

“Wearing the Face”
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
Sunday November 27, 2011
Fiona Heath, Intern Minister

“Loneliness is about the scariest thing out there.”
Joss Whedon

Call To Worship

Let there be joy in our coming together this morning.
Let there be truth heard in the words we speak
and the songs we sing.
Let there be help and healing for our disharmony and despair.
Let there be silence for the voice within us and beyond us.

Let there be joy in our coming together.
Carl Seaburg

Anthem: “Eleanor Rigby” By The Beatles

Reading:

This is an excerpt from Sharon Butala’s memoir “The Perfection of the Morning” about her experiences living on a southern Saskatchewan ranch after marrying her second husband.

I viewed everything that happened in my new community from the vantage point of somebody who was slowly and painfully learning she would never be anything but an outsider.

And I was (also)... revelling in the freedom of my new life despite the inevitable loneliness, and in the real balm for the heart and soul of waking each morning to birdsong and the open sky, and going to bed each night listening to the muted croak of the nighthawk and the distant, melodious choir of coyote voices.

... I found solace in the extraordinary beauty of the land itself.

On a warm spring day riding a horse... across true shortgrass prairie that had never known a plow in all its history since the glaciers, I thought I had never smelled anything so wonderful in all my life:

sage and grasses mixed with sunlight, carried on the light fresh air as it swept freely

across miles of unbroken grass.

“Wearing the Face”

We are entering the season of endings. It is the time of cold winds and dark nights. But Christmas is coming as well, shiny and bright and cheery. The tension between the two can make us aware of troubles in our lives, like loneliness.

And loneliness sucks. Anyone who has experienced the desolate feeling of loneliness knows this.

A few years ago I occasionally attended a women’s ritual group.

We met infrequently, and I rarely saw them outside these occasions.

At one session, we were gathered in a circle, with light coming from a couple of dim lamps. We did our usual brief check in.

When it came around to a young, vivacious woman, one that always wore a big smile, she began with the usual news about her life.

Then she paused, and said with great force, “Lately I have been feeling so lonely. I have a great husband and I love him dearly, but I feel so alone. I’m so isolated. I live with this horrible sense of loneliness all the time.”

We sat stunned by the power –the rawness - of her emotion.

It was as if she had removed a mask. A mask many of us wear.

Everyone is lonely. Not all the time.

Some of us are busy enough, contented enough, to rarely feel that overwhelming sense of isolation and separateness.

But most of us have felt it at one time or another, and many of us live with it more often than we would care to admit.

Loneliness is part of the human condition.

The woman who spoke out was intelligent, with a good job, active with volunteer work, lively and interested in all sorts of things.

From the outside her life appeared full and fulfilling. And yet she spoke with such heart felt anguish about feeling lonely.

We sat silent after she spoke. Then she asked us not to respond but just to move on. So we did. Perhaps it was enough just to have spoken the words out loud. To know she had been heard.

There is a difference between being alone and lonely.

Being alone can be a cherished state. Having space for the self can be refreshing, a gift, an opportunity to expand our spirits beholden only to ourselves.

Loneliness, on the other hand, is disquieting. We feel isolated, excluded, cut-off,

detached from the world. It is a negative state.

And like my acquaintance, we can feel lonely even when we are in the midst of a crowd.

Severe loneliness can actually change our brain chemistry. Studies have shown that it increases our sensitivity to social signals, while simultaneously disrupting the processing of these signals.

This means as we experience loneliness we began to misread social cues, and are thus more likely to make social mistakes. Small problems present as catastrophes. Minor mistakes appear to be huge screw-ups.

We react more intensely to the negatives, and are less soothed by the positives. We feel rejected even when we are not.

More sensitivity and less accuracy in understanding others can lead to a deepening and on-going sense of isolation.

We can get stuck in loneliness.

Loneliness is not the same as depression. Loneliness is not a mental disorder or a disease. It is part of the human condition.

The woman from the group was not in any way depressed about her life, but her sense of loneliness was real and profound.

Indeed, for many of us, loneliness is harder to admit to because to all appearances we are doing fine.

My acquaintance felt her isolation so deeply she needed to break through the polite mask of the everyday to share her experience with a group she could trust to hold it.

We all put on masks to go out in the world.

We have our childhood masks – of being the good girl, or the bad boy.

We spend our teen years and early youth trying on identities as we seek to find one that expresses our inner selves.

Masks are part of the complexity of human identity.

So I don't think the answer is to just rip off the masks we wear. We may wear masks for good reasons.

Jacques Plante was a famous goalie for the Montreal Canadians in their glory days.

In 1959 his nose was broken by a puck, he returned to the game wearing a crude mask he had been using in practices. By the end of the season, the mask became an essential part of his equipment.

Masks protect us from the hockey pucks that life may sling at us.

Masks can also enhance us.

