

# JOHN BROWN'S SPIRIT IS BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

A Sermon  
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Every American citizen, indeed every Christian, who wants to think more deeply about his national and spiritual heritage, and perhaps come to a deeper understanding of himself, might very well journey to Harpers Ferry in West Virginia. Standing there on a point of land where the waters of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers converge, and where they have occasionally boiled over the banks to send their churning, ravaging waves over the town, he might very well allow his imagination to capture and recapture a moment of terrifying historical drama, the thunder and turmoil of which reach into the very heart of our society today.

In 1859 Harpers Ferry was an industrialized town in which the United States government had located an Armory and Arsenal, together with munitions manufacture, for the purpose of stocking implements of war. On a chilled, drizzly Sunday night, October 16, 1859, John Brown, an ardent abolitionist, in the company of eighteen men, attacked the Federal Armory. By this attack Brown hoped to capture the stock of weapons and thus produce an insurrection among Negro slaves in the state of Virginia. Brown succeeded at first in taking the community by surprise, seizing several strategic points. After the alarm had been sounded and the local citizens and State militia were aroused to action, Brown and several of his raiders barricaded themselves in the Armory fire enginehouse. Before long a contingent of U.S. marines arrived under the command of Col. Robert E. Lee and Lt. J. E. B. Stuart. Early on October 18 the marines stormed the enginehouse, killing ten of the raiders. Brown himself was captured alive, though his head was repeatedly smashed by the butt end of a sword. The events of that week in Harpers Ferry made this town famous in history and served as an ominous prelude to the tragic Civil War that followed.

John Brown was tried in nearby Charles Town under the charges of murder, treason, and conspiring with slaves to commit treason. Last summer I visited Harpers Ferry and then drove to Charles Town where I stood for a few contemplative moments in the courtroom where John Brown was found guilty. On December 2, 1859, he was executed by hanging in Charles Town while an aroused nation looked on in both sorrow and anger.

During the forty days that Brown reclined in his jail cell in Charles Town he became one of the most celebrated figures in American history. Aside from the fact that many, of course, denounced him as an insane fanatic and murderous insurrectionist, many of the leading personages of the day exhausted the vocabularies of praise and eulogy to acclaim him one of the greatest martyrs since Christ. Many, indeed, did compare him to Christ. Ralph Waldo Emerson declared that Brown "... Will make the gallows glorious like the Cross," (To Purge This Land with Blood, Stephen B. Oates, p. 318), Julia Ward Howe, the author of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," saw in him "A Puritan of the Puritans," (Ibid, p. 271) and Bronson Alcott said, "I think him about the manliest man I have ever

seen--the type and synonym of the Just." (Ibid., p. 269). Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison--some of the greatest literary lights of the age--ransacked the language to find words with which to acclaim him.

But who was this gaunt, fiery hero, really? Who was this old man of 59 years, with the piercing eyes, the roaring energy, the indomitable courage, the serenity of spirit that allowed him to die on the gallows without fear and flinching? At this moment I feel moved to indulge myself in a bit of shameless name-dropping. My family is related to John Brown by marriage. Brown's first wife, Dianthe Lusk, who bore him seven children, was my great-great aunt. (It is also recorded by Louis Ruchames that Dianthe's mother's maiden name was Mary Adams, "Who traced her ancestry back to the renowned Adams family of Massachusetts." (A John Brown Reader, p. 16, 17.) John Brown, of course, was an almost feverishly religious man who believed that slavery was wrong, an abomination in the sight of God. He spent most of his life befriending runaway slaves, raiding slave territory to snatch human beings from their bondage, conducting fugitive slaves into Canada, and, at last, dying for them on the gallows. Deeply steeped in the Bible, especially the Old Testament, he saw himself as a kind of Gideon leading the mighty armies of God against the evil of slavery. In many respects he was a touchingly kind and considerate man, possessed of profound compassion, a man who tenderly loved his family and his friends. It might be said that there was a kind of singleness of purpose in him--a haunting, uncontrollable necessity for freeing the slaves. There was a ferocity to his fanaticism, yet when he was taken captive at Harpers Ferry, placed behind the bars, tried in a hostile court, and led out to the gallows, there was a serenity in his manner and words that left even some of his enemies marvelling.

