White Bear
Unitarian Universalist Church

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Powerless, Powerful, Empowered

The Reverend Victoria Safford

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115
651/ 426-2369 vsafford@whitebearunitarian.org

READING #1

In Those Years
Adrienne Rich

In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of *we*, of *you*
we found ourselves
reduced to *I*
and the whole thing became
silly, ironic, terrible:
we were trying to live a personal life
and yes, that was the only life
we could bear witness to
But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
into our personal weather
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
along the shore, through the rags of fog
where we stood, saying *I*

READING #2

Saved
Theresa Novak, Unitarian Universalist Minister

Come into this place
There are healing waters here
And hands with soothing balm
To ease your troubled days.
Bring your wounds and aching hearts
Your scars too numb to feel.
Your questions and complaints,
All are welcome here.
Rest awhile.
Let the warmth of this community
Surround you,
Hold you,
Heal you.
When you feel stronger,
Just a bit,
Notice those that need you too.
They are here.
They are everywhere.
Weep with them
Smile with them,

Work with them,
Laugh along the way.
Pass the cup,
Drink the holy fire.
Take it with you
Into the world.
We are saved
And we save each other
Again, again, and yet again.

Powerful, Powerless, Empowered

My earliest memory of doing something deliberately wrong is closely tied to an early memory of being deliberately good. When I was six or seven years old, I was entrusted by my parents with a special task. I was so proud. Every night, about half an hour before dinner, when my mother was cooking and my father was down in the basement watching the news in his recliner (but not "watching," exactly, because he sat with a typewriter balanced on a board across the arms of the chair with the *New York Times* spread over it, like an oxygen tent of news and information), he would call out to my mother, and that was her cue to mix him a drink. It was crystal clear and cold, with an ice cube and a twist of lemon. My job was to carry the glass carefully down the stairs, and my joy was to hear my father's cheerful thanks and praise for a job well done. Once, on a summer night when it was really hot and that icy drink in my hand smelled so lemony and cool, I had a wild thought. I ducked into the bathroom on my way downstairs and took a quick, deep swallow just to see what it was like, and as soon as I did, I knew immediately that I was going to die and deserved to die and pretty much wanted to die. It was so awful, so disgusting, so shocking, so dry and hot and bitter. My eyes watered, I sputtered and coughed, my mother called out, "Everything all right?" and I said yes. "Dad is drinking poison," I thought – which, in way, was not so far from the truth. For some reason, which somehow I understood to be an unspeakable, secret reason, he was drinking poison like a dragon, every night. I felt awe and a little fear, but mostly I felt pride in having a part to play in this clandestine adult mystery. I filled the glass with water from the faucet to replace what I'd drunk and brought it to him, hoping that he wouldn't notice. I brought it for years, in time sharing the honor with my two brothers, and in time coming to hate it, though not knowing exactly why till many years later.

We never spoke about it, and by *never* I mean that for all the years he was alive no one in our house ever spoke about the fact that my father drank one or two martinis before dinner every night and two or three tumblers of scotch and soda afterwards. We came close only once, a few years before he died, when he had surgery to remove most of his ulcerated stomach. They had to put him in four-point restraints with a fifth strap across his chest so that the shaking of his tremors and the sobbing through withdrawal would not dislodge the IV and the bandages. We never spoke about that, not in the hospital and not when he came out and drank again; we never spoke about a lot of things, and our silence was part of the poison.

Someone asked me once (or maybe it was a survey) about the greatest innovations of the 20th century. I remember responding, "The Hospice movement and AA." Not the Internet, not penicillin, not the electric guitar. My mind went immediately to these two almost sub-cultural

revolutions: the one (Hospice) retrieving the thing we fear most and had almost banished from our sight, bringing death back into the land of the living, where people love and grieve and live and die in bodies, in sorrow and gladness and memory embodied and stories incarnate, holding love and death together, open-eyed and hand in hand. And the other, AA and its many offshoots, bringing the language of illness and recovery into what had been before a twisted landscape of sinfulness and lonely shame; shining harsh, loving light into the shadowy, secretive corners of addiction.

