

“that’s what she does with some words on a page!” Oprah Winfrey describing her admiration for this woman from Lorain, Ohio. You may remember that I am also from Lorain, Ohio – although born about 30 years after Chloe Wofford - Toni Morrison’s real name. So for personal reasons, I loved watching the documentary. It showed places that I knew growing up. Buildings alive and full of life when during Morrison’s youth, but long faded by my time.

I feel a kinship with her because of this connection, this experience of life in a steel town on the banks of Lake Erie. We knew the same streets, , swam in the same beaches, skipped rocks into the same Black River, crossed over the Bascule bridge – and both of us lived for a while on the same stretch of 21st St – right up from St Joseph’s hospital.

At the same time, there is a vast gulf between our experiences. Morrison lived in Lorain in its heyday, full of a bustling working class of immigrants who were happy to be able to feed their families and make a living working in the steel mill, the Ford plant or the shipyards – where Toni’s father was a welder. The neighbor behind us was a welder at the yard. I knew that neighborhood.

But she also experienced life as an African American, which was the one class of people that those immigrants could use to forge an American identity - by looking down upon them. We have much in common – and a whole lot different at the same time.

This picture – on the cover of the order of service and here in the frame is a program from a dinner celebrating Toni in 1981. It’s signed by both Toni & the artist, John Sokol, who created it using words from her novel “Song of Solomon.” This is one of those times that I really miss my mom, because I can’t ask her about the night – how did it come about? What did she experience? My dad’s name is on the program as one of the people who helped create the evening, but I can’t remember even hearing about it. Darn – so close and yet so far – my connection to an authentic powerful person.

Toni Morrison is one of those amazing and rare human beings who help the rest of us ask the really big questions; What does it mean to be human? Is there a point to being alive? Do we matter? Each and every one of us has our own experiences; our own tragedies, our own triumphs. We have long stretches which make no sense whatsoever, and tiny moments of pure clarity. We long to have someone reflect back our experience and tell us it matters.

Very skillful story-tellers can do that. They can weave stories so well and so deep and so beautifully, that we can find our own lives within their words. Toni Morrison is that kind of bard. She writes very particular stories, stories of people we do not know and experiences we will never have. But she puts them together in such a way, with such depth, that they can hold the whole of our own lives as well. Tales where we recognize, not our separate existence, but our connection to something much larger. Where we can step into our inalienable right to be here, to be alive, to claim this mystery of our belonging.

It takes an enormous story to do that. And such a story demands a lot of us – because it gives so much in return. I titled this sermon “Beloved” after Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel written in 1987. It is a beautiful, frightening, exquisite story which changed how much of our country thought about the institution of slavery. Like any of her novels, it’s hard to capture the essence of the book in just a few words. She uses narratives, and descriptions, and architecture of story which does not follow the usual “boy meets girl” format.

Morrison's inspiration for *Beloved* came from a small newspaper article she found while creating the "Black Book." A book which was a turning point in how African Americans were able to claim their identity in the United States. The article was about a woman named Margaret Garner, who escaped the place she was kept a slave in Kentucky in 1856 with her four children, making it to the free state of Ohio. At that time the fugitive slave act made it legal for owners to track down and capture these people even after they'd reached freedom and so, only 28 days after she made it to Ohio, Margaret was found. But she was not about to let her children grow up in the conditions in which she lived, so she ran into a shed and to kill them before the law reached her. In her mind, her children were better off dead than back as property on the plantation she'd run away from.

The horrific thing -or illuminating- thing about the article was that it focused on whether she should be charged with murder or destruction of property. Charging her with murder acknowledged that she (and her children) were human beings. It was the focus of much debate. Morrison said this article weighed on her for years, eventually becoming the basis of *Beloved*.

The details of that story were fuzzy, so Karen and I watched the film version to get ready for this sermon. Starring Oprah and Danny Glover, it's a powerful movie – and it's inspired me to reread the book again with new eyes and appreciation. But it's not easy. It does demand a lot, to look into such misery and suffering and not turn away.

