

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Awakening Through Brokenness”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 8, 2009

Reading from *Kitchen Table Wisdom* by Rachel Naomi Remen

One of the angriest people I have ever worked with was a young man with osteogenic sarcoma of the right leg. He had been a high school and college athlete and, 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, which saved his life, also ended his life. Playing ball was a thing of the past.

He refused to return to school. He began to drink heavily, to use drugs, to alienate his former admirers and friends, and to have one automobile accident after the other. After the second of these, his former coach called and referred him to me.

At the beginning, he had the sort of rage that felt very familiar to me. Filled with a sense of injustice and self-pity, he hated all the well people. In our second meeting, hoping to encourage him to show his feelings about himself, I 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, gritting his teeth and ripping the paper. He had tears in his eyes. They were tears of rage. It seemed to me that the drawing was a powerful statement of his pain and the finality of his loss. It was clear that this broken vase could never hold water, could never function as a vase again. It hurt to watch.

In time, his anger began to change in subtle ways. He began one session by handing me an item torn from our local newspaper. It was an article about a motorcycle accident in which a young man had lost his leg. His doctors were quoted at length. I finished reading and looked up. "Those idiots don't know the first thing about it," he said furiously. Over the next month he brought in more of these articles, some from the paper and some from magazines: a girl who had been severely burned in a house fire, a boy whose hand had been partly destroyed in the explosion of his chemistry set. His reactions were always the same, a harsh judgment of the well-meaning efforts of doctors and parents. His

anger about these other young people began to occupy more and more of our session time. No one understood them, no one was there for them, no one really knew how to help them. He was still enraged, but it seemed to me that underneath this anger a concern for others was growing. Encouraged, I asked him if he wanted to do anything about it. Caught by surprise, at first he said no. But, just before he left, he asked me if I thought he could meet some of these others who suffered injuries like his.

I said that I thought it was quite possible and I would look into it.

It turned out to be easy [in a big hospital]. Within a few weeks, he had begun to visit young people on the surgical wards whose problems were similar to his own.

He came back from these visits full of stories, delighted to find that he could reach young people. He was often able to be of help when no one else could. After a while he felt able to speak to parents and families, helping them to better understand and to know what was needed. The surgeons, delighted with the results of these visits, referred more and more people to him... Gradually his anger faded and he developed a sort of ministry. I just watched and listened and appreciated.

In our final meeting, we were reviewing the way he had come, the sticking points and the turning points. I opened his chart and found the picture of the broken vase that he had drawn two years before. Unfolding it, I asked him if he remembered the drawing he had made of his body. He took it in his hands and looked at it for some time. "You know," he said, "It's really not finished." Surprised, I extended my basket of crayons toward him. Taking a yellow crayon, he began to draw lines radiating from the crack in the vase to the very edges of the paper. Thick yellow lines. I watched, puzzled. He was smiling. Finally he put his finger on the crack, looked at me, and said softly, "This is where the light comes through."

Sermon

I adore the abbreviated story of the broken vase from the medical practice of Rachel Naomi Remen. The story resonates with my own life experience and I

hope with yours as well. My spiritual growth and development hasn't been greatly encouraged by my success and good fortune. My rough patches, disappointments and failures have been my greatest teachers.

I thought of this story when I heard Arjuna Ardagh interviewed on a podcast describing something called the "Oneness Blessing." Ardagh, a journalist of transformational religious movements, has been around the block a few times on the spirituality circuit, sitting at the feet of Indian Gurus, attending workshops, doing psychotherapy, and other related personal growth oriented work. He has had powerful enlightenment experiences and written a book on the awakening process titled *The Translucent Revolution: How People Just Like You are Waking Up and Changing the World*.

After publishing that book in 2005, he came across the Oneness Blessing in India. This spiritual practice began spontaneously in an Indian private school that taught a combination of academics and spirituality. In the 1980's, a few of the children spontaneously were filled with golden light. The spiritually gifted administrator of the school recognized this as a spiritual process at work. He asked one of the light filled students to offer this golden light to another student which he was able to do successfully. Soon, the whole school was experiencing a rapture of light as this blessing was shared. I was interested in Ardagh's description of the parents response. They had two reactions. The first was to remove their student from the school since they wanted their child to be prepared to be doctor, engineer or a lawyer not a saint. The second reaction was the parents wanted what their kids were getting. The school was gradually closed and converted into a center to teach this awakening method.

Now there are all manner of miracle workers all over India who can enlighten you with a variety of different methods, many of which Ardagh was already aware. What differentiated this center in his mind was the power of the Oneness Blessing to effectively promote psychological healing and the purity of the people offering the blessing. The downfalls of most supposed gurus are lust for sex and money. They may offer beautiful words and radiate peace and joy but look closely at the assistant teachers and the beauty fades quickly. What impressed Ardagh so much was the beauty of the *dasas*, the 170 or so people designated to offer and teach offering the Oneness Blessing. Almost without exception, these *dasas* glowed with energy, integrity, good humor and deep compassion.

Ardagh wanted to know what was the key factor for them to be able to attain and maintain this enlightened state. He was very surprised by their answers which hardly varied. What opened the door to the deep and expansive love they felt and radiated wasn't a special spiritual practice, belief or natural ability. What opened the door, they said, was embracing their brokenness. They embraced the crack in the vase where the light comes through.

Doesn't this sound a lot like the first step of Alcoholics Anonymous? We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable. Embracing brokenness facilitates a profound recognition that our individual personalities can't be fully perfected or completely fixed. Yes, we can strive to develop our character and optimize our habits. I encourage all of us to do so. I particularly encourage you to do so with your children. Yet, also realize that the inner sources of greed, hatred and delusion cannot be eliminated from the human condition. There is a profound brokenness to the human condition ... that only responds to love.