Yet John Brown, despite his lofty idealism and his courageous deeds, was an accomplished murderer. John Brown reacted violently to a chain of violent events. On May 22, 1856, Senator Charles Sumner was sitting at his desk in the chamber of the U.S. Senate. A few days before he had delivered on that floor a vitriolic speech in which he had attacked Senator Andrew Butler of South Carolina for his pro-slavery views. Now on this day Senator Butler's nephew, Preston Brooks, a Congressman from South Carolina, approached Sumner and with a heavy cane beat him viciously until he lay senseless in a pool of blood on the floor. Out in Kansas John Brown was involved in the increasingly violent border disputes between Missouri and Kansas. Brown had sought to assure that Kansas would be retained as a territory free from slavery. But also at this very moment in Kansas five free-territory advocates had been murdered in Lawrence by pro-slavery men. Knowing of those murders as well as having just learned about the beating of Senator Sumner in Washington, John Brown proceeded to take revenge. In the company of seven other men, four of whom were his own sons, he set forth on a remorseless mission. Bruce Catton in his superb book This Hallowed Ground tells what happened in the region of Pottawatomie Creek May 24 and 25, 1856:

John Brown and his band went stumping along through the night. They were in pro-slavery land now, and any man they saw would be an enemy . . . after a time they came to a cabin occupied by a family named Doyle.

The Doyles were poor whites from Tennessee. They had come to Kansas recently, and although they believed in slavery. . . they did not like to live too close to it; it appears that they had

migrated to get away from it. Brown hammered on the door. It was opened, and he ordered Doyle and Doyle's two grown sons to come outside. The three men obeyed, the door closed behind them, and Brown's band led the three away from the cabin. Then there were quick muffled sounds, brief cries, silence and stillness and darkness, and Brown and his followers went off down the road. In the morning the bodies of the three Doyles were found lying on the ground, fearfully mangled. They had been hacked to death with the Grand Eagle swords . . . . The father had been shot in the head. (Brown himself shot the man through the head after he was already dead.)

Next the men went to the home of one Wilkinson, a noted pro-slavery leader. Knock on the door again; Wilkinson, ready for bed, came and opened up without bothering to put on his boots. The threat of death was in the very look of the terrible old man who peered in from the night, and Mrs. Wilkinson--sick in bed with the measles--cried and begged that her husband be spared. No pity; Wilkinson was taken out into the yard, the door was shut, and again the swords came down with full-arm swings--like the cane of Bully Brooks, only heavier and sharper. The men left Wilkinson dead in his dooryard and went on to another cabin.

Here they found William Sherman, Dutch Bill, known as one of the Border Ruffians. Dutch Bill, like the others, was dragged out into the darkness for the fearful work of darkness. In the morning he was found lying in a stream, his head split open, a great wound in his chest, one hand cut off--apparently he had put up a fight for his life.

It was past midnight now. Old Brown had planned to get five, and five he got. He and his men washed their swords in Pottawatomie Creek, and went off to their homes. (pp. 9, 10--used by permission)

Though there was a warrant out for Brown's arrest for days and weeks, he eluded capture and eventually returned to his home in New York state, there to plan further movements and to consort with some of the greatest literary and political figures of the time for the financial support he needed to carry on his work.

For over a hundred years John Brown has had a haunting effect on our history. Most of the great poets and essayists have written ecstatically in describing his meaning and spirit. We cannot today sing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" without being reminded of his presence. This song, written by Julia Ward Howe, herself a great humanitarian, did much to inspire the Union army during the Civil War. She wrote it in 1861 after she had visited an encampment of Union soldiers on the Potomac. She had heard the soldiers singing "John Brown's Body" as they marched by her. Returning to her lodging in Washington that night, she could not get the rough swinging words of that popular melody out of her mind. She awoke before daybreak the next day and wrote the stanzas of her own song while it was still dark. (A Treasure of Hymns, Amos R. Well, p. 154). I must confess that I have always been stirred by the martial notes of this hymn, but the more I read and think about John Brown, the husband of my great-great aunt, the more uneasy I become. It seems to me that there is a striking parallel between John Brown's furious fanaticism and the movements that are storming through our contemporary world. Just about everyone I know is outraged by certain happenings, though obviously our senses of rage are not all directed toward the same happenings. Almost everyone in his expression of outrage seems so certain

that he is right. Sometimes he is even able to summon arguments justifying force and violence in support of his point-of-view. This was precisely the case with John Brown. In retrospect who would deny that slavery was an abomination to the Lord and a stench in the nostrils of man? Obviously it took the unspeakable violence of a four year Civil War to remove this tortuous sin from our common life. But what about the still prevailing spirit that believes that might makes right, that violence and murder can be justified in the uprooting of evil? Surely as "John Brown's Body lies a moldering in the grave" his spirit is still blowin' in the winds that are troubling our world. To me there are several insights of great truth which we can derive from John Brown if we truly think of the effects of his spirit that are with us today.

