

LIVING INTO OUR BROKENNESS

Arlington Street Church - Sunday November 25, 2007

Last year, during my third year of seminary, I worked as a chaplain at a very large state mental hospital in California. Most of the residents were there in forensic confinement – they had committed crimes but had been sent there because of their diagnosis of a profound mental illness. The very first resident that I met and began working with was a lovely older woman with the most delightful smile and warm demeanor. She had welcomed me, quite literally, with open arms.

At our very first one-on-one meeting together she confessed her crime to me – many, many years prior, while very much at the effect of her illness, she had killed her five children. I told her how very sorry I was for her loss and all of the suffering that must have preceded and followed it. At subsequent meetings we talked at length about her life before that event and how she had been abused – in every way imaginable – by all of the men in her life.

Eventually she said to me “you’re different though – you’re a different kind of man – you must be gay.” I appropriately deflected her inquiry into the personal details of my life. The very first lesson we had been taught, and one incessantly repeated, was to never disclose any details of our personal lives. But she persisted, asking me quite demurely but directly.

Being such a novice at chaplaincy I thought perhaps this is what she needed to know to be able to trust me or maybe she was a lesbian and wanted to tell me she’s part of my tribe or perhaps she just needed some courage to come out at all. I also thought about all of the years that I had struggled with my own sexuality and how I had longed for a mentor to help me come out and grow to love and accept myself.

All of these wonderful, noble and heart-warming thoughts ... and all of them were absolutely dead wrong. As soon as I said, “well, yes, I am gay” she pushed her chair back, folded her arms across her chest and scowled at me in the most demeaning manner. I tried to recover by changing the subject, then by apologizing for violating my professional boundaries by engaging in conversation about myself but to no avail. As I got up to leave I asked the standard closing question “would you like me to come back to see you again?” Duh! Her silence spoke volumes.

As I crossed the grounds back to the chapel to see my supervisor I walked very, very slowly trying to figure out what had just happened. I knew WHAT I had done wrong – that was very clear to me – but I could not wrap my mind around WHY I had done it. What was I going to say to my supervisor? Was I going to be able to stay there and finish out my chaplaincy, a requirement to get my degree, and this internship and become a minister?

It was a very, very long walk indeed!

Fortunately my supervisor, a profound and gracious man with more than 40 years of incarceration ministry experience, was unfazed. He offered me a very deep insight that day. It was also a gift. He said, “Dan, this is not about her, or this place, it is about you.”

And so it was. Even with all of the trappings of an intense and tension-filled setting and the degree to which the work required holding and processing many staggering layers of the human drama, and the most palpable and powerful lesson came to me in the form of hidden, buried knowledge about my self; one aspect of my own sense of brokenness that was so old and deep that I had figured it was long since addressed and resolved.

Many layers and variations of it have been tirelessly excavated and explored in many ways over many years. Yet some thing remained powerfully positioned in an old mineshaft that had long since been closed due to depletion. But it had been full, and in clearing through, and clearing away all of it, even more excavation was necessary.

And while seemingly engaged in deeper more complex excavations, far, far away from that earlier mineshaft, something very rich and very precious came forth from that mother vein. What came forth was something that revealed far more valuable product than the more complex excavation could ever yield.

What is more, is that the long-hidden vein produced something that was a deep-seated, and therefore deeply-hidden, brokenness that I had been unable to resolve myself dealing with it alone and in solitude. I had never been able to move beyond my own deeply engrained assumptions and their shadow sides.

In fact as I looked backed over ME and not at the patient or the setting or mental illness or my inexperience as an institutional chaplain, it was me, and ‘a leftover’ that had been in my refrigerator, in one container or another, since, well, since there had been a refrigerator.

I had long assumed that if it existed at all it was in a tiny jar, in the back of the bottom shelf on the door. And so it was there, a condiment, in just a tiny quantity, but so tainted that everything it came in contact with was ruined merely by its presence.

And so it is with all that is brokenness in us, in our communities and so much so in our larger world. And the reason we must **live into, move through** our brokenness is that there is absolutely no other way – on heaven or on Earth – for us to ‘get on through to the other side.’