This has been my experience of psychotherapy. Allowing myself to remember and feel the harm done to me, and the harm I've done to others hurts. All kinds of unpleasant feelings move through my body when I do. And I also notice moving *towards* those unpleasant feelings, embracing them and allowing them to penetrate the armor around my heart, initiates a inner emotional healing process.

This has also been my experience of meditation. Sitting completely still, watching my breath coming in and out, awareness of body sensations and muscle tension generated by neglected fears and anxieties of the last 24 hours pop into consciousness. Worries about whom I need to call, cards I need to send, to-do items undone, flood my mind. Sometimes I lust for the peaceful solitude of a meditation retreat. Other times I resent the distractions that disturb my one-pointed concentration. When I'm doing the meditation correctly, however, the river of sensations, feelings, and thoughts just move through me in a jumble as I lovingly embrace the gift of consciousness with all its imperfections. Religious traditions have long understood the need to embrace our brokenness. I think we Unitarian Universalists miss their insight when we react negatively to their religious language and theology.

On Yom Kippur, Jews recognize that even if they have atoned for every sin, there may be sins they have forgotten or neglected. They despair as they contemplate all they have done that they cannot take back or have left undone they cannot do. Their plea for forgiveness is beautifully put to music in the Kol Nidre. And God is there for them. As it says in the Psalms, "God is close to the brokenhearted."

The Christians make a great deal of the brokenness of Jesus on the Cross as a metaphor for the human condition. The identification with Jesus' suffering and humility opens the door to encounter God's holiness. Formerly bound in fear of rejection, self-love and indifference, the Christian will find new freedom, desire and faith to share the gospel because embracing brokenness turns their concerns from inward to outward and their faith upward, and their personal reliance from temporary to eternal.

We Unitarian Universalists struggle with a transcendent affirmation of embracing our brokenness. One source of that struggle I believe comes from our Puritan forbears belief in the concept of the elect. John Calvin interpreted the Bible as dictating that a select few, the elect, would go to heaven, and everyone else was destined for hell. No one could know for sure if they were of the elect or not since God ordained them before they were born. But Calvin believed signs of election were visible during the life of the chosen. The Puritan church members were supposedly only the elect.

The concept of election infiltrates our American culture and particularly Unitarian Universalism through the elitism of self-reliance. In our strong valuing of individualism, we celebrate those who discipline themselves and their minds and achieve greatness. We enjoy extolling the many famous Unitarians and Universalists who have shaped American culture and society. We don't parade our brokenness on Sunday morning as do some of the more evangelical faiths. We chose works righteousness, striving to make the world a better place for all.

And each one of us struggles quietly with our inner brokenness. That brokenness is increasingly visible as the current economic crisis affects members of our congregation. Some of you may have read with some distress, as I did, what Leah, our Director of Religious Education, reported in her column for this month. She passed on her experience of a few RE families becoming less involved or dropping out of our congregation because of their economic status.

Those suffering economic hard times look around at our bright shiny faces and fine clothes and can feel left out and unwelcome.

Now I know many of you with the bright shiny faces and fine clothes would be as appalled as I am that some people feel that way. Let us ask ourselves though, what kind of message are we sending that we care? How are we communicating that we too have endured hard times and know what that is like?

My comments this morning do not come out of a vacuum. I've been talking to leaders in our congregation about ways to send a different message than "we're okay and you're not." I'm also reading on-line about Unitarian Universalist congregations who're responding the brokenness of our economy and looking for ways to help their members. They are setting up networks of support that go beyond the crisis intervention assistance our caring network provides when someone gets sick or experience loss or when our members become homebound.

I'll be supporting a proposal that will come before our Board of Trustees this month to set up a network of support for those in economic distress. What we don't know at this point is what support we might offer because we don't know what each of you might be willing to contribute to such an effort. Some might be able to help with financial counseling. Others might be able to help with resume writing. Others might offer childcare during an interview. Others might want to help someone pay a heating bill or mortgage for a month.

That is why there is an insert in your order of service asking what you might want to do to help your fellow FUUSAns who are hurting. I strongly encourage you to at least fill out your name and email address EVEN IF you don't know what you might want to offer right now. One aspect of the plan we're imagining is to create an email list to let people know what needs are coming up so they can decide to help on a case by case basis.

One powerful way to begin embracing your own brokenness is though helping others in need. Those, feeling weary and small in tough times who feel friendless. Those, down and out, in pain and in need of comfort. May our congregation be, for them, a bridge over troubled waters. Let us lift those sentiments in the song, the words you'll find in your order of service, for Bridge Over Trouble Waters.

Hymn "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" (Simon & Garfunkel)

When you're weary, feeling small,
When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all;
I'm on your side. when times get rough
And friends just cant be found,
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down.
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down.

When you're down and out,
When you're on the street,
When evening falls so hard
I will comfort you.
I'll take your part.
When darkness comes
And pains is all around,
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down.
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down.

Sail on silvergirl,
Sail on by.
Your time has come to shine.
All your dreams are on their way.
See how they shine.
If you need a friend
I'm sailing right behind.
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind.
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind.

Benediction (from the end of the reading by Rachel Naomi Remen)

Suffering is intimately connected to wholeness. The power in suffering to promote integrity is not only a Christian belief, it has been a part of almost every religious tradition. Yet twenty years of working with people with cancer in the setting of unimaginable loss and pain suggests that this may not be a teaching or a religious belief at all but rather some sort of natural law. That is, we might learn it not by divine revelation but simply through a careful and patient observation of the nature of the world. Suffering shapes the life force, sometimes into anger, sometimes into blame and self-pity. Eventually [our suffering] may show us the freedom of loving and serving life.

May it be so, here.

Go in peace. Make Peace. Be at Peace.

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