*First, the moods and manners of violence which torture our land today are powered by people who tend to believe that they are divinely inspired, that they are virtually doing the will of God.*

Throughout history man has tended to clothe his deeds of violence in the messianic garments of divine justification. When John Brown was questioned about the massacre of Pottawatomie Creek he was always vague and inconsistent about his own part. On various occasions he would say, "I did not kill them, but I approved of it," or "I don't say but what those men were killed by my orders," or "I believe that I did God a service in having them killed." He told a friend that the victims deserved to die because they "had committed murder in their hearts already, according to the Big Book." Later he asserted that the killing of those five men in Kansas had been "decreed by Almighty God, ordained from eternity." (Oates, p. 147)

Many people in Southern Illinois will recall, perhaps with horror now, a massacre that occurred in Williamson County on June 22, 1922. The miners were on strike against the policies of mine owner, William J. Lester. In order to keep the coal moving out of the mines Lester imported a group of tough strike-breakers. On that terrible day in June, twenty-three of these strikebreakers were massacred by a snarling, vicious mob of union men. Paul Angle has powerfully documented this story in his celebrated book Bloody Williamson. Angle quotes Henry Lee Myers, a U.S. Senator from Montana, who on the floor of the Senate, declared: "German atrocities of the World War horrified this country from one end to the other; but I doubt if any German atrocities were perpetrated. . . that were more horrible, more shocking, more inexcusable, than the atrocities of which I have just read?" (p. 29) After two separate trials in Williamson County in the year 1922 it was impossible to get a single conviction. The citizens of the area simply believed deep in their hearts that the massacre of those 23 men was justified because their presence as strikebreakers had threatened their security. Many of them were faithful members of the surrounding churches, and they invoked the Bible and their religion to justify what had happened.

Is it any wonder, then, that we have so many people and so many groups in our contemporary society who believe that their grievances are so great and so unendurable that violence, even killing, are justified in redressing them? It has been so in every age, and it is so in ours. Jesus Christ was in fact put to death by the Pharisees, the ruling authorities of his own community, because they were profoundly convinced that he was a threat to their leadership and way of life.



The men who made this decision we would call "God-fearing," and they were not necessarily evil. They were in fact good men, deeply devoted to the keeping of the religious laws. Indeed, they contrived to kill Jesus of Nazareth because they felt it was the will of God. So John Brown has his counterpart in every age, in every nation, almost in every heart. And yet I am terribly frightened when I hear someone declare that he is prepared to kill other human beings in the name of and for the sake of God.

Just before he was executed, John Brown handed a sheet of paper to an attendant which contained his last message. It read: "Charlestown, Va., 2d, December, 1859. I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty, land; will never be purged away; but with Blood. I had as I now think: vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed; it might be done." (Oates, p. 351). When I realize that the man who said that believed that God was leading him in his efforts, my spirit shivers. John Brown's spirit is, indeed, blowin' in the wind, and I sense a chill in the air.

## II

*Another insight afforded us by the story of John Brown is in the unusual parallelism to which we are directed when we see that frequently very good men are often moved to support those who seek to accomplish the Lord's will through violence. In the present time there are all kinds of charges and counter-charges being hurled against those who give support and comfort to the perpetrators of violence. But consider, for a minute, the case of John Brown.*

After the fearful massacre at Pottawatomie Creek in 1856, John Brown returned to the East to mobilize support for his further activities among a veritable galaxy of celebrities. In many places in New England he made fiery speeches while admiring and approving abolitionists looked on. In Concord, Mass., for example, he held an audience spellbound, including the great literary figures, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The Massachusetts Kansas Committee, formed for the aim of abolishing slavery, supplied Brown with guns and money, albeit in amounts that were pitifully small. But this Committee consisted, among others, of Samuel Gridley Howe, the great social reformer and benefactor of the blind, the husband of Julia Ward Howe; Theodore Parker, one of New England's most brilliant preachers; Franklin Sanborn, an intellectual; Wentworth Higginson, another brilliant clergyman; and George Luther Stearns, a prominent and wealthy merchant. (Oates, pp. 181-190) One might almost say that these prominent and brilliant men were mesmerized by the compelling Brown. Apparently they asked few questions about his part in the Pottawatomie massacre and Brown told them very little.

