

PENGUINS IN THE SANCTUARY

by Mike Fedel, 2006

for

Martin Luther King Day Service, January 2007

CAST:

Mom - female
Dad - male
Greeter - either
Kid - young boy or girl

SETTING: At the front of the church is a painting of a penguin, preferably a reproduction of one of Howard Thurman's penguin paintings. A greeter is standing offside, in view of the audience but not on stage proper. The effect is uncertainty, is (s)he part of the play or not.

Try to do something unusual to the space - move instruments or candles around - to give a physical shift to the room.

SETUP: During the first ten minutes or so before the service, a multimedia presentation has been running. It includes either collaged or morphed faces of King, Gandhi, Thurman, Johnson and the others, and members of the congregation if available. Soundtrack might be either "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" (which ties in to the play later) or any Civil Rights music. The Multimedia presentation was turned off when the service began. No comments, no explanation, or minimally something like "It'll be explained later".

Dad, Mom and Kid (male or female) stroll up the middle aisle. Mom saunters to the piano and plinks a few notes. The greeter walks over and hands a bulletin to Dad, just says "Welcome". The Kid notices the penguin and runs up to it. Dad hands the bulletin to Mom.

Kid: *(excited about seeing the penguin)* Dad! Look at this.
(Turns and looks at dad.) I hope this is going to be fun.

Mom: [name]! Be quiet, the service is starting in ten minutes!

Dad walks over to the penguin painting, which Kid is excitedly eyeing.

Dad: It's a penguin. What's fun about a penguin?

Mom: *(opens the bulletin, scans it)* It doesn't say anything about penguins in here.

Dad: It's probably a surprise. It'll be interesting to see what they do with it. *(Pause)* Maybe it's something for the kid's time.

Kid: *(in awe)* Yeah!

Mom: It's probably one of those new things they keep trying to do to make the service "relevant", you know. Like the music Linda said they have here. It's like that...I don't know...folk music. Acoustic guitars and harmonicas! *(She shudders)* I just don't know.

The Greeter steps over to the three of them.

Greeter: Welcome to our Martin Luther King Day celebration.

Mom: Well, thank you.

Dad: *(indicating the Multimedia)* Yes, we saw the pictures when we came in. But what's the penguin got to do with this?

Greeter: *(laughs)* Yes, well. We thought it would be interesting to give people something different to look at during the first few minutes of the service.

Kid: *(looking at the painting)* Boy, that sure worked! This is very cool. *(Pause, turns to the Greeter)* Can these things fly?

(Chuckles all around)

Greeter: No, no penguins don't fly. But in fact, there are a

great many things we can learn from penguins...

Mom: *(interrupts him)* I'm sure there are, but...

Greeter: *(interrupts her)* For instance, the adult male emperor penguin takes a very active...

Mom: *(interrupts him)* I'm sure that's very interesting, but please, what do penguins have to do with Martin Luther King?

Greeter: It's about non-violence.

Kid: Yeah, I saw a documentary about penguins once and they looked very non-violent!

Greeter: *(chuckles slightly)* No, not the penguins themselves. Mahatma Gandhi.

Kid: Mahatma Gandhi was a penguin?

Greeter: No...

Kid: He collected penguins?

Greeter and Dad in unison: No...

Kid: He wore a tuxedo and looked like a penguin?

Greeter and Dad and Mom in unison: No!

Dad: Listen, I'm afraid I just don't get it.

Greeter: OK, let me try this.

Greeter walks to the computer and starts the Multimedia presentation up again. He pauses on the first shot of a painting (not the one in the room), then goes to the second (also not the one in the room).

Greeter: These are paintings by Dr. Howard Thurman, a Baptist minister and one of the predominant African-American theologians of the 20th century.

Greeter clicks to next slide, which is of Thurman.

Greeter: Thurman was a lifelong friend of Dr. King. He wrote a book called *Jesus and the Disinherited*, which was one of the books that deeply influenced King. In fact, it's been reported that Dr. King had a copy of this book with him at all times. I can't prove it, but some people have said that you can see the book in Dr. King's hand in some of the more famous photos.

Greeter switches to a slide of book jacket. (It would be great to find a photo of King holding the book, did a web search with no luck.)

Dad: I always assumed he was carrying a Bible.

Mom: Yes, but the book always seemed too small to be a Bible.

Kid: I want to see more pictures of the penguins! Show me the next picture!

Greeter: Well, I can't really do that, the next picture isn't one of a penguin.

Kid: Why not?

Greeter: *(looks around conspiratorially, then puts his hand up beside his mouth and 'whispers' to the kid)* See, we're actually in a play *(the Kid's eyes get wide here)*, and the slides are set up to follow the script.

The kid is kind of dazed, walks slowly across the front of the church, looking around, up and down.

Greeter: Yes. Everyone assumes the book he's carrying is a Bible. And, as I said, we don't have solid proof that he was carrying Dr. Thurman's book, but that is the common wisdom.

Dad: That's amazing. But what does Howard Thurman painting penguins have to do with Dr. King and non-violence?

