

“Getting to Know You”

International Women’s Day 2014

Lynn Harrison
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
9 March 2014

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.

I’d like to dedicate this sermon to a ministry colleague.
At least I hope he continued into ministry.

He was the intern minister at my family’s congregation in Winnipeg. He arrived an hour late, for his service on “spring forward” Sunday. I’m so glad that isn’t me.

§

I’m not sure how Reverend Shawn goes about writing his sermons—I think sometimes he has a direct pipeline to some omnipotent source of brilliance—but I’ll tell you about one of my techniques.

Sometimes, when I feel a little baffled, I stand in front of my bookshelf, take a deep breath, and let my hand float naturally to a book. Sounds crazy, but sometimes it works.

I did that the other day and landed on a book by Brenda Ueland.

In 1938 she published “If You Want to Write.” It was based on her experiences teaching creative writing to women at her local YWCA.

She lived to be 93 years old. Among her many accomplishments, she set records for competitive swimming as a senior citizen.

“If You Want to Write” is a classic. It affirms the natural human ability to make beauty and meaning, simply by being awake in the world and reflecting on it with reverent curiosity.

But this time, my hand landed on one of Brenda Ueland’s lesser-known books.

It’s called “Strength to Your Sword Arm”—a book of essays.

I was delighted to find an entire section on feminism...just in time for today’s International Women’s Day sermon.

Eagerly I turned the pages to find some suitable material, from this amazing woman who had inspired me for years.

Sure enough, I found some real gems. Succinct, vivid and powerful statements that I can share with you. Here’s one:

“We, the women, do not have to worry about being kind. Our maternal physiology accounts for this. We are kind already and cannot help it.”

She went on to say: “As for men, they should be kinder. Quit their silly mass-murdering, their conceit based on nothing, their absolutely permeating, unstanchable infantilism.”

Unfortunately, there were more examples I could have chosen.

As I came to the end of the essay, I discovered that it was, in fact, a sermon. It was delivered at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis on March 7th, 1971, for International Women’s Day.

To be fair, social attitudes have changed radically in the past 45 years. Brenda Ueland was speaking forcefully from the feminist context of her times...and her speech was very well-received.

She was invited to deliver it at three universities following that first worship service.

Today, I'm not going to talk about men's "infantilism" nor about women's "innate kindness."

I think we've all seen enough examples of maturity and unkindness in both men and women to set that kind of stereotyping aside.

Nor am I going to deliver a full sermon on contemporary feminism, because I know that I don't know enough about it to speak with authority...whether or not I am a woman, and whether I'm standing in