

“Life on a Mobius Strip”

Reverend Jill Cowie

Unitarian Universalist Society of Martha’s Vineyard

September 25, 2011

Reading

Not long before he died, William Sloan Coffin, the great preacher of Riverside Church, asked a beautiful question: “Who tells you who you are?” - which is another way of asking what covenants you’re bound by, who harbors you and whom you harbor. He said some people rely on money to tell them who they are, and it’s a desperate standard. Some rely on status or power or position, and some need enemies to tell them who they are. (“Whatever I am, I am not that” - a small and cynical defining.) Too many of us, too often, he said, allow our own mistakes to tell us who we are. We look through the murky lens of shame or regret at our own shabby jumble of stumbles and sins and define ourselves by these alone. No other measure will convince us. There is grandiosity in such delusion.

Who tells you who you are? He responded by quoting the prophet Isaiah: “I have called you by name. You are mine, saith the Lord.” For him, a Christian preacher, this meant, “For one thing, you never have to prove yourself. God’s love is poured out universally on everyone, from the Pope to the loneliest wino on the planet; God’s love doesn’t seek value, it creates it. Our inherent value is a gift, not an achievement. So you never have to prove yourself, with money or power or perfection. You only need express yourself, and abundantly return the love you’ve been given so abundantly.”

Sermon

We sang, “There’s a river flowin in my soul, and it telling me, that I’m somebody. There’s a river flowin in my soul. (singing)

From where comes your river? The poet writes “When you want to lay yourself open for the divine... then go into your inner place physically, or to that story or symbol that reminds you of the sacred.” (Neil Douglas-Klotz)

What story do you go into, what symbol do you enter?

Each of us has a different answer, that’s the beauty of it. The symbol I go into is our flaming chalice. The flame to me is love moving in my heart and taking shape in the way I live my life nourished by the oil of all of you, the chalice of the beloved community.

There are moments though when the flame diminishes, the oil gone, or the river dry. You know that feeling of being spiritually lost, unnourished disconnected from the beloved community?

Quaker author and teacher Parker Palmer describes this sense of connection and disconnection in his story about the blizzard of the world.

He writes of the time when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door of their house out to the barn. They all knew stories of people who had wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home in a whiteout while still in their own backyards.

Today we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others. We all know stories of people who have wandered off into this madness and been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives.

The lost ones come from every walk of life: clergy and corporate executives, politicians and people on the street, celebrities and schoolchildren. Some of us fear that we, or those we love, will become lost in the storm. Some of us are lost at this moment and are trying to find our way home. Some are lost without knowing it. Some of us have just reached for the rope. Others are in the middle of the journey trying to keep hold of our grip. Others have just arrived home.

Parker Palmer ends his discussion with this, "My own experience of the blizzard, which includes getting lost in it more often than I like to admit, tells me that the soul's order and life's hope can never be destroyed. It may be obscured but, that rope is always close at hand, offering, time after time, the chance to regain our bearings...and find our way home again.

This is the focus on Unitarian Universalism: helping people find their way home to live lives of greater connection to their deepest selves. This is the saving focus of our faith community, and it saved me. A faith that knows there is no identity without relationship and cares enough to hold you as you seek the answer. The question "Who am I?" always leads beyond the self-absorbed self to a deeper one, "*Whose am I? Who needs me? Who loves me? To whom am I accountable? To whom do I answer? How do I give with the abundance that I have received?*" (Douglas Steere)

These questions lead us to moments of deep sharing and caring, each with a holy place of love that still blesses and sustains. I remember a patient I saw as

a chaplain during an early morning pre surgery visit. His eyes drew me in as I introduced myself. Eyes that said I am scared. His wife rocked on her feet at the end of his bed, pushing her body against the curtain, wanting to flee. Right hand in his, I stretched to hold hers, drawing her oh so gently to his side. His eyes held fast to mine, like a boat to an anchor as we wove a prayer about their life together, their love and memories. It was just a few minutes, but when I visited them later that day, his wife welcomed me as if I was the doctor responsible for the successful surgery. The joy is still with me.

The Buddhists call this joy our original nature, the Quakers call it our inner light and Hasidic Jews call it our spark of the divine. “What we call it matters little, says Palmer, but that it exists matters a great deal, for it is the objective ontological reality of selfhood that gives us the strength and integrity to stay grounded and live fruitful and blossoming lives.”

