

(Un)break My Heart
Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer
Sunday, February 11, 2018

First Unitarian Universalist Church
Rochester, Minnesota

READINGS

*A reading from **Healing the Heart of Democracy** by Parker Palmer*

*A reading from **Ranier Maria Rilke***

SERMON

Like a musical flash mob – before flash mobs were a thing –
and it wasn't even a mob, because it was only four people.
So, I guess – a flash quartet.

This is my song – they sang.
But not those words, or the traditional Finland national anthem words.

It was their high school choral anthem,
and they, randomly, found a beautiful half dome sculpture,
built of concrete, to sing under,
with a clear blue sky, bluer than the ocean,
and sunlight beaming.

As they were singing,
a few folks who were walking on the boardwalk
along Lake Superior
stopped to listen.

One elder gentleman, awash in sunshine,
stood, almost clinging to what seemed to be his daughter next to him –
tears streaming down from under his sunglasses.
As he stood there in wonder, listening...

The song came to a close.
A quiet but hearty applause came
from the little congregation that had gathered there along the boardwalk.
And one of the singers went over to the two, both with tears of joy –
and asked, “Is everything okay?”
The only thing they were thinking was, maybe he went to their high school –
but they had never met anyone, ever,
who had a deep connection to that high school anthem.

The daughter responded – “he doesn't speak English – he's from Finland.
You just sang the anthem of his homeland from across the world.
You just blessed him with your music.”

And, perhaps luckily, while he knew it wasn't sung in Finnish, he didn't know it was about a high school – which probably maintained its eloquence.

In those moments,
music opened a passageway –
a possibility for connection beyond spoken language –
a bridge
where the love one had for homeland,
was met with generosity and grace and love.

Those songs, those identities, live in our hearts.
And as much as courage is about diving deep into our own souls,
knowing who we are and who we strive to be –
it is just as much
breaking the heart open
beyond individualism,
beyond the self alone,
toward the collective, larger whole
of the common good, our shared life.

*I live my life in widening circles writes Rilke,
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.
I circle around God, around the primordial tower.
I've been circling for thousands of years
and I still don't know: am I a falcon,
a storm, or a great song?*

How we hold on to our identities,
how we express and live out the core values and hopes and dreams
of who we are –
is a matter of how we live by heart.
From that, we begin to craft, together, the community in which we live.

The human heart is the first home of democracy.
writes Terry Tempest Williams.
It is where we embrace our questions.
Can we be equitable?
Can we be generous?

*Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds,
and offer our attention rather than our opinions?*

*And do we have enough resolve in our hearts
to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up—ever—
trusting our fellow citizens to join with us
in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?*

The balance of the individual and the community,
is an essential question – an essential practice – to try to figure out.

Different cultures and traditions over millennia have been asking the questions –
and offering various answers,
at times almost like a teeter totter
or a scale
leaning one way for a while, to lift up the individual
and then another way, for a while, to lift up community.

And it has shifted for good reason – because no tradition, no culture,
has any final absolute answer about much of anything
that can be sealed, bound, cast in stone to be true for all time and eternity.

Because things shift, and change,
and morph dependent on the time, the place, the circumstance.

But some things we do know.
Some things we know from our biology and the survival of our species –
primarily, the truth that we are social by nature – we need each other –
we live in relationship.

From the very beginning of our lives, we are relational -
A baby cannot survive on its own –
and while in some ways that changes over time,
in most ways – it does not.

There is something about our core,
about the heart and its ability to break open
with compassion, with empathy,
with generosity and creativity and love – that connects us
that creates who we are.

*Within us is a yearning writes Quaker Parker Palmer,
for something better than divisiveness,
toxicity, passivity, powerlessness,
and selling our democratic inheritance to the highest bidder.
Within us is the courage to pursue that yearning,
to hold life's tensions consciously, faithfully,
until they break us open.*

*The broken-open heart is a source of power
as well as compassion—
the power to bring down whatever diminishes us
and raise up whatever serves us well.*

Our response, as individuals and communities,
to the realities and hardships and challenges and despair of the world,
are crafted and curated by the wider culture in which we live.

When one's heart is immersed, steeped as if it's in tea
in a culture of rugged individualism
and commercialism
and militarism,
it becomes normative to how we think, and act –
it is the air we breathe.

I'm not sure how many of you saw the super bowl commercial
for a certain pickup truck –
using words from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. –
about the greatness of serving –
being a servant for the betterment and the well-being of humanity.

It is a great quote – a great teaching.
And, I don't think it is bad for a company, necessarily,
to lift up beautiful and important social teachings.

However -
there is a unique irony, a twisted logic,
that takes some virtue, some value,
and uses it or turns it in such a way that it is deceptive
and creates the very thing the teaching is meant to guard against.

Later, in the exact same speech from Rev. Dr. King that was used in the pickup truck commercial, he wrote these words:

*We are so often taken by advertisers,
you know – those gentlemen of massive verbal persuasion –
and they have a way of saying things to you that
kind of gets you into buying things...
in order to make your neighbors envious
you must drive this type of car –
and you know, before you know, you're just buying that stuff –
I've got to drive this car because there's something about this car
that makes my car a little better than my neighbor's car –
and I am sad to say, he said, that the nation in which we live is the supreme culprit.*

The wider culture
takes something like service to your neighbor
twists it into the need to purchase something
where individualism and consumerism
are the virtues of the day.