Mom: *(who is watching her Kid)* Yes, I was wondering the same thing.

Greeter: Well, the story goes back even further than Dr. Thurman, but...

Dad: Let me guess, there were no great penguin painters in the original crowd, so you started with Thurman?

Greeter: Well, you might say that...*(fades off as all three of them turn their attention to the Kid)*

The kid has noticed the congregation, walks up to someone in the first row and touches them to see if they're real.

(Ad lib) If the person responds, the Kid jumps back and says "wow!". If no response, kid moves on to another person and tries again. In either case, after about 10-20 seconds:

Mom: [name] will you please come back here, it isn't polite to go out of character like that!

Kid comes back and stands beside Mom, looking furtively back and forth between the overhead and the audience.

Greeter: So, Gandhi...

Dad: *(returning attention to Greeter)* Yes, right, Gandhi. He didn't paint penguins.

Mom: So Thurman painted them for him?

Greeter: *(chuckles)* I'm not sure, but that might have been the case. Back in 1936, Dr. Thurman organized a trip to India for himself, his wife, and several others who met with the Mahatma. He was not the first - other notable African-Americans leaders had already been in conversation with Gandhi. Probably the best known of those was James Weldon Johnson, the famous American poet.

Dad: Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing.

Greeter: Yes, maybe his most famous piece. During that trip in 1936, Dr. Thurman asked Gandhi whether or not he thought non-violence would work in American. Gandhi's answer was - some say - prophetic. He said that the message of nonviolence would probably come to the world through African-Americans, then he asked the Thurman delegation to sing a spiritual for him.

Dad: Fascinating. So King wasn't the first to talk about this?

Mom: *(interrupting)* What was the spiritual?

Greeter: Gandhi asked for "Were you there when they crucified our Lord?" He said that he thought suffering was a tool for transformation.

During the last exchange, the Kid has been poking around at the computer and tries to forward the Multimedia to one of the penguin paintings, but ends up going backwards 3 clicks.

Mom takes Kid by the shoulder and gently pulls Kid away from the computer.

Mom: You can say that again.

Dad: So, then Thurman talked to King about this?

Greeter: Well, it's debatable. After Thurman returned to Howard University - where he was teaching at the time - some other prominent figures went to India to meet with Gandhi and some reports are that they Mordecai Johnson was the first to expose King to Gandhi, but there's some question about it.

Dad: Does it matter?

Greeter: Exactly the point, it really doesn't.

Kid: I want to see more penguins!

Greeter goes to the third penguin slide, which is the slide that matches the penguin painting.

Greeter: The bad news on the penguin front is that these are the only images we have, but there are some of his books over there on the shelf. *(Points to the back of the church.)* You might want to go read up on what he said about penguins.

Kid walks over to the painting.

Kid: Naw, I'm just going to sit here and enjoy the picture while you three chatter on.

Greeter: Well, there isn't much more to say. You may or may not recall that King was stabbed in Harlem in 1958 - a while before the Civil Rights movement really exploded. Thurman had a pastoral relationship with King and visited him in hospital during that time. Thurman advised King that it was hugely important for him to deepen his spiritual channels - as he called it - because he intuited that King was about to become a very important part of a movement that would take on a life of its own and swallow him up. He was right.

Dad: So why have we never heard of his fellow before?

Mom: And why isn't Martin Luther King the focus of this play...*(Turns to the audience, embarrassed)*...I mean, this service?

Greeter: Well, that's an interesting subject...

Kid: And why the penguins?

Greeter changes the Multimedia to the morph or to a collage (whichever has been prepared)

Greeter: The thing that Thurman recognized was that everyone plays a different role in the work of being God's hands in the world. He was not publicly visible in the Civil Rights movement, not in the way Dr. King or Malcolm X or others were. But there are many who consider him the 'spiritual architect' *(fingers do quotation marks in the air)* of the Civil Rights movement. He was a quiet, meditative man who was deeply rooted in the tradition and inspired many of those who did become visible.

Greeter and parents walk toward the back of the church down one of the side aisles. Kid has picked up crayon and paper and is sketching a penguin.

Mom starts to call for Kid, but Dad shakes his head indicating 'leave Kid there'

Mom: And why the penguins?

Greeter: Thurman - in partnership with a white minister named Fisk - started a church in San Francisco. It's still active, by the way. One of their primary activities was a theater group. He recognized the role that art,

music, drama, poetry - all of it - play in each of our lives and wanted to bring those alive in the church.

Greeter finds them seats toward the back and settles them in.

Dad: Paintings. Of penguins!

Greeter: His wife said in an interview that he wouldn't admit it, but he may have enjoyed compliments on his paintings as much or more than compliments on his books and sermons.

Dad: *(laughs)* Hmm. I hear that the minister here plays the guitar sometimes. I wonder if he paints?

Greeter: We'll have to ask him sometime. *(Looks around.)* Where'd your [son/daughter] go?

Kid sees them looking for him/her, holds up the sketch of the penguin.

Mom: I think we'll just leave [him/her] there for now.

Greeter: Sounds fine. Enjoy the service.

THE END