And so it had been with me – for months and months through the years leading-up to my chaplaincy at the State Hospital, I had silently struggled with my own internalized doubts over whether my ministry existed apart from me. Did I have an effective, a real, a *legitimate* ministry outside the quite limited confines of my own faith community?

Now let me be very clear here; my brokenness was not that I am gay or want to be a minister who is gay but that even with all of the years and efforts of coming out and learning to accept and love myself, I still looked at some portion of the world – and therefore myself – through eyes that had been shaped in a religious tradition that is unequivocal in condemning my sexuality.

I came to realize that my brokenness here was not about where I ministered, or what I had learned or knew about being there – or anywhere - or what I had learned or knew about being a minister; it was about what lead me to doubt myself, to short-sell myself, and most especially to short-sell my congregants, parishioners and other patients by withholding and being held back by that which made me doubt my very worthiness to be there in the first place

I did not need another pastoral theology class or preaching practicum or even more training with regard to working with sociopaths and serial murderers. What I had required was a return to the very inner fabric of how I viewed the world and myself – business supposedly most fully and effectively completed many years prior.

What is your brokenness? How deeply and finely is it interwoven into the very fabric of who you are and how you are in the world and in your very self?

The only possible way to live into and live through our brokenness is to discern it, to name it and to knowingly engage with it. And there is something else that we need to actually complete that process – and that is to not attempt – to never attempt - to do it alone. And so it is that this is how the work of living into our brokenness is a religious enterprise, a spiritual endeavor, a covenantal, sacrament of redemption.

Though I had wrestled for months and months with my worthiness demon, keeping that struggle and its wounds to myself only empowered that shadow side of my demon – since it was acting covertly, in secret, every successive grapple with it just reified its hidden and heinous toll on me.

We need each other to be able to excavate, estimate and expurgate our most hidden and therefore most potent brokenness.

Forrest Church, minister emeritus of our All Souls Church in Manhattan says it this way,

Over the years my parishioners have taught me two lessons. When cast into the depths, to survive we must first let go of things that will not save us. Then we must reach out for things that can. As to the former, until we free ourselves from an attachment to false sources of security and let go of our illusions, we will remain in the abyss. With respect to the latter, the most important thing to remember is that lifelines have two ends. To grasp one end, however tightly, avails us nothing unless the other end is secured. Unless we reach out to and for others, seeking meaning not in our own suffering but in our shared experience of the human condition, our lifelines will not hold.¹

¹ *Lifelines: Holding on and Letting Go*. Forrest Church. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. Page xv.

Reverend Church makes his examination of what our suffering – our brokenness – bring us to by turning to the Hebrew canon’s wisdom book, *Ecclesiastes*, written by the prophets more in terms of a universalistic philosophy rather than as theology, law or history. Church posits that *Ecclesiastes* “suggests that life is difficult, fragile, painful, unpredictable, unfathomable, and limited.”²

Quite simply that everyone suffers – some more than others – making life unfair and unjust. However, not only does rain fall but the sun also shines, both on the just and unjust and there is no making any sense of it. Just as the prophet in *Ecclesiastes* writes, “I have seen everything that is under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind.”³

“The right happiness for men and for women is to eat and drink and be content with all the work we have to do under the sun, during the few days God has given us to live, since this is the lot assigned to all of us.” And further that there are ways for us to serve one another, including “we should not hoard our bread but cast it upon the waters, give a portion to seven and also to eight, **for two are better than one for if they fall, the one will lift up his neighbor, but woe to those who are alone when they fall, for they have no one to help them up.**”⁴

Church then goes on his own words, everyone suffers, but not everyone despairs. Despair is a consequence of suffering only when affliction cuts us from others. It need not. The same suffering that leads one person to lose all hope can just as easily promote empathy, a felt appreciation for other people’s pain. Grief, failure, even

² *Ibid.* p. xvii.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

death can thus be sacraments. Not that suffering is valuable in and of itself...if one suffers alone, suffering is no elixir. A sacrament symbolizes communion, the act of bringing us together. Suffering brings us together when we discover the lifelines that connect our hearts.⁵

