admired historical activists rallied the people, started revolutions, fought in those righteous battles, and ... weren't able to finish the task.

Think of Moses, a prince of Egypt, who takes up the cause of the lower class, leading them through dangerous lands and desperate years, until at last they reach the 'promised land' – yet he dies. Think of Thomas Jefferson, brilliant statesman, who pens the Declaration of Independence, leads the young country expanding into the frontier of liberty – yet owns Black human beings. Think of Abraham Lincoln, who led the country through a severe test, actually did emancipate enslaved people – yet never lived to see how Reconstruction dissolved into Jim and Jane Crow. Think of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a fiery advocate for women's rights, who worked diligently her whole life for the right to vote – yet never got to cast her ballot. Think of Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote, preached and marched for racial justice – yet died without fulfilling his dream.

All these, and many others, stirred the hot coals of change, fanned

the sparks into flames and then flamed out before the goal was attained. Of course, it's true, substantial change takes time – the torch passed along for generations. This doesn't have to be discouraging; it doesn't mean we give up the fight for justice, equality, basic human rights, freedom, though it can be disheartening to consider how many torches have been left behind to flicker in the dim light of history.

One great radical reformer I haven't mentioned, because to include his name on the list of failures could be called heretical if not blasphemous, is Jesus of Nazareth. How dare we think of him as a failure, but how much we need to! I sometimes play the 'If Only' game: If only he had lived into old age, how much good, how much wisdom and healing could he have accomplished? Those who believe his whole brief life, and tragic young death, was foreordained, planned out by God, make it all about one thing: sacrificial atonement. He was born to die, and that's all that matters. It's all about the cross, and faith is all about believing and being saved. I find that sad, not only for those who view a life primarily as preparation for death, but sad for the man himself. It makes it too easy to ignore his central message – a radically inclusive love, rather than religious dogma.

Personally, I take heart in the fact that all these 'greats' were as human as we are. They weren't able to complete their social, personal or planetary change, but they gave it their all. Some, like Jefferson, were tripped up by their own impaired vision which prevented them from advancing even further in the struggle to reform their world. On balance, we might think of Thomas Paine, who had a clear vision of the way forward, but perhaps overstretched his influence in too many revolutions! (American,

French and attempted British). Though we can admire his call for a new revolution in religion, naturally following a revolution in government, we see how quickly he lost his public, at least much of the general populace. On the other hand, his freethought torch was handed to later generations of reformers who re-kindled his flaming vision.

Here's where this leads my thinking. If any of these reformers of the past stir us to action, or just deeper contemplation, their defeats become our challenge. They pass along their energy and ideas that we can choose to take responsibility for carrying forward, adding our own energy and ideas of course. Or, we may choose to leave them to history's pages. For instance: How do we turn the 'failure' of Jesus, his short-lived sojourn long ago, into practical change today? It's too easy to say 'salvation is the message.' What I'm asking is essentially, what torch could we carry, believers or not, that he no longer can? Did he pass along beliefs to transform into doctrines, dogma and theology, or was there something more present, profound and practical? Like other revolutionaries who fought the good fight, what is left to do, not only say, not only believe?

Thomas Jefferson once wrote, rather ironically, that some 'shackles' will fall after the Revolution, but some will remain, heavier 'till our rights shall revive or expire.' We will fail too, time and again, but the choice is change, or chains.

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