

Courageous Love
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UUSMV
February 20, 2011

Reading:

You may know that UU's are courageously standing up for immigration rights and many were arrested for civil disobedience in opposition of oppressive immigration law in Arizona on the day it was to go in effect, July 29th of last year. Their cases are just now coming to trial and Reverend Wendy Von Zirpolo shared with us her statement after pleading guilty to civil disobedience a few weeks ago. Public comments such as hers are rarely permitted, and she was grateful to the judge, who gave space time for her witness.

Wendy said.

Your honor, I treasure this country. I believe in our judicial system and the laws that protect all people. But there is a higher law which landed me here today. The law of our collective soul some call God. It is a law that cherishes all creation's children and insists that each of are due respect, safety, justice and love.

On my flight here this morning I reread the autobiography of Anne Moody, an African American woman who grew up in the midst of the battle for civil rights in Mississippi. A story she told mirrored a part of my fourteen hour experience in Maricopa County Jail. She tells of a young man being yanked from a gathering, dragged by police, not resisting arrest but unable to stand because of how we was dragged. He is beaten by officers and taken away, bloodied. The only difference between that story and what I witnessed on July 29th was that the beating itself took place away from my eyes. While inside the Maricopa Jail garage, I saw a young Latino man dragged past me and behind some vans, calling out "I am not resisting arrest. I am not resisting arrest." "When I saw him again, perhaps only ten minutes later, it was clear he had been beaten. Beaten badly. This, nearly half a century since the horrific instances of racism were brought to a country finally willing to see, to own and to correct, and yet, here we are today.

In Anne's accounting, two white men sat watching in a car, unwilling to participate. Silent. Today, while it saddens me to find breaking a law of our land necessary, my God calls me to participate, my faith requires I not be silent. My faith calls me to stand with my Latina and Latino sisters and brothers and other people of color who are victimized, scapegoated and hunted by those who deform the laws of our human soul and construct evil legislation.

Sing: Open your hearts

Sermon

We watched the towers collapse. We watched America choose war. The peace in our own hearts shattered.

How to pick up the pieces?

What to do with the pieces?

Author, Terry Tempest Williams was desperate to retrieve the poetry she had lost.

Standing on the rocky point in Maine. Looking east toward the horizon at dusk, she faced the ocean. Give me one wild word, she asked of the sea.

The tide was out. The mudflats exposed. A gull picked up a large white clam, hovered high above the rocks, then dropped it. The clam broke open, and the gull swooped down to each the fleshy animal inside.

“Give me one wild word to follow...”

And the word the sea rolled back to her was “mosaic.”

We all know these moments. The tide is out, the peace in our lives shattered. We ask, how to pick up the pieces, what to do with the pieces? Forrest Church, minister for thirty years of All Souls Church in New York City, one of our largest congregations, who died last year of cancer, called this our God project.

Our lives, he says are like interactive mosaics of stained glass windows that take shape as we grow, love, fail and recover. On any given day, some pieces are broken, some are discolored, and some are badly cast. Our spiritual search is about the little truth in our lives adding up one by one. We are all broken somewhere, says Terry Tempest Williams. Yet, the pieces put back together can bring joy to the darkest of places.

Italian Mosaic Artist, Marco Del Luca writes in Terry’s book *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* that it is part of human nature to recompose a unity that has been broken. In mosaic, he says, we recreate an order out of shards, to make new forms from the past. We must listen to the object of our art. He holds the beautiful 1500 year old glass from the basilica of San Vitale in his hands; he brings them to his ear and says “listen.”

He learned the art of mosaic from the masters, he studied all the ancient rules, and then finally after years of mastery when he knew himself as an artist, he found the courage to break the rules, find new beauty, new forms. Where do we find the courage to hold our broken pieces, to feel the weight of our broken dreams, to listen to our pain? How do we consider the possibility that these shards can be added to beauty to build a new foundation for our life?

Let us look for a moment, like De Luca did, to the wisdom of our ancestors. Early Universalism of the 18th century was a communal faith. “Communal” then meant the individual was removed from the religious equation. Radical. Universalists encouraged believers to think of their own interests as inseparably linked with the eternal welfare of the whole body of humanity.