I don't really know if these are the two most revolutionary movements of the last century, but they were (they are) symbols of our capacity always to turn from denial toward truth. They're signs of spiritual health, spiritual maturity, or our longing for it, leaning toward it, in a culture that doesn't always feel so healthy or honest or brave. They were also evidence of what happens when we lean toward each other, out of our fierce independence into mutual care, out of isolation into human covenant, out of judgment into empathy, out of delusions of omnipotence, autonomy and control into the terrifying, humbling, ennobling admission that sometimes we need help beyond our own making, power from outside ourselves to meet power inherent within. Asking holiness outside ourselves to meet the holiness within. Does that mean we're asking in or admitting, the existence of a "higher power?" Who can say? Many Unitarian Universalists can't abide any Twelve Step program because of the implied theology or explicit theism. They can't take seriously any discussion of "God as we each understand Him," can't say with integrity the Lord's prayer at the end of a meeting, or the Serenity Prayer or little slogans. Some have found help in more secular alternative meetings; some do fine in AA. I like the way writer Thomas Lynch, who is a Catholic, expresses it:

What I've learned from my sobriety, from the men and women who keep me sober, is how to pray. Blind drunks who get sober get a kind of blind faith- not so much a vision of who God is, but of who God isn't, namely me.

Lynch is an alcoholic in recovery, whose father was an alcoholic all his life, and whose son, in his twenties, is an addict. He goes on:

When I was a child, all of my prayers sounded like, "Gimme, gimme." I wanted a Jerry Mahoney puppet, to fly like Superman, and for my brothers and sisters to be adopted by other kindly parents and leave me and my mother and father alone. I got none of these things. Those prayers were never answered.

When I was my son's age, I'd always begin with, "Show me, Lord." I wanted God to prove Himself or Herself or Itself. In this I was a typical youth, full of outrage and arrogance and bravado. Nothing ever happened. None of these prayers was ever answered.

For years as a new husband, new parent and a social drinker, I'd pray, albeit infrequently, "Why me, God?" The more I drank, the more I prayed it. I was carping daily, a victim of my all too often self-inflicted wounds. Why wasn't God listening? The silence out of heaven was real.

Someone told me that I should just say "thanks," and that all my prayers should begin that way and never stray far from the notion that life was a gift to be grateful for. I began by giving

thanks for my family, for the blessings to my household, the gifts of my children. Then the daylight and the nightfall and the weather. Then the kindness you could see in humankind, their foibles and their tender mercies. I could be thankful even for this awful illness, baffling and powerful, that has taught me to weep and to laugh out loud and better and for real. And thankful that of all the fatal diseases my son might have gotten, he got one for which there is this little sliver of hope that if he surrenders, he'll survive. Every time I say it, the prayer gets answered. Someone, out of the blue, every day, someone gives out with a sign or wonder in the voice of God, in some other voice than mine, to answer my prayer. "You're welcome," it says.

"You're welcome," to life and life abundant.[i] Whether that voice comes from a circle of strangers on folding chairs in a church basement, hearing your story and holding you accountable, or whether it comes from some other holy mountain, hardly matters. What matters is the sacrament of listening and speaking, that we are be one another the voice, the open ears and open heart, the open arms of God, on the off chance that there is no other way for God, whatever God is, to speak and listen and embrace us.

It does not always look like kindness. Thomas Lynch writes about having to kick his own son out of the house. *I will not help him die, or welcome his killer into my home. It hurts so bad to think I cannot save him, protect him, keep him out of harm's way, shield him from pain. What good are fathers if not for these things? Why can't he be a boy again, safe from these perils and disasters? Lately I'm always on the brink of breaking. His thirst puts him utterly beyond my protection, but never outside the loop of my love.*

Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Parker tells a story about how shy she was as a young minister and how she dreaded making calls on her mostly elderly parishioners. She was a Methodist then, serving a little parish where they expected the pastor to visit every household at least twice a year. "At each doorway," she says, "I dreaded that the door would be closed in my face." It never was. One afternoon she visited Maxine in a retirement home, who had just received a letter from her brother, Lyle.

