

Begin Again
Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist
October 2, 2011

Story - African Song - source unknown

I come to you with a story from Africa this morning. It is or perhaps was the practice of some African villages to prepare for the birth of every child by sequestering the women of the tribe with each pregnant woman until together they discovered the song of this child. Throughout the pregnancy this unborn child would hear its song. At the child's birth he is welcomed into the tribe in a circle ceremony surrounding the family as the village sings his unique song. Throughout his life any transgression of rule or civility severe enough to merit discipline is met by the village standing in a circle around this beloved member singing his song until he comes back to himself and understands who he really is and how life among them is sustained. It is the song of life that companions one in recovering from illness, in grieving loss, and at the time of leaving this life.

Perhaps in this world today, we cannot quite imagine knowing each other well enough. Loving one another deeply enough, to call each other back to authentic self when one among us lost in grief, or greed, or fear, or confusion.

Every time we engage from an open heart, without expectation or defenses, free of assumptions, believing and summoning this most authentic self, we have a glimpse of the world we seek to create. How does a heart prepare for being this open?

In My Own Words - "Casting Forgiveness on the Waters" by Nicolette Toussaint

In the UU church in Oakland, California, we used to perform an annual fall ritual rooted in Jewish practice. Traditionally, Jews prepare for their New Year by making amends with others, wiping the slate clean so that their names can be inscribed in the book of life for another year on unblemished pages.

In church, we would listen to the wail of the shofar and then recite a Litany of Atonement. That responsive reading, which was written by Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs, who was my minister at the time, appears in our hymnals here too.

Rob would ask us to turn, join hands and look into the eyes of the person sitting next to us as we recited the words of the Litany. Usually, in church, we sit next to someone we're close to – or at least someone we want to get to know - and because of this, the words take on deeper meaning: "For the selfishness which sets us alone and apart...we forgive ourselves, we forgive each other, we begin again in love."

The first time I encountered this ritual was in 1987. It was the year I lost everything: my marriage, my house, my pet, my business, my savings, even my car. As I repeated the litany, I worked at letting go of resentments: I forgave my real estate agent for selling too low. I forgave the kid who totaled my car. I even managed to mostly forgive my ex-husband.

Everyone, it seemed, but my father. I could **not** forgive my father. For as long as I could remember, he had cast a deep shadow. I would never forget the beatings he inflicted on my little brother. My role in the family was to keep my father from killing Gene. There's nothing forgivable about child abuse.

In that year, I was just beginning to understand how child abuse had led to my own fear of the dark, my exaggerated startle reflex, my inability to trust. My father seemed to lurk everywhere, and panic and anger always lay just below the surface. Throughout my teens and twenties, at least once a week, I had awakened screaming, but I could never remember the nightmare. As I turned 30, I began to remember. There's nothing forgivable about the sexual abuse of a child.

Slowly, I discovered a righteous, cleansing anger. I confronted my mother for abandoning her children to a man she knew to be dangerous. I reproached and forgave my stepmother for not protecting me as a teenager.

But I did not – would not – forgive my father. I refused to even discuss it. I had **earned** my rage, and it was **empowering**. It gave meaning to the words we recited: For remaining silent when a single voice would have made the difference...

I forgave the voiceless, terrified child I had been, and I began to speak publicly. I became an activist. Knowing that domestic violence repeats generation after generation, I saw violence in the home as the dragon's tooth that unleashes violence in the world. Finally, I wrote to my father, saying that I would see him **only** if we cleaned the slate. **He** would have to begin our relationship anew by taking responsibility for what he had done. (WAIT)

I waited years for that letter. By the time that I learned the litany, I knew that his letter would never come, that he would never take responsibility, that I never would have an adult relationship with my father.

Then, one day in 1987, I heard a quote from Confucius that penetrated the red haze of my anger. Confucius had said: "When you live for revenge, dig **two** graves." Suddenly I understood that the second grave was my own. To protect myself, I had placed everything connected to my father off limits. I had cut ties and moved far, far away. For years, I had pushed away recollections of my childhood: memories of camping trips, of playing chess with my father by lantern light and scaling Colorado's 14,000 foot peaks.

But in burying my memories, I had suffocated a part of myself. Ironically, it was my childhood mountaineering experiences -- learning to use a compass, to build a fire and to survive on my own -- that had fueled my self-reliance, my courage... and an ironclad will to overcome.

And so, one fall morning, I retreated to a big lake in Oakland to prepare a private ritual of forgiveness. I gathered branches and sat by the water's edge. Saying my mother's name, I selected a small branch. Envisioning it as a boat, I loaded it with all the anger, regret and blame it needed to carry. I launched it, saying: I forgive you, I forgive myself, we begin again in love. I repeated this ritual again and again, each time choosing a bigger boat, and a more difficult task of forgiveness. My anger receded as each boat drifted away on the ripples. Until I came to my father.