We find our way home as our inner and outer selves are integrated; a process that Parker says involves four stages. In the order of service you will find a two inch piece of paper which will serve as a visual aid to these stages. One side of the paper is your outer life. Take a moment and write or name words to describe your influence and how you hope to make a difference.

The other side of the paper is your inner life. Take a moment to write, or name words that describe your ideas, intuitions, feelings and values. Parker’s first phase starts when we arrive in the world whole and integrated. Perhaps think about and describe yourself as a child. Name on this side of the paper if you can the source from which such things come: mind, heart, spirit, soul or place-beyond-naming.

The second phase begins when we erect a protective barrier between our inner self and the outside world, usually during our teenage years. Depending on what happens, this barrier can last a very long time, and comes down only when the pain of living a divided life becomes too much. I think of a friend of mine who is bisexual and after years of struggle, is coming out to her husband, her friends and coworkers.

Hold each end of the piece of paper at eye level, and consider what part of you was or still is hidden. Is the self you present to the world different from the one within?

We enter phase three when we strive to reorder our outer lives around our inner values and beliefs. Take the paper and join the ends together. The circle represents the yearning for our inner truth to be the plumb line for the choices we make about our life-about the work we do, and how we do it, about the relationships we enter and how we conduct them. This is the yearning to be centered. Phase three for me was my call to the ministry.

I have learned, and you can see this visually, if you put your hand under your circle, that phase three has a shadow side if we use our inner truth as a filter to exclude anyone or anything we find challenging.

This brings us to the fourth and final stage of our integrated self. Take the strip of paper you have been holding in the shape of a circle, pull the two ends slightly apart, give one end a half twist and then rejoin the two ends. We have created a remarkable form called a Mobius strip, named after the German mathematician August Mobius who discovered the mathematical equation that produces the shape. It is also known as the bilinear transformation. You probably never thought you could all this from such a little piece of paper.

Holding the strip together with the fingers of one hand, trace what seems to be the outside of that strip, suddenly and seamlessly you find yourself on what seem to be the inside of the strip. Continue to trace what seems to be the inside surface and suddenly and seamlessly you find yourself on what seems to be the outside of the strip.

The two sides keep co-creating themselves. As you trace, try to feel the connection between how you described your inner and outer self. How does it feel? I find that I go fast in the “inner” places and slow in outer spaces. How about you? Do you find you drive really fast on some parts of the strip, and get stuck in other places?

Palmer says, the reality is that we live on the Mobius strip all the time, and there is no place to hide. The wall, and the circle are the sometimes necessary illusions of protection that serve in the long run only to cut us off from the vitality of our core self.

The more we as a faith community create space for each of us to give voice to our inner self, the stronger we will be as a fruitful force in this world. We have only one choice, says Parker, either we walk the Mobius strip wide awake to its continual interchanges, learning to co create in ways that are life-giving for ourselves and others, or we sleep walk on the Mobius strip, unconsciously co creating ways that are dangerous and often death dealing to relationships, to good work to hope.

My friends, our call is nothing less. The prophet Isaiah said “I have called you by name. You are mine, saith the Lord. Divine love doesn’t seek value, it creates it. Our inherent value is a gift, not an achievement. We never have to prove ourselves with money or power or perfection. We only need express our true self and abundantly return the love we’ve been given so abundantly.

Let us sing “We are Building a New Way”

Closing Words by Neil Douglas-Klotz

Close the door of your awareness to
the public person you think yourself to be.
Pray to the parent of creation, with your inner sense,
the outer senses turned within.
Veiling yourself, the mystery may be unveiled through you.

By opening yourself to the flow of the sacred,
somewhere, resounding in some inner form,
the swell of the divine ocean can move through you.
The breathing life of all reveals itself
in the way you live your life.
May it be so for us

~

Opening Words

One of the old ones stood up into the morning light and spoke to those who had come back to the river:

"Now we have come again to this place; it is a good thing. My life apart from you is not as strong.

"Yes, I have danced and I have told the stories at my own fire and I have sung to all the six directions.

"But when I am with you, my friends, I know better who it is in me that sings."