

The People On the Bus

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading “Tuesday 9:00 AM” by Denver Butson

A man standing at the bus stop
reading the newspaper is on fire
Flames are peeking out
from beneath his collar and cuffs
His shoes have begun to melt
The woman next to him
wants to mention it to him
that he is burning
but she is drowning
Water is everywhere
in her mouth and ears
in her eyes
A stream of water runs
steadily from her blouse
Another woman stands at the bus stop
freezing to death
She tries to stand near the man
who is on fire
to try to melt the icicles
that have formed on her eyelashes
and on her nostrils
to stop her teeth long enough
from chattering to say something
to the woman who is drowning
but the woman who is freezing to death
has trouble moving
with blocks of ice on her feet
It takes the three some time
to board the bus

what with the flames
and water and ice
But when they finally climb the stairs
and take their seats
the driver doesn't even notice
that none of them has paid
because he is tortured
by visions and is wondering
if the man who got off at the last stop
was really being mauled to death
by wild dogs.

Reading by Joy Kogawa, from *Itsuka* from her collection *Itsuka*

I'm standing at the bus stop in the splattering rain,
waiting for the northbound Bathurst bus,
and here, unexpectedly out of the grimy air, is a gift.

It's as if I've been in a coma for years,
in the debris at the side of the road,
and suddenly there's presence by the roadside,
as tangible as an ambulance driver kneeling
and doing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation
and thumping a fist on my chest to get my heart moving.
And my lungs are filling.

It's as if I can hear a voice calling my name
through the blare and scuffle of traffic,
and I want to lift my arms up but I can only take a breath—
a deep choking breath.

But that's enough. Here.
Waiting for the bus. Not moving at all.
It's enough to be breathing.

'Thank you.' The words come forth unannounced.
There's a promise in the air.
I can feel it as surely as I feel the raindrops.

I could throw my head back and laugh

but the people standing by might say, ‘Poor crazy thing.’

Specifically, what I’m sensing is that it’s all right.

It’s not what people say that matters.

What’s important is what precedes.

It matters to stumble after.

In the midst of all the unknown, it matters to trust. ...

Thank you for this.

Sermon: “The People on the Bus”

I don’t know about you, but I haven’t completely decided how I feel about the new subway cars running on the Yonge and University lines.

I mean, they’re bright and shiny and spacious.

The whole train is open from one end to the other and you can move freely about.

If you wanted, you could go bowling in there, or run the 100 metre dash!

And if a car is too crowded

or you need to trek through the train to get closer to your eventual exit, all you have to do is walk.

But, that’s my problem—that all you have to do is walk.

If someone is noisy or smelly or annoying, all you have to do is walk away.

If you don’t particularly like your new set of neighbours, you can simply take a stroll.

Nuisance be gone.

A few years ago, I heard the Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg speak about one of her spiritual practices, a practice she inherited from a teacher of hers.

It goes like this: from time to time, whenever in a group of people, she imagines that she is inescapably caught up with them.

That they are trapped together forever.

That there is no escape.

In her imagination, they've been zapped by extra-terrestrials,
and no one is getting out.
They are stuck together and the place is hermetically sealed.

And whether she's in the cash line at the supermarket, at the library,
or on this bus, she looks around and says to herself:
"These are my people."

Now, this is a spiritual practice, because those words change her.
They change her outlook and reshape the world around her.
They soften her heart and open her mind.

She finds welling up within her reserves of compassion she didn't know she
had, as she understands in her heart of hearts
that she and her companions are in this together, sink or swim.

Their shared survival depends on whatever mix of gifts and talents
they can come up with from among themselves,
even with all their shortcomings, faults, and foibles.

How differently might we view the world and each other
if, looking around, we reminded ourselves more frequently:
"these are my people"?

I'll confess that it's a mantra I have an opportunity
to use a lot around here...,
and I commend the practice to you all.

When your patience runs short and misunderstanding abounds:
"these are my people."

When you're frustrated that you seem to be singing from a different hymnal
than everyone else: "these are my people."

When you find yourself in deep disagreement about decisions made
or theological views you can't stomach—say it with me—
"these are my people."

It is helpful to have a practice that reminds us
that we are all in this together.
Here within these walls.

Standing in line at the bank.
Surrounded by strangers on the streetcar.

These, and these, and those are my people.

And, that's why I'm so ambivalent about the new subway cars.
It's too easy to step on to the train,
look around and decide that these *are not* my people.
And then stroll down the train looking and hoping for a better fit.

While I'm all for liberty and the freedom of choice,
what gets lost in that moment is the invitation to compassion.
The need to see people as they are—
and not ignore what we'd rather pretend not to see.

What gets lost in that moment is the sacred opportunity
to bow before the reality of this life,
acknowledging that the hardship and challenges that befall another
could just as easily be our own.

That first poem I shared with you paints for me
a vivid and surreal and jarring picture
of what our lives and the lives of those around us so often look like.

This person is on fire, that one is frozen, the one over there is drowning.

Do we notice? Do we dare notice?

What would happen if we did?

And what might it mean if we confessed that we, ourselves,
are sometimes the one frozen or aflame
or the one struggling to keep our head above water?

With every day I serve as a minister,
I'm reminded of the truth in that old bit of wisdom that tells us
to "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

I have learned this to be true, over and over again—
for the down and out, as well as the up and out.
Everyone around you is struggling with something.

And those who appear to have their act mostly together, often, well, don't.
At least not exactly, or at least not for long.
Life is hard, on some level, for most everyone.
And, if that isn't necessarily so today, it eventually will be.