I was completely unable to launch his boat. Twice I got up to look for a bigger branch. Once I stood up to leave. Finally, I sat and envisioned my father not as I knew him, but as a child. I knew that he too, had suffered abandonment and abuse. He had gone hungry; he had lost his mother when he was eleven.

Slowly, I began to feel a measure of compassion for the child he had been. I understood that he had been a victim before he had made me one. And the words of the litany echoed back to me: For so many acts both evident and subtle, which have fueled the illusion of separateness, we forgive ourselves, we forgive each other...

I placed that little boy in that very big boat. Then I set it in the water and, in forgiveness, I let it go.

Sermon - "Begin Again" by Gretchen Haley

I was at a ministers' retreat last spring, talking about our covenant with one another. It needed to be updated, it had been a while. We had new promises we wanted to make to each other, new words we use to describe those promises. We were brainstorming, just throwing things out, when one of the colleagues said, let's promise to acknowledge our radical imperfections. Not just imperfections, but radical ones.

We all laughed and nodded as it was entered into the record. It was maybe especially funny given that we were a group of *Unitarian Universalist* ministers. Unitarian Universalists, whose origins can be traced almost entirely to our *rejection* of the idea that humans were born into original sin, and pre-determined for a destiny of bliss torture, based on no acts or effort of our own. This just couldn't be right, we've puzzled out over the decades.

Humans do all kinds of good things, humans are compassionate, kind, generous, creative, we have within us all those qualities we usually attribute to a traditional notion of God. This

actually was the thesis of a 1828 sermon by the founder of American Unitarianism – William Ellery Channing – called, fittingly, “Likeness to God.”

Much of the religious world has preached and lived out the narrative of human sinfulness and depravity, while our history has repeatedly claimed what Matthew Fox calls human’s “original blessing” as *our* story.

We are as *our* story tells it, stardust, we are the cosmos reinterpreted as bones and skin, muscles and movement, stardust, carrying forward the good and the blessing of this glorious and mysterious life.

That same Lutheran pastor who calls Christian praise music, “Jesus is my Boyfriend Music,” (you remember) she was just interviewed by the *Denver Post*. In the interview, she detailed her own faith journey, which began first in Unitarian Universalism. She’s a progressive, even radical, in most of her thinking – with the tattoos and free use of the f word to match. But she didn’t stay in our faith she says in the interview, because Unitarian Universalists have too high a view of humans. She goes on to explain, it just didn’t match with her experience, thinking so highly of ourselves.

Although I don’t think she’s read us right, I get how she could get that idea. One church website I ran across recently actually said, Unitarian Universalists don’t “do” sin. The paragraph below this line talked about how we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, about our potential for good. They didn’t really expand any more about “sin” itself. And so I wasn’t sure if they meant – we don’t believe humans sin, or we don’t use the word “sin,” or we just don’t talk about anything that might be called “sin.”

In some ways, it actually doesn’t matter what that website meant. What we don’t have language for, we can’t make meaning out of, what we don’t talk about, we don’t attend to. It’s as if it isn’t there. Maybe some of you are familiar with the children’s book about the dragon that the mom said wasn’t real?

(PULL OUT *There’s No Such Thing as a Dragon*, SUMMARILY READ IT)

Just because you don’t talk about something, doesn’t mean it goes away. As the story tells it, sometimes it actually means it gets bigger.

Have you ever walked into a place – an event, or a club meeting, maybe just a casual gathering of friends or family – and had the sense that there was something right there in the room, something unseen or unmentioned, but still present? I felt it most recently at my daughter’s school. I was waiting for her at the door with a bunch of other moms. Their hair was so nicely combed, and they had make up on, and wow, their socks matched – each other, and what they

were wearing. And for a moment I wondered, if it was just me that sometimes couldn't get my child out the door, just me that wasn't sure when or how to fit in a shower, let alone a haircut.

But then I just knew, their quick praise of their children, their wide smiles – it wasn't the whole story. All of us standing there have moments where our child confuses us, frustrates us, wears out our last bit of creativity and patience. We all have moments where we wonder if we're cut out for this, wonder if there's any way to call parenthood a "success." We just mask these moments with hair and make-up, with stories about how great it is to be a mom, how charming our children are.

Which makes sense. It's a risky thing to share the places in our life where we feel we miss the mark. The places we feel separate from our best selves, from the people and values most important to us, separate from the universe and the life we are called to live.

And yet, unless we have some place in our lives where we can talk about these things, some place where we can make meaning of them, consider them as normal and regular, just as regular as anytime we approach that "likeness to God," then these things, what we might call, our radical imperfections – are our dragon.

