

“Bringing Our Whole Selves Here”

26 March 2006

Unity Church–Unitarian

Worship Leader: Janne Eller-Isaacs

Worship Associate: Ginger Reynolds

SERMON: “Bringing Our Whole Selves Here”

During our sabbatical ten years ago, we spent a month living in our then partner village in Transylvania. It was a major learning experience to worship in a small church with no heat during the final weeks of a very late winter. But in addition to weather lessons for a “Californicated” family, we also learned some important religious lessons.

Our partner minister at that time was quite resentful of a minister’s wife who had the audacity to become a minister. He was suspicious of me and consistently overlooked my ministry. In his eyes Rob was the only minister.

Rob and I each preached once while we were there. Levente reluctantly had invited me to preach. It was a very tense and difficult time for me, full of a lot of soul searching and long walks alone on the roads that connect Okland from Szentpeter, Unity’s partner village... Once I even thought I would try to walk to Kinga’s.

In preparation for the service, I learned the Lord’s Prayer in Hungarian and I wrote a sermon on faith. I’m not sure anyone recognized that I was saying the Lord’s Prayer, but I did try.

I was in the minister’s study writing the sermon. I shared one of my favorite stories about Mary Magdalene. The story revolves around Mary witnessing about the resurrected Jesus to a Roman centurion.

The story goes that as she witnesses the white egg she has just purchased at the market turns red. As I wrote, I heard a tentative knock at the door. A shy hunched over woman came in with a basket. She asked to speak to the minister or his wife. I understood that much because I could recognize their names. No one was in the house who spoke Hungarian. She tried to communicate with me; her intentions becoming clear when she showed me the basket of eggs. Since I had literally just been writing the word egg when she came in, I took some notice. She had sparkling blue eyes that were alive with spirit. She was one of the few crones from the village who braved the cold and sat in worship during the winter. I had noticed her before, her face weathered and worn, her eyes the bluest I had ever seen. Her name was Emmanini, nini being a term of honor for the elder women.

When we visited a few months later with parishioners she was there, face beaming. I looked for her at every church or village function and smiled at her, she would shyly smile in return. Because of those eggs, I felt some bonding. Because she had entered my life at a time of deep turmoil, I felt she was one of my angels.

Two years later we visited the village again with a congregational delegation and celebrated communion to mark our arrival. I looked for Emmanini in the group of elderly women who came up to participate in this most important sacrament for our Transylvanian churches. She wasn't there. At the conclusion of the service I asked Eva, our translator, guide and wife of the minister, "Where is Emmanini?" "Oh, her son died a few months ago and she doesn't attend church." "Doesn't attend church? I would think that now more than ever she would want and need church." "In Transylvania, when great tragedy befalls a person, they stay away from church." "Stay away from church? Why?" "Because they are angry at God and don't want to bring that kind of anger to church. Here it is just understood that they will stay away. It is our way."

I insisted that we bring the communion cup and bread to Emmanini. I argued that I would serve her communion and it could be attributed to me, that crazy not-quite minister from California. We visited Emmanini and she poured out her heart to us, all the pain and suffering, the hours of grief, the hours of desolate loneliness. I thought, there has to be a better way. I continued to visit Emmanini every time I went to Transylvania until she died some years ago. There has to be a better way, but then again, are our Transylvanian brothers and sisters simply more direct and honest about something that plagues us as well?

I used to believe that only our Transylvanian sisters and brothers stayed away when they were suffering or feeling broken, but I know enough about some of your lives to know that it is not the exclusive domain of the Transylvanian Unitarians. Many of us simply stay away from church when times are hard.

“We come to church when we would be comforted, when we are in despair or need to be called to our best selves,” wrote George Ordell. But when tragedy strikes our lives, some of us need time to process alone.

The desert is barren and stark. Sometimes when we suffer or are in pain, we need that barren land to walk through. We need to walk through the rough land until its songs start to sing in our hearts. I understand those walks through the valley of the shadow of death. The gifts of the desert, the gifts of that barren and desolate land are that it exists for our wanderings, that the beauty that exists in the desert is powerful and often a surprise. It also is incredibly responsive to change in the weather. After a little nourishment from rain, the desert comes alive. A pothole in the rock will suddenly be a pool teeming with life.

I understand the desert times in our lives. Solitude provides the space to delve into the depths of our lives. It is a gift beyond measure, but when we walk out of our desert experiences and we are not completely healed or complete. Then what?

Is our brokenness welcome here? Poet T.S. Eliot, first cousin of former minister Frederick May Eliot once said, that to be Unitarian, “was to be noble, upright and superior to all other human beings... They believed that they were already enlightened...They attended church to set a good example to others.”

Theologian James Luther Adams calls us “the church of the successful.” And we all know that successful people lives do not fall apart, they do not lose control. They do not wind up in jail. Their children do not do drugs. They do not run away from home. They do not suffer from depression or anxiety. They are all good looking and all the children are above average. They are doers and the givers.

How in the world do we contend with that one? Because I believe that sentiment is woven into the fabric of this congregation. It is woven into the fabric of our culture.