There is an old Buddhist story told by the Dalai Lama
of a woman named Kisagotami,
who suffered the death of her only child.

Unable to accept the pain of such an enormous loss,
she ran from person to person, seeking a medicine
to restore her child to life.

The Buddha was said to have such a medicine.

So, Kisagotami went to the Buddha, paid homage, and asked,
“Can you make a medicine that will restore my child [to life]?”

“I know of such a medicine,” the Buddha replied,
“but in order to make it, I must have certain ingredients.”

Greatly relieved, the woman begged to know what ingredients he required.

“Bring me a handful of mustard seed,” said the Buddha.

The woman promised to procure it for him,
but as she was leaving, he said to her,
“I require the mustard seed to be taken from a household
where no child, spouse, parent, or servant has died.”

The woman agreed and began going from house to house
in a frantic search for mustard seeds.

At each home the people agreed to provide her with the seed,
but when she asked if anyone in that household had died,
she was unable to find a single home where death had not come—
in one house it was a daughter, in another a servant,
in others a husband or parent had died.

Unable to find a home free from the suffering of death,

Kisagatomi realized that she was not alone in her grief.

She let go of her child's lifeless body and returned to the Buddha,
who said to her with great compassion,
"You thought that you alone had lost a son;
[but] the law of death is that among all living creatures
there is no permanence."¹

As the Buddha taught,
the human condition is shot through with suffering.
And he rightly called us to compassionate living as a response.

To look around on the bus and say "these are my people"
is to see something of the lives of others for what they truly are.

And it is to see in the faces of others a reflection of our own reality, too.
To see our own suffering and struggle mirrored back to us.
To see our shared vulnerability
and know in our bones the deep deep need we all have for compassion.

The flip-side of "these are my people" is that "I am theirs."

The utter absence of compassion and empathy was, I think,
what so many people found so gripping
in the story earlier this summer of Karen Klein,
the 68 year old grandmother and bus monitor
for a small school district just outside of Rochester, New York.

If you haven't heard the account,
Klein was surrounded in June by a group of Grade Seven boys,
who bullied her on the bus ride home,
called her appalling names,
mercilessly ridiculed her physical appearance,
and threatened to egg her house, urinate on her door, and stab her.

When she began to weep, they only taunted her more
and said she was crying because her family had killed themselves to get away
from her.

¹ Dalai Lama and Cutler, Howard C., *The Art of Happiness*, New York: Penguin Books, 1998, p. 133.

Within a day or two of this relentless assault,
one of the students posted a ten minute video of the whole thing on YouTube.

I don't know anyone that's been able to watch the whole thing.
It's painful and sickening and a minute or two is more than most can bear.

Still, the video went viral and was all over the web within days.

A young man living in Toronto was moved to start an online fund
in hopes of raising \$5,000 to send Karen on what he felt
was a much-needed and well-deserved vacation.

At final count, his effort had raised more than \$700,000.
Karen will not only go on vacation; she has decided to retire
and to direct some of the money she's received
to charities that support children with autism.

In these past few weeks,
I've wondered at what that vast outpouring of money was all about.
I imagine it's about many things.

I think many were moved out of compassion for the abuse this woman
received and simply wanted to do something, anything, to make it better.

Surely some who've been bullied were moved to give out of empathy.

And, who knows, maybe a former bully or two
put up some cash as a way of seeking restitution for their sins.

Mostly it felt to me that people were making a statement
that such behaviour was just absolutely unacceptable.

The response felt like a collective summons to our better angels.

It felt like a visceral reaction against the degradation
on such horrendous display in the video,
and a way of saying that we can and must be better than this.

The thing is that watching the video,
it feels that the boys were degraded by their actions,
as much or more than Karen, though they didn't seem to know it.

Though they were on the same bus that day,
it was clear these kids had no sense that Karen was one of their people.

If they had, they might have known how hard life had been for her.
They might have known something of her challenges.
That she was partially deaf in both ears.
That she was widowed.
That her son had taken his own life.

They might have known that their words were cruel beyond measure.

Jonathan Haidt, in his book *The Righteous Mind*,
speaks of how we humans are “groupish” creatures.

That we can and will transcend our individual and sometimes selfish interests
to support the well-being of the groups to which we belong, though, our
groups can be pretty tightly defined.

He says that we evolved to live in groups
and that our minds were designed
not only to help us succeed and win within our groups,
but to band together with others to compete and win against other groups.

He adds that: “it would be nice to believe that we humans
were designed to love everyone unconditionally.
Nice, but rather unlikely from an evolutionary perspective.”

“Parochial love,” he says, “—love within groups—
amplified by similarity [and a] sense of shared fate...
may be the most we can accomplish.”²

I am not a moral psychologist or evolutionary biologist,
but I do find myself drawn to the way that he hedges in that last line.

That love within groups *may* be the most we can accomplish.

Which I read to say that we may actually be capable of more.

² p. 245.

That we should, at least, aspire to more.

I believe evolution is still underway.

That progress is still possible.

That while our biology may imbue us
with suspicion toward outsiders and a spirit of competition,
we can also practice our way to a higher plane of being.

Reminding ourselves that “these are my people” and “these are my people” is a
place to start—as we draw ever-wider the circles to which we belong, as we
grow into a greater and more inclusive understanding
of what the reach and the embrace of our groups might be.

Edwin Markham said it so succinctly:

He drew a circle that shut me out —

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But Love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle that took him in.

Friends, may we, with love, find the wit to win,
to draw circles that take others in.

Amen.