"You know," said Maxine, "after the war we almost lost him." In 1945, Lyle was the only veteran to return alive to his small town in Iowa. The day he arrived home, the whole town came out to meet him. When the train pulled into the station, the band played, people cheered, the mayor stood ready to shake his hand. But the man who climbed off the train was not the cheerful, high-spirited boy who had gone off to war. He was a ghost. In response to the music and cheers, he stared back, mutely. His blank face did not register recognition of anyone - not mother, sister or friend.

They took him home to the farm. He sat in the rocker in the parlor. He wouldn't speak, he wouldn't sleep, and he would barely eat. No one in that town knew what was wrong. They only knew that his soul was lost somewhere.

Maxine decided to keep her brother company. She'd sit in the parlor with him and talk. She'd tell him the news from the hardware store in town, or about the potluck at church, who was there, which dress each young woman wore. She'd tell him how the clean laundry had blown off

the line into the tomatoes that morning. When she ran out of things to say, she'd just sit with him quietly, snapping beans or mending socks. Lyle was like a stone. No expression. Rocking.

It went on like this for days, which flowed into weeks, and on into months. Then one night, late, Maxine was sitting with her brother, quietly knitting, when the eyes in Lyles' still face filled with tears. Maxine noticed. She got up and put her arms around her brother. Held in his sister's embrace, Lyle began to cry full force, great gusts of sobbing, and Maxine held him. Then he began to talk. He talked of the smoke, the noise, the cold, the death of his buddies. And he spoke of the camps, the mass graves, and the smell. He talked all night and Maxine listened.

When the morning light came across the fields, she went to kitchen and cooked him breakfast. He ate. Then he went out and did the morning chores.

Rebecca Parker says, "She had offered him her presence, and remained present through his silence to the account of terror and grief without turning away. She was a faithful witness. She stayed with him. She heard his testimony without being overwhelmed, and through her presence, Lyle became present to himself again."[ii]

We have these stoic, selfless intentions of autonomy, but sometimes - most of the time - there is no way a wounded person will be healed without the saving grace of another person's presence, another person's witness. Without the sacrament of listening and speaking, there's no way, for example, that a person's crowning lifetime achievement, the part she played once in a miracle (an intimate miracle), the defining gesture of her life and her brother's life, could be made known; no way that a shy young minister could ever trust that doors would not be closed to her if loving, patient people hadn't opened them and set the table for the sharing of the stories of their lives, as holy a communion as any made with bread and wine. Recovery, from trauma, from addiction, from grief, recovery of the soul, which is not the same as "cure" but is more like restoration, is a choice. It requires intense inward struggle and the concentration of the will, the will to live – but it needs grace as well, which can come only from beyond us. We grant it to each other. One writer says,

You don't have to be an addict to be reminded that it's not all up to you. God, it seems, cannot reach the self-reliant. That is why it can take considerable hollowing out before we have enough space within to receive that which we did not generate. When we give up our striving, cease trying to fill the emptiness ourselves, and "stand in the dark, there finally may be a place in us to be filled with light other than our own, by which we may come to know that there is neither the need to run nor the possibility of hiding. It is [here]… that hope begins."[iii]

It begins in telling the truth. I've spoken here before about a colleague whom I knew in Massachusetts. We began our ministries in the same year about 30 miles apart and met frequently at professional meetings or district events. He was a pleasant person, but distant; not shy but elusive; sometimes maddeningly superficial. He was often late, often absent, often absent even when he was present, except that every once in a while there'd be this flash of intensity. I'd look at him across a room and see him staring off, not vacantly, but intently, forcefully, at something no one else could see, something deep behind his eyes. He was not a reliable colleague, could never be counted on to get the minutes out or the agenda drafted, but

there was something very kind about him, and something sad. I knew he was lonely: his life partner had died of AIDS, and he was serving a cranky little congregation in a drafty old stone church. It was not a happy match. He had a habit of calling me on Saturday afternoons, ostensibly just to chat – but the only reason I would ever be in the office and reachable on a Saturday afternoon was because I was desperate, staring at a blank screen or a blank page, trying to coax out of the air something to say on Sunday, just hours away. He'd call late in the day, with all the time in the world, it seemed, just to check in, just to say *hi*! At some point it dawned on me that of course he was calling because he, too, was sitting in an office somewhere, staring at a blank and desperate screen - we were both anxious new ministers with no confidence and nothing to say - but I never let on, never confessed any hint of solidarity, never admitted to him my own uncertainty, or my own loneliness in the task. I was afraid of being swallowed by his neediness, and even more, of being found out myself. So I never even said, "It's hard, isn't it, this work?" Instead, I'd puff up like an officious little hen, a feathered fortress of bluster "Hey – I'm fine! I'm glad you called! I'd love to talk, love to talk, but I'm very busy. Gotta. go. See you next month, at our next meeting." And then in a week or two he'd call again.