Now in our own time many of the people who perhaps revere the historical memories of Emerson, Thoreau, Howe, Parker, Garrison, etc., appear to be enraged because certain persons have been known to support militant leaders who are thought to be revolutionary. The United Presbyterian Church has been rocked and riddled with controversy because one of its agencies contributed \$10,000 to a fund which was intended to see that Angela Davis got a fair trial.



Such people as Leonard Bernstein and Jane Fonda have supported the Black Panthers. And now the Readers' Digest is intent upon vilifying the World Council of Churches because certain monies were given to help liberation groups in Africa. At the same time many who are screaming about this kind of support are very liberal in their contributions to certain radio preachers who espouse the causes of pure racism and facism. Could it be that all of us at some time or another are willing to support militant groups that seem dedicated to our own ideals and beliefs, without really asking too many questions about methods and manners? Possibly it is all a matter whose ox is doing the goading.

### III

*Still another insight that honesty compels us to accept, however painful and self-disillusioning it may be, is that there is really in all of us a kind of furnace of feeling that belches out the heat and steam of self-righteous indignation. Before our God, who knows what is hidden within our hearts, I think that we must make this admission.*

I am appalled at the violence I see in others, but there is something of a counter, reciprocal movement in my own heart that often secretly delights in the hurt of another. Let me be very specific here: I felt a terrible turbulence of rage deep within my soul the other day when I read that an attacker had slashed out the eyes of a young girl because he did not want her to be able to identify him and bring charges against him for the crime she had seen him commit. I guess I just wanted to attack him physically. Because of this I could understand what I heard a mother say the other day when she was speaking of the way she felt because her son had hurt her so deeply. "I would just like to knock this evil out of him," she said. Haven't you felt that way too? Isn't there an element of the John Brown in you?

Some time ago I heard a Dallas minister (Wilfred Bailey) tell about a twelve year old boy in his neighborhood who had shocked his father by rushing in to shout: "Dad, I've got great news for you. President Kennedy has been killed!" The father was appalled, but the son reminded him that their family car bore a bumper sticker which read: "Can the Kennedy Clan." And often the boy had heard his father say, "Somebody ought to kill that Kennedy."

Two other simple highlights out of the John Brown story are instructive here. The very first person killed by Brown's raiders at Harpers Ferry was Hayward Shepherd, who worked at the railroad station as baggage master. He was a former Negro slave who had won his freedom. Hence our very rage against evil often destroys those whom we are sworn to defend. (Oates, p. 292) And watching Brown's execution in Charles Town was a young man serving in the ranks of the 1st Virginia Regiment, out of Richmond. As the old man Brown took his place on the gallows this young man viewed him with icy contempt, "thinking how abolitionists like him were 'the only traitors in the land.'" That young man was John Wilkes Booth who six years later believed he was doing the will of God when he put a bullet through the head of Abraham Lincoln.

I have been thinking about John Brown, therefore, for a long time. He has frequented my mind ever since I stood last summer on that point of land where one can observe the boiling confluence of the Potomac

and Shenandoah rivers. I brooded about him as I walked the haunted streets of Harpers Ferry. I came home to read about him and learn all I can. And in all of my contemplation and study I think I have learned something about my fellow man, and most of all about myself. John Brown is a distant relative of mine, albeit by marriage. But so are all of the other beings in this world with whom I share a common humanity. I am related to those who wreak violence, and those who tender compassion. We are all brothers, for through us all there races a current of human life that alternates between love and hate, mercy and vengeance, hope and despair. John Brown's spirit is still blowin' in the wind. But looking into the depths of our common humanity, I discover once more that my only real hope in this world is in my brother Christ. Only in the grip of his grace can my anger be cooled, my stormy passion stilled, my self-righteousness checked, my motives purged. An my prayer becomes

Dear Master, in whose life I see  
 All that I would but fail to be,  
 Let thy clear light forever shine,  
 To shame and guide this life of mine.

Though what I dream and what I do,  
 In my weak days are always two,  
 Help me, oppressed by things undone,  
 O thou whose deeds and dreams were one.

Amen.