The mask in our story today helped the King to become better than he was.

According to systems theory, he changed himself, thus changing the system. He lived into a happier self by giving people the room to respond to him in a more positive way.

Strangely, masks can help us become who we are. They protect us so we can safely pursue our goals. They inspire us to be more, by providing an ideal to grow into. Novelist Christopher Barzak writes “Nothing is more real than the masks we make to show each other who we are.”

The trick is to find the masks which fit, which truly represent our spirits.

We need to choose our masks carefully.

We need to avoid the masks that constrict, deny or keep us from being ourselves.

And when our good girl and responsible man masks become disguises that hide rather than reveal, then we need to learn how to crack them open.

When we are hungry, we eat. When we thirst, we drink. And when we feel lonely – a normal, human way to feel – we connect. This isn’t easy, the thinking patterns caused by loneliness make it more difficult to reach out. But when we are able to connect, and share our difficulties, it is often surprising how many people have experienced the same troubles. Doris Lessing says that: “Growing up is after all only the understanding that one’s unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares.”

There is no cure for loneliness, because it is a normal part of the human condition. We all live with loneliness at one time or another. For some it is a short lived sensation. For others it can turn into a painful isolation that it is hard to break free from. But it is possible to break free.

There are many ways out of loneliness.

At one time writer Dorothy Parker had a small, dingy cubbyhole of an office in the Metropolitan Opera House building in New York. No one ever came to see her, and she became sad and lonely. She sat there all day long, wishing for conversation. So when the signwriter came to paint her name on the office door, she persuaded him to write instead the word “GENTLEMEN.”

That is one way to meet people.

It is in relationships with others that we find the best healing for loneliness.

We can move beyond our lonely sphere by showing a genuine interest in someone else. Even a spark of connection can provide a powerful sense of blessing.

This does not mean pouring out your heart to the person sitting beside you on the bus; it can be as simple as a pleasant exchange with the grocery clerk.

Wendell Berry calls this conviviality, a way to heal the world through positive

exchanges.

Our everyday interactions can be balms for the spirit.

When we treat those around us with inherent worth and dignity – a smile for the busker in the subway – we are opening ourselves to being present in the moment. It is that openness that nourishes us.

That can be tricky, especially when we feel vulnerable and lost.

Sometimes we need our interactions to be a little more mediated.

The internet, with all its drawbacks, can be a useful connector. Whatever your interests are, there are websites, facebook pages, tumblr accounts, and twitterers.

If you are a fan of long cancelled tv show, you are not alone.

A fan of Texas barbeque beef? Not alone.

Making lego dioramas of movie scenes or current events? Not alone.

While I cannot advocate for a life lived on the internet, it provides a starting point. It is filled with communities of shared interests that can be a baseline of comfort and connection.

Some, like Sharon Butala in the reading, turn to the wonder of nature. The lovingness of our animal companions reminds us that we are all connected. Sitting on a park bench under a blue sky can create a sense of rootedness in the earth.

A reminder that our emotions are transient, but the earth abides.

What do you turn to when you are in need of connection? The smile of a stranger? A chat room? A cherished pet? The chalice?

The flame of the chalice brings light to the dark. As Unitarians we also turn to each other, knowing that we are all worthy parts of the interdependent web. We come together this morning to remind ourselves that even when we feel alone – we most truly are not.

We come together to grow our connections, to give ourselves a safe place to stand.

These connections grow through the generosity of all those who volunteer to make this morning succeed – the ushers, the office helpers, the coffee people, the library volunteers – and more - and all of you who came through rain and traffic to be here. All of you who come and listen and offer your voices in song and your spirits in candle lighting. We are a community of care.

And yet... people screw-up. People disappoint. Connections can be weak. We will feel lonely again.

So we come together to remind ourselves not just of the wonderful human connections we are growing, but to recall that we also belong to a great and magnificent mystery.

We are all part of the whole.

We belong to this earth, this moon, this sun, this solar system, this galaxy, this ever unfolding, ever mysterious universe.

Our molecules are made of stardust from the big bang. We breathe the same air the dinosaurs were breathing 65 million years ago.

We are all in this strange and beautiful ride of evolution.

But as the Beatles said, what about all the lonely people? Where do they all belong?

Are there small gestures of kindness we can make as we go about our lives that might bring hope to others? Can we bring light to the dark? Can we invite them here? To join us? What can we do to ease the loneliness?

We belong to the chalice, to the earth, the mystery.

May we continue to grow connections that nourish and sustain – not just ourselves – but those around us.

May we help all the lonely people find a place to belong.

May it be so.

Closing Words

These words come from American poet Louise Bogan:

“I cannot believe that the inscrutable universe turns on an axis of suffering; surely the strange beauty of the world must somewhere rest on pure joy.”

May we find ways to reach out and touch the pure joy of the world.

May it be so.