Some years ago a group of medical ethicists noticed that people tended to organize their stories into one of three distinct shapes. The most pervasive, of course was the happy ending which they called the restitution narrative. This is no matter what is really going on, no matter how messy or complicated or devastated our lives are, things will work out. “Things are fine, really.” In the restitution narrative, all suffering is overcome.

The second narrative they termed the chaos narrative. Being the opposite of the happy ending, it is not a common narrative in our culture. The chaos narrative is the least likely to be spoken out loud by anyone. In the chaos narrative suffering overcomes us.

The last is the quest narrative. In this narrative, suffering is accepted as an inevitable part of life, but that we need not be completely defeated by it either.

Gretchen Thompson, minister of this congregation for three years, challenged us some years ago when she last preached to look at the ways that the narrative of this congregation leaned more toward a restitution narrative. We are the church of the successful after all. But what Gretchen found working here is that pain was denied, conflicts avoided and it made people feel crazy. People felt abused by the way things were run here and when they complained, they felt dismissed, marginalized, brutalized.

What I want to do here is redefine successful. Every Sunday in the words of welcome we state that we hope you find Unity Church to be a place where you can find and keep your balance, a place where you are encouraged to live a life of integrity, service and joy. The word integrity comes from the Latin *integritas*, meaning soundness and from the Indo-European *integer* meaning whole, complete. So, I wonder if integrity means soundness and whole and complete, doesn't living a life of integrity mean being our whole selves? And don't our whole selves involve the broken, the harmed, the ugly, the mean and nasty? We are all broken, even the person sitting near you that you imagine lives a perfect life. As Wavy Gravy, the wise jester of our age, reminds us, "We are all bozos on this bus."

I love preaching here, because at the conclusion of the service people add their thoughts and comments. Last week a number of you had wise things to say about suffering. Carol Harris added this quote from a friend, "It's a given that our angels will get along. That's the easy part. The real question is: can our demons dance with one another?" This is the question of intimate relationships. It is a question for us

here. Can you bring your whole self here complete with at least some of those shadowy demons that we all carry with us?

The Dali Lama and other Buddhist teachers remind us that we can not choose whether or not we experience pain and suffering, but we can choose how we respond to it. The quest narrative invites us, living a life of true integrity reminds us that none of us are saved from the challenges of life.

I know that when we are feeling broken, suffering with pain we can't see the beauty of the desert, can't open our hearts to the compassion of others. When we are suffering the wellsprings of our lives can be difficult to locate. It's difficult to add vulnerability to the list.

There is a lovely Hasidic tale of a Rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, "Why on our hearts, and not in them?" The Rabbi replied, "Only God can put scripture inside. But reading sacred texts can put it on your hearts, the then when your heart breaks, the holy word will fall inside."

Often when I listen to people who are suffering, I am struck with how little slack they give themselves, how undeserving they can feel of comfort. Michael Lapsley, Anglican priest who is chaplain to the African National Congress and lost his hands, part of his arms and an eye in a letter bomb, has devoted his life to bringing healing to the black and white citizens of South Africa. He knows the journey of healing from the inside and outside. He outlines the quest narrative this way: we move from victim, to survivor, to victor.

I take victim to mean the people living the chaos narrative; those that have been defeated by pain, or deny their pain, survivors recognize their pain and can function well in the world. But the victors have transformed the pain into something powerful and redemptive. They

have allowed love and kindness back into their lives. He also knows enough about the journey to know that we often go back and forth, dancing between victim, survivor and victor. It is the movement toward health. It's almost never linear. It's almost always two steps forward and three back and four forward and one back.

It is a spiritual challenge to let people see you in your brokenness. It is a particular challenge for those of us who are successful, competent, smart. But to allow people in is as great a challenge and opportunity as it is to give. Receiving is as much a spiritual gift as giving.

In closing, I want to introduce you to Poor Pitiful Pearl. I think I've talked about her before. She was the doll I wanted in the worst way when I was eight. She was marketed for the future service professionals of my generation. She was marketed as homely, poor and pitiful and I wanted her. I wanted her to take care of her. My best friend got her for Christmas. I didn't. I got to play with her when I went to my best friend's house, which was pretty often, but it wasn't the same. I wanted to take care of her because that was part of the best I had to offer the world. I also wanted to have her so that I could care for some poor, pitiful girl who was in need of some redemptive love, which was also me. At eight, I was a victim of my eldest brother's incestuous desires. I felt powerless and unprotected. Of course I didn't dare share my dirty secret with anyone, so I didn't give anyone the chance to care for me. I was mostly defeated by my suffering, but I walked the journey that Michael Lapsley describes, from victim, to survivor, to victor. The best of redemptive love that can be found in sacred space invites us all on that journey of healing.

So how did I get Pearl? Some agent of redemptive love gave her to me for Christmas two years ago.

So I wonder do you want to dance? And if you do, may our dance be devoted to something larger than ourselves, something that is powerful and transformative.

May it be so and Amen.