

Daily Meditation 5-18-26

Fred Shuttlesworth: Civil Rights & Eco-Justice Visionary & Activist

Good morning.

It is our privilege this morning to reflect on the life and wisdom and teachings of Fred Shuttlesworth. Amazing man, just one of so many who brought about the civil rights legislation in 1965, that the current Supreme Court in its “infinite wisdom” (ahem), has sought fit to throw out, to destroy — with the not unsurprising results that all these Confederate states are racing, racing, racing to evict every black legislator from Congress, thanks to this Supreme Court. Unbelievable.

We’re back in times of Jim Crow. We’re back before the martyrdom of King and so many others. The tremendous sacrifices made by so many, filling the jails, being hosed down with firehoses, as Fred Shuttlesworth was, Shuttlesworth beaten by chains by the Ku Klux Klan. Yes, the Ku Klux Klan were born in Tennessee, the first state to eject laws of gerrymandering that really eject black legislators. It goes on and on. How these Supreme Court judges look themselves in the mirror in the morning, is beyond me. To wrap it in pseudo-legalese, junk justice. Every law school in this century should be embarrassed by the legal profession today. Embarrassed and ashamed in doing something about why people graduate from the law schools with no value system.

Back to Fred Shuttlesworth: I’ve been meditating, of course, on my time with him in Birmingham. And I can’t say enough about his insight and his prophetic imagination. When he was being ahead of his time, when he insisted back in 2004 that the poorest in this country must look at the ecological crisis from their point of view. Because the poorest county in Georgia and in Alabama was the most afflicted by poisonous dumps. Of course: This is where we’ve been dumping our poisons, in black communities, in the poorest communities, in the countryside, as in Alabama. And as I pointed out in my talk, maybe in that day in southeast Los Angeles also, where children had 1/3 the lung capacity compared to other children, because they grew up in environmentally dangerous places.

At the time that Fred had this insight, people were saying, oh, environmentalism, ecology, it’s for white people, it’s for comfortable white people. But he stepped out. And he had a holy stubbornness about him. He knew what he knew, and he saw what he saw.

Now, I share with you the way I began my talk in his Civil Rights Museum, where we did our dialogue. Because even to this day, I'm a little surprised that I began this way. I was surprised then too, but I'm not ashamed of it.

I began by citing Adelard of Bath, a 12th century theologian of England, and a white guy in the 12th century. Adelard of Bath said this: *Were we to neglect coming to know the admirable rational beauty of the universe in which we live, we would deserve to be cast out from it, like guests incapable of appreciating a home in which hospitality was offered to them.* That's where I began my talk in the Black Museum with Fred Shuttlesworth at my side, quoting a 12th century English theologian, white English theologian. Am I crazy or what?

Well, first of all, I just think he says it so well, and it's so radical. He's saying we have a right to be evicted from this planet, because we are neglecting the admirable, rational beauty of the universe in which we live. We are "like guests, incapable of appreciating a home in which hospitality is offered to us." That was true in the 12th century, and it's very true in the 21st century. But in the 20th century, well, the early 21st century, it took Fred Shuttlesworth to stand up and to say the way we're treating our home, the universe, the earth, ecology therefore — is worthy of expelling us from this beautiful place. Those words are, I think, more resonant, more in technicolor today, than they were in the 12th century, and even when they were in 2004.

And I recited them at the Civil Rights Museum opposite the church in Birmingham, where four girls were blown up by Ku Klux Klan members on a Sunday morning. And here we have this Supreme Court in 2026, who couldn't care less, couldn't care less about the death of those four girls. Couldn't care less about the 40 martyrs who made the civil rights laws possible — who lie to us that things are "just fine," that there's no racism left.

What planet are they living on? Well, we know: they're living on a planet of privilege. John Roberts' wife makes millions of dollars a year as a lawyer with a very glitzy law firm that, in fact, sends a number of her clients before the Supreme Court. Yes, where her husband rules. Last I heard this, several years ago, he's worth about \$24 million. So that's the world that these people live in, I guess. They certainly not in a world of conscience. It's not a world that admires the rational beauty of the universe in which we live. It's a world that Donald Trump has sold down the river, for a billion or more dollars of support from the fossil fuel corporations, that never stops flowing to him and to his MAGA crowd..

In contrast, Lorne Eiseley writes, *We have re-entered nature, not like a Greek shepherd on a hillside, hearing joyfully the returning pipes of Pan — but rather as an evil and*

precocious animal, who slinks home in the night with a few stolen powers. The serenity of the gods is not disturbed. They know on whose head the final lightning will fall.

There's an ecological trumpet warning us about ecology and eco justice.

As Thomas Berry puts it: *We are involved in a supreme pathology, closing down the major life systems of the planet. We are upsetting the entire earth system, that has over some billions of years, and through an endless sequence of experiments, produced such a magnificent array of living forms, forms capable of seasonal self-renewal over an indefinite period of time.*

And as Hildegard of Bingen put it in the 12th century, the same time that Adelard of Bath was writing: *If humanity breaks the web of justice to which we belong, all of creation is a web of justice, she said, then God's justice permits creation to punish humanity.*

And that is what we're going through today, and it's just beginning: the melting of the icebergs of the Antarctic, of Greenland, the North Pole, rising of the seas, storms, the hurricanes, the wildfires, the intense heat in the summers, the immigration that's already begun, creating so much disturbance. And it's just the beginning of people, humans will migrate, they must migrate for their own survival, out of these places that have turned from green to brown, where you can't grow crops anymore. You have to move, you have to eat. All this is what our friend Fred Shuttlesworth was talking about, and why he brought me to Birmingham in 2004.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.