Over time, I understood that his emptiness, his hollowness, which I wrote off as shallowness, were all symptoms of alcoholism, but by the time I took the time to face it and to name it and speak it to him with tough tenderness, to offer him my presence, it was too late. Once I did speak it, the phone calls stopped. He didn't talk to me again. The next time I spoke it was several months later at his funeral, at the request of his family, who explicitly asked that addiction be named as part of his life story, part of their story, laid out there plainly with everything else, a piece of the person they'd lost, and the primary reason they'd lost him. His emptiness had been part of his wholeness. His absence was part of every relationship he touched. His incompleteness was part of his completeness, and so it is for all of us.

At the funeral reception, a member of his congregation, pouring coffee, spoke to me sternly. "I hope you will learn in time, Reverend Safford, that some things are best left unsaid." I wish I'd had the presence of mind to say to her then, "I have heard that this is true, and was brought up to believe it, but I know this one thing isn't one of them." I'd finally understood that it is dishonest and dishonorable to look into the eyes of a colleague, to hear his voice on the phone, or that of a friend, any person, and be unwilling to see the true person, the whole, broken, beautiful, vulnerable, struggling person, to call him or her by name, and sometimes, to call his or her disease by name. The least we can do is to be-hold each other. When you do that of course, your own broken, beautiful, struggling vulnerability is reflected back quite clearly. It's a jagged mirror, and I guess over time, as we grow up, we each decide how much of that we can afford to leave unseen, unspoken, unrecovered. We can't save each other, but we can see each other. We can admit that whatever spiritual power any of us holds begins in frailty and risk.

The free mind, the free spirit, the unencumbered pilgrim who is master of his fate, captain of her soul, the independent agent, intelligent, capable and self-contained – that's an old icon in our religious history. When people ask what Unitarian Universalism means, what we believe in, almost always we'll say "freedom" first, the freedom of each person to craft an ethical and spiritual life that makes sense. We grasp it fiercely, as we should. It is a cherished virtue. But when life does not make sense, when a person is drowning in shame or fear or in icy gin mixed with vodka and a twist of lemon, then this solid, stoic, rational ideal can crumble like ashes in

your hands. ***It will betray you if you rely on it entirely.*** You can't think your way out of loneliness, addiction, depression, despair. You can't be a person by yourself. You can't live a secret or a lie behind a newspaper, or conspire for long in someone else's secret, without echoing consequences.

Adrienne Rich, the poet, speaks of a time in the future when people will look back on a previous age, maybe the age we are evolving out of now. "In those years," she says,

people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of we*, of* you
we found ourselves
reduced to I …
we were trying to live a personal life
and yes, that was the only life
we could bear witness to
But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
into our personal weather
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
along the shore, through the rags of fog
where we stood, saying I

In those years, the years her poem looks forward to, that maybe are the years we're in right now, when people ask what we believe in here, we say *compassion* first, or love, and we'll mean nothing sentimental. We will speak of covenant, of the care and trust that keeps us in each other's keeping, the sacred offering of witness and the sacrament of stories that are true.

Come into this place, says Theresa Novak,

There are healing waters here…
To ease your troubled days.
Bring your wounds and aching hearts
Your scars too numb to feel.
…Rest awhile…
When you feel stronger,
… Notice those that need you too.
They are here. They are everywhere…
Laugh along the way.
Pass the cup…
Take it with you into the world.

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[i] Thomas Lynch, *Bodies in Motion and at Rest.*

[ii] Rebecca Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*.

[iii] Julie Nerras, (with quote from Michael Downey), *Apprenticed to Hope: A Sourcebook for Difficult Times.*