A culture with a value of protection of our children,
to create communities of safety and peace,
joined with the social fixation on autonomy and protection and militarism –
takes a situation like the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary back in 2012,
and twists the value of safety into violence
until you can't recognize it anymore
and one response was, "give teachers handguns to prevent this."

Mary Catherine Ricker, in 2012, was President of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers. In the aftermath and national conversation following Sandy Hook, she was swept into the debate about arming educators with guns in their classrooms.

She wrote this response, titled, *Licensed to Teach*:

*Some say the answer to stop school shootings is more guns,
joining the smattering of elected officials
who recently have promoted the idea of arming teachers and principals...
if one person with a gun can wreak havoc
on a military base where many guns were present
to some of our most skilled soldiers -*

*what makes the [gun lobby] think that arming a nation
of book loving, denim jumper wearing,
wooden apple bead necklace creating,
white board marker toting school teachers (and the rest of us)
will be effective?*

*You want to arm me? Good.
Then arm me with a school psychologist at my school
who has time to do more than test and sit in meetings about testing.*

*Arm me with enough counselors
so we can build skills to prevent violence,
have meaningful discussions with students about their future
and not merely frantically adjust student schedules like a Jenga game.*

*Arm me with social workers
who can thoughtfully attend to a student's and her family's needs
so I. Can. Teach.*

*Arm me with enough school nurses
so that they are accessible to every child
and can work as a team with me
rather than operate their offices as de facto urgent care centers.*

*Arm me with more days on the calendar
for teaching and learning
and fewer days for standardized testing.*

*Arm me with class sizes
that allow my colleagues and me to know both our students
and their families well.*

*Arm my colleagues and me with the time it takes to improve together
and the time it takes to give great feedback to students
about their work and progress.*

*Until you arm me to the hilt with what it will take
to meet the needs of an increasingly vulnerable student population,*

*I respectfully request the gun lobby
to keep your opinions on schools and our safety
to yourself.*

When a society takes a value
like protecting children
like serving your neighbor
like supporting workers
and twists it through the filters of individualism and consumerism and violence

we get guns in schools
we get competitive capitalism
and we get free-range corporations
with no accountability
to the degradation of the planet
and the devastation of systemic poverty.

Rev. Dr. William Barber, former president of the NAACP
and leader of the moral Monday movement in North Carolina,
and now the leading theologian of the renewed poor people's campaign,
he has spoken throughout the country
about the need for a moral revival
for ancient traditions calling for justice and equity –
to be, what he calls,
moral defibrillators for the heart of America.

He says we know we have a *heart problem* in America –
when religion is used as meanness and judgement,
when politics is used to mask hatred
to trample the poor, and isolate identities,
and not only use the rhetoric of nationalism
to build a border, physical and spiritual, around the heart of our country –
but also try to cast out those with dreams of finding home here –
there is a problem with the moral heart of our country –
where another theologian says,
make no mistake - nationalism is a religion – and war is its liturgy.

We take some value
and twist it beyond recognition
because the passageways are clogged
with indifference, greed, judgment –
and good air can't pass through
until the point when we need
what Dorothy Day called
a revolution of the heart.

Maybe you have seen this practice, or done it yourself.
You write down some story, or some teaching or value.
Something you want to believe is true, or hope to be true.

It might be about yourself or about the world.

And you sit with it for a few moments.
And you think about what truth
or what other perspective, or story, or value,
might be missing from that.

So you rip it in half.
And you attach those pieces to another piece of paper.
And you write, in the middle,
something a little more true – or a *what if* –
and write something new –
not destroying the first part,
but breaking it open, expanding it.

And then you rip that in half, and do it again – and again.

Maybe it's deeper truths about who you are –
like those five words of identity I mentioned last week.
Or maybe it's deeper truths about community,
or love or justice or beauty.

And you keep breaking it open.
Until the story is wide enough,
until the words are broken open enough,
until the heart is tender enough, able enough,
to break open without breaking apart.

The broken open heart is a source of power as well as compassion
writes Quaker Parker Palmer.

The broken open heart,
one that moves beyond the rigidity of self-focus only,
is one that moves in rhythm with a larger sense of “we.”

He writes,
Becoming people who offer hospitality to strangers
requires us to open our hearts time and again
to the tension created by our fear of ‘the other.’

That is why many wisdom traditions highlight the creative possibilities
of the heart broken open instead of apart.
Only from such a heart can hospitality flow...

This is our song –
for peace –
to remember
that other skies have sunlight, too, and clover –
and skies are everywhere blue as mine –
that other hearts are beating
with dreams as true as mine.

One of the hardest lessons in life –
one which is a regular lesson to return to in our home right now –
how to move the language from
“mine” to “our” –
from the individual to the collective,
until we know,
somewhere deep down –
what one pastor and activist in Minneapolis
reminds those gathered for justice work:
that there is no such thing
as other people’s children.

That is radical interconnection –
it’s an old principle, and sometimes,
it takes our heart to be broken open
to realize that we can’t mend ourselves.

Because sometimes
we find the time, the space,
and we open the passageways for fresh air
so the values or the virtues don't get clogged
with self-absorbed greed and indifference -
and we gather with others -
under the dome of our own blue, beautiful sky,
blessed by the sun on our faces
and the song in our soul,
and we join our voices,
join our hearts
and we make a harmony
familiar enough, simple enough,
to break open the heart
and let tears roll down
and cling to one another
like a blessing -
and we remember who we are,
who are our people,
and we remember again,
the song that is not *mine*,
but *ours* to sing.