If we reform this Universalist principle in the language of our own time, we might say that it is basically a commitment to *liberation*; that spiritual liberation and social liberation are inextricably linked.

Wendy Von Zirpola in our reading speaks of our collective soul, some call God, a law that cherishes all creation’s children and insists that each of us are due respect, safety, justice and love. A law that requires her not to be silent, a faith in a law she embodied that day as she joined her Latino and Latina brothers and sisters in their vulnerability under an oppressive law, and offered her truth to the possibility of a new just mosaic.

The pieces of our lives shattered in the moments of our pain can be fashioned into shining stones of hope by the love of this progressive faith community and the thousands of Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country. This is our God project.

I fashioned such a stone in my life. When I was in my late twenties, about to embark on a new career as a management fellow with the federal government just a few months married, I became unexpectedly pregnant. Not ready to have a child, Ben and I decided to end the pregnancy. The weight of that decision grew over the years with shame and guilt.

In the warm embrace of my faith community I finally broke my silence and shared my pain. There I found the courage to spend many a Saturday morning in the 1990s, joining arms with others creating a protective circle around the women seeking the services of Planned Parenthood and other abortion clinics. It was rough going, the anti-abortion people were physically and verbally violent, but our circle of liberation sustained me, reshaping the painful shards of my past. In the embrace of my spiritual friends, I heard the call of my faith to take what was broken and make it whole, to heal my soul and liberate myself on behalf of others.

To recognize one’s own tears in another’s eyes, says Forrest Church, creates a divine connection. His words remind me of an encounter I had with a homeless man of a tribe that lived here long before Europeans came to this land. I was on my way to the internationally acclaimed rose garden in Portland Oregon and had just entered the 500 acre park located on the highest hill of the city. I was alone, standing in the dark shade of the holocaust memorial when the homeless man and another man who could have been his young adult son approached me dressed in rags and carrying bags that spoke of weary feet and unfathomable uncertainty. I ignored the alarm that goes off in my head when being approached by unknown men, and met the older man’s gaze.

My senses stretched to fill the space between us and I for a moment lived the life that danced in his moist eyes, read like Braille the deep creases of faces, and absorbed like a dry sponge his story of lost social security check, and his hopes of traveling 70 miles for a reissued check. We were both thirsty for conversation, and as we talked, we experienced the joy of connection. As he ambled away, his son and I shared a “you just got to love him” look. I continued on looking for the rose garden, and after getting lost several times I finally found the right uphill path, and there to greet meet me, bright with familiarity and mirth among a sea of strangers and roses of every color was his kind face as he said to me, “well you finally made it.” We gave each other the gift of been seen. In moments like this, I hear William Sloan Coffin’s voice say “The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.”

Forrest Church breathed life into these words. Diagnosed with esophageal cancer four years ago, his cancer first responded to treatment for awhile, went into remission, and then returned with a vengeance. During the years in which he was actively dying, Forrest says that he was curious to see if the faith he’d been preaching all the years of his ministry would sustain him.

He was choosing to be on public display through it all. Still in the pulpit. Still writing. Still giving interviews. So it was not only his parishioners at All Soul’s who were privy to how he was doing, but also all those others for whom his words had been a source of inspiration. He wanted so much to be a good example of how to live into a good death. And so it seems that he was. A colleague says that her last email from him said, “Cancer has returned. Death looms. Other than that all is well. Much to celebrate. Love, Forrest.”¹

It hasn’t been easy, of course, for those who have loved him. One of his parishioners who has had her full share of death, wrote to him of her heartache, “My heart has been broken again, and for that I am overwhelmingly thankful; without love this wouldn’t be possible.”