Growing amongst us, getting in our way, reminding us all the time that the house we are building might at any moment wander down the street, might burst into pieces, disappear.

We puzzle sometimes at the success at some of the big conservative evangelical churches, most of them embracing a pretty low view of humans, a pretty low emphasis on human capacity to improve themselves or the world. I think there's a bunch of reasons why these churches are attractive, but one of them, is that at least in theory, they give people permission to be fundamentally flawed. Even to be a total mess. It's expected. Perfection is an impossibility, and striving for it is actually like blasphemy.

I think about that, I think, what a relief! What a relief to be in a community where I am not expected to be perfect, or even pretend to be, where I can be real about what's really going on with me, where I can share the story of my heart even when it's a big confusing mess (which is a lot of the time), the things I'm wrestling with, the places where I don't know the answers, and sometimes where I don't even know the questions. What a relief for *us all* to be in a community where people know each other well enough to help each other figure out how to move through these struggles, to call each other back to the things we most care about, back to the light, to that piece of stardust that shines within each of us, whether we can always see it or not.

Here's the good news. We don't need to lose our high view of humanity to create this kind of community. In the story Nicolette told, the song is a song of beauty, a song of goodness, a song

of truth and wholeness. When the village sings the song, it is to call a person back to *that* self – the self that is joyful and loving, the self that gives and receives of his spirit and her heart, with a great sense of how that self is connected with all other selves. This is the authentic self. Good, sacred, worthy. Inherently worthy and precious.

This image of singing one another back to our most authentic selves offers us a mighty alternative to the pessimistic view of humanity offered by some religions on one end of the spectrum – where no matter how much singing you may do, you’re trapped in this thing called sin, or the impossibly high view of humans that our tradition has often fallen into – where we all affirm each other’s tune no matter how far off it feels from something we might call good, or authentic, or whole.

And the good news is that more than this cheery resistance to calling out and dealing with our dragons, our tradition has its core something very much like the story of the African village, something that we call the practice of our covenant.

Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal faith. Which means, we are bound not by specific shared beliefs, but by the promise of continued relationship – to each other, to ourselves, to the greater world, to the Spirit of Life. The promises of covenant are promises to walk together as we discover our sacred songs – the ones of our individual lives, and the songs of our shared life together.

And they are promises to help each other be faithful to these songs, and to call each other back to our truest selves when we have lost our way. We *will* all lose our way. We will *all* miss the mark. The dragon is real, our covenant says, and it’s in the room. As Jewish theologian Martin Buber says speaking covenantal language, we are promise-making and promise-*breaking* creatures.

And just as our covenant anticipates our breaking our promises, it also calls us to return to the relationships held in that covenant when these breaks occur. It says over and over, to try again. To seek forgiveness, to make amends, to repair relationships, to heal yourself, to heal the world.

A covenant anticipates our human imperfection, even our radical imperfection – and so my colleague’s suggestion at our retreat is, despite our chuckles - completely in line with covenantal theology.

And in response, this covenantal theology would sing to this human imperfection a sweet song calling us again and again back to our most authentic self. Stardust.

Living this practice of covenant, it's slow work. It doesn't happen just because we gather more regularly on Sunday mornings and read something we call our covenant, though that does help.

It happens because we commit – as individuals and as a group – to making a place where we can learn each other's unique song. It happens when we ask each other what we most care about, and what loyalty to that would look like. When we make the time and the structure for these conversations to occur.

It happens when we meet in small groups and listen deeply. It happens when we share in service. It happens when we study together and pray together and sing together with full voice. And this kind of community happens when we come to church with make up undone and socks not matching, and we trust that people will laugh and love us through it all. When we share about difficult moments in our lives, the people whose hurt stays with us, the people who we have hurt more than we can stand to say, and the ways we've made sense - or haven't yet - of all of these. When we say out loud and make sense of the ways we feel known, and seen – and the ways we are lost, and confused, and lonely. And as Nancy Bowen says, this community of covenant happens “when we commit to knowing each other well enough, deeply enough that we can call each other back to authentic self when one among us is lost in that grief, or greed, or fear or confusion.”

When we know each other well enough, deeply enough, that we can sing to each other, our unique and holy song. This is the way of our covenant, the way of our faith, the way of creating a community where we all feel we belong. This is the call before us. What a relief such a community would be. What good news for the world. As we live into this story – *our story*, we share a glimpse of the world we seek to create. It is here among us already. Becoming and beginning, already, and again.

In this beloved community, may we walk together in this covenant, may we hold each other in all our brokenness, may we love each other into all our beauty; may we offer each other and ourselves forgiveness, and release; may we find the courage to give voice to our secret songs; and may we receive each other in our truest selves.

Here is our call, this worthy work. Let us walk this path, together.

May it be so, and amen.