He then goes on to examine the example of many 12-Step Programs, like Alcoholics, Narcotics and Gambling Anonymous, that so successfully encourage, empower and accompany others who suffer from those ailments through all of the labyrinths that sufferers could not ever possibility negotiate alone.⁶ He concludes that none of us can avoid adversity, loss or failure but we can choose how we will respond.⁷

What makes this entire process uniquely-suited to being a Unitarian Universalist communal sacrament of redemption is the powerful and pivotal role that love plays in this redeeming of our suffering and affliction through an ever-healing, ever-encompassing love. In the words of Unitarian Universalist theologian Dr. Rebecca Parker,

Love is the active, creative force that repairs life's injuries
And brings new possibilities into being. Love generates life,
From the moment of conception to the moment when we
remember with gratitude and tenderness those who have died.
And in the darkest night, when our hearts are breaking, love
embraces us even when we cannot embrace ourselves. Love
saves us and redirects us toward generosity. A theology
adequate to the realities of violence in our world must speak
from the depths of our life experience. It must speak words of
anguish and words of hope. The anguish is this: violence can
break our hearts and efface the sacred goodness of life in this

⁵ *Ibid.* P. xviii.

⁶ *Ibid.* Pg. 75-77.

⁷ *Ibid.* P. 160.

world. The hope is this: love, in its myriad forms, can recall us to life.⁸

Parker speaks in terms of acting and living in love to heal and restore a broken and ruptured world but the lesson applies with no less significance to the work we do to restore ourselves, our loved ones, those who similarly suffer or just with those who hold tightly to the other end of our lifelines.

We can claim, own and live into our individual brokenness, our community's or denomination's brokenness and our larger society's and world's brokenness, and in that process begin to do the very work that commences the healing, restoring and growing that can flow from working together and knowingly on living into and through that brokenness. And as we do that, with and for ourselves, we live and learn just what we need to, and can do, with our community's brokenness and our society's.

Similarly, as we begin to do the work of addressing our society's and country's brokenness with regard to immigration, economics, class-ism, racism and scapegoat-ism – to name just a few – that is how we commence the work of our very own *Santurio Para Tod@s*. We do not pretend that we are beginning with the answers to fix the system, but we begin with the one we can answer: how to deal with the harsh unjust and unfair consequences of all of those systems? And we do that by looking at what it is that we can do for those who are at the short end of that stick – who are bearing the brunt of the inequities flowing from our much larger brokenness, on so many scores.

My dear fellow travelers on this way, we are all of us broken, as individuals, as community members who need to do more to

⁸ *Blessing the World, What Can Save Us Now*. Rebecca Ann Parker. Boston, Skinner House 2006. Pp. 14-15.

live up to our obligations to ourselves and others that we hold most dear and to those who we encounter anywhere along our way. We can do that by living into what it is that ruptures and disrupts us. We can do that by living with and into each other in companionship, honesty and love; with open eyes, open hearts and hand-in-hand. Two by two, three by three, committee by committee, group by group – we give each other what all of us need to live into, through and ultimately beyond all of that brokenness.

I close with these words of Unitarian Universalist minister and theology professor Thandeka, “The Legacy of Caring,”

Despair is my private pain

Born from what I have failed to say

Failed to do

Failed to overcome.

Be still my inner self

Let me rise to you

Let me reach down into your pain

And soothe you.

I turn to you

To renew my life

I turn to the world

To the streets of the city

The worn tapestries of

Brokerage firms

Crack dealers

Private estates

Personal things in the bag lady’s cart

Rage and pain in the faces that turn from me

Afraid of their own inner worlds.

This common world I love anew

As the life blood of generations

Who refused to surrender their humanity

In an inhumane world

Courses through my veins.
From within this world
My despair is transformed to hope
And I begin anew
The legacy of caring.⁹

May it be so, with us, now and forever.
Amen.

⁹ *Been in the Storm So Long*. Mark Morrison-Reed & Jacqui James. Boston, Skinner House, 1991. P. 17