When I was a teen-ager I went on a kick reading classic novels – because they must be classic for a reason – right? And I remember eagerly telling my dad about this book or another, about the horrifying details – because most classics have horrifying details – and him just not being interested. In his forties at that time, he said he'd seen enough hard stuff in his life and didn't need any more for entertainment. My teen-aged self thought he was a wimp, but my 58-year-old self can commiserate. Life is hard – why seek out more hardship?

But I've come to understand that this is the classic definition of white privilege – being able to feel comfortable and not have to witness human's inhumanity to other humans. Being able to create a bubble where life seems safe from the discomfort of knowing how unjust and unfair life can be. I have to offer a caveat of sorts here. The world has gotten so much more connected with the flow of horrible news going on 24-7 that none of us can live in it all the time. I'm not advocating allowing yourself to be drowned by the onslaught of tragedies. I am saying that we have to face what is – what is real in our own lives and what is real in our communities and our country. We must open ourselves to take a look at the dark side of life – and find a way to come to terms with that uncomfortable space in order to be able to fully embrace the whole of our lives.

In the book *Beloved*, the main character Sethe has mimicked the real-life Margaret Garner. She and all the characters in the book have escaped from a life of slavery but have had to disconnect or disassociate from parts of themselves in order to survive and shut out the horrors they experienced. In the novel, a young woman called *Beloved*, the same age as the girl that Sethe killed as a baby, suddenly appears at their door in need of support. The brilliance of the novel is that it doesn't explicitly say whether *Beloved* is a ghost or not. There are hints which point that direction, but which also could point to her having escaped from a sinking slave ship. But all the family members believe that *Beloved* is the daughter come back to life. Morrison explores what it means to be confronted with the darkest most terrible thing you've done in your life – not as an idea – but as a real incorporated being that demands attention and interaction.

Sethe just wants to be able to love the daughter she lost, but *Beloved* isn't content with following that script. She demands attention and to be the center of Sethe's life, pushing out her other daughter, Denver and her lover Paul

D. In making *Beloved* a living embodiment of her sin and pain, Morrison seems to be saying that our past is always alive within us and affecting the present moment whether we acknowledge it or not. Unless we take the courage to face who we are and what we've done, it will continue to haunt us.

Eventually each of members of Sethe's family find themselves by doing just that – by facing their fears. Even the town changed and helped dispel *Beloved's* presence by accepting Sethe and her family back into its community life. There is grace for each of the characters – but not easy grace. They look their past in the eye and claim those disassociated pieces, and become whole in the excruciating process.

It is a story which speaks to us on so many levels. It works on a personal level, where it is only by making peace with the buried parts of ourselves, acknowledging and welcoming the parts we may not like or accept, that we can become whole and filled with vitality. It works on a societal level if we think about how the shadow of slavery still hangs over a country that has refused to deal with its original sin – and flails deeper and deeper into repression and escapism – so much so that truth isn't even a value for our leaders in the government. Our senators just decided that they didn't need to have witnesses or additional evidence in the impeachment process before deciding that the president was innocent of the charges against him – and they've cynically wagered that the country has such an insanely short attention span that they won't pay for that dereliction of duty at the ballot box. Sadly they might be right.

What would it look like if we invited the ghost of slavery into our house? If we let it tell us its story, express its anger and resentment? What would it look like to take full responsibility for the horrors inflicted on millions of enslaved people and then change who we are and how we act in the world in relationship with that shame? I can't say that I know – or that I believe it will ever happen. The only thing I can do is to take responsibility for my own life. I can live as truthfully, as honestly with myself and others, and as bravely as possible. Here's a clip from Morrison talking about her characters' transformation.

Clip.

We live in a world that seems short on adults right now. Short on that leanness which allows people to really face the whole of who they are – not the mask they show to the world or the promotional bio that they've come to believe – but actual, honest, real human beings. People with flaws, with challenges, with regrets and shame, but who know who they are and what they are able to offer the world. It is only by doing this very real, very hard, very challenging work that we can earn our answers to those eternal questions: What does it mean to be alive? What is my purpose in living? Who am I? Does my life matter?

Margaret Garner mattered. Toni Morrison mattered. Each and every one of you matters. This is what it means to be human – being brave enough to face the ghosts in our lives – brave enough to face that human being in the mirror. Brave enough to admit that living is worth the pain that it takes to embrace the whole of it and be our true selves. **Blessed be and Amen.**