This woman, through the wisdom of her living, has learned to be grateful for the heartbreaks, because it is only a loving heart that can be broken. It’s a lot safer, of course, to build a shell around our hearts, a shell that consists primarily of fear: fear of disappointment, fear of embarrassment, fear of confrontation or conflict, fear of the unknown, fear of being wounded one more time. It is not dying that takes courage, said Forrest. It is loving that takes courage because to love is to place our hearts in jeopardy. Love makes us vulnerable. And yet, he says, it is love that will survive our deaths. The only thing that death does not kill, he says, is the love we’ve given to others during our brief span of days. He tells about some of the obituaries that were printed in the paper following the events of September 11th, 2001. He says that what stood out in these brief obituaries was not worldly success, not a list of noted

1 Reverend Carol Rosine, “Standing on the Side of Love” 2009

accomplishments and positions. Instead what stood out was the love that had been given and received. Three examples:

Scott M. McGovern

“Just before bedtime,” Mrs. McGovern said, “her husband would pick up Alane, the older of their two daughters, wrap her in a blanket and walk out to the driveway of their house in Syckoff, N.J. ‘Where are you going?’ Mrs. McGovern would ask them. Scott would whisper back, ‘We’re going to wish on a star.’”

Cora Hidalgo Holland

“I loved my mother’s hands, her extensions of her soul,” Nate Holland, now 19, said in eulogizing his mother... “She had hands like silken clay, forever soft and always warm. When I was a child she would tuck me into bed and run them through my hair as we talked until I could talk no more. I would drift into sleep as her fingers floated across my scalp. The second that she withdrew her hand I would awaken, her rhythmic lullaby ending, but I would still pretend to be asleep.”

Christopher C. Amoroso

“The other night, after Sophia Rose Amoroso had her bath, she looked at her tiny hands, wrinkled from the bathwater and told her mother, Jaime, ‘I have Daddy’s fingers.’ She will also always have the letter he wrote her when she was 10 weeks old: ‘Sometimes it makes me cry, as I am overwhelmed by the joy I’ve been given by you and your mother. I want you to know that I consider myself the luckiest man to ever walk the face of this earth. If anything were to happen to me, I could honestly say I’ve known true love and happiness in my life.’”²

We are all broken somewhere, and putting the pieces together with the vibrancy of a deeper truth creates a joy that liberates and heals.

I offer with one last story shared by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen in her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*. She tells of an angry young man with osteogenic sarcoma of the right leg. He had been a high school and college athlete and up until the time of his diagnosis, his life had been good. Beautiful women, fast cars, personal recognition. Two weeks after his diagnosis, they had removed his right leg above the knee. This surgery that saved his life ended his life. Playing ball was a thing of the past, and he began to engage in self-destructive behaviors, drinking heavily, and drugs, refused to go back to school and alienated his friends. Rachel encouraged him to show his feelings, and gave him a drawing pad and asked him to draw a picture of his body. He drew a crude sketch of a vase, just an outline. Running through the center of it he drew a deep crack, he went over and over the crack with a black crayon, finally ripping the paper. It hurt to watch.

In time he began to take notice of stories in the paper of others in accidents in which legs or limbs were lost, and he would talk endlessly in their sessions together on their

² Ibid

behalf...no one he says understands them. Rachel asked him one day, what are you going to do about it? So began a new calling and ministry for this young man, visiting these patients in the hospital.

One of my favorite of his stories concerned a visit to a young woman who had lost her mother, her sister, and her cousin to breast cancer. Another sister was in chemotherapy. At twenty one, she took one of the only options open at the time, she had both her breast removed surgically. He visited her on a hot midsummer day, wearing shorts, his artificial leg in full view. Deeply depressed, she lay in bed with her eyes closed refusing to look at him. He tried everything he knew to reach her, without success. He said things to her that only another person with an altered body would dare to say. He made jokes, he even got angry. She did not respond. All the while a radio was softly playing rock music. Frustrated, he finally stood, and in a last effort to get her attention, he unstrapped the harness of his artificial leg and let it drop to the floor with a loud thump. Startled, she opened her eyes and saw him for the first time.

Encouraged he began to hop around the room snapping his fingers in time to the music and laughing out loud. After a moment she burst out laughing too. "Fella" she said, if you can dance, maybe I can sing."

That's Courageous love. Let us sing.

Hymn: Standing on the Side of Love.

Closing words

The last time Dr. Remen saw the young man, she showed him his vase drawing, he said "it's not finished" he took the drawing and drew yellow lines radiating from the crack to the very edges of the paper. He was smiling, putting his finger on the crack he said, this is where the light comes through.

May your light emanate from the cracks of your soul and help ease the suffering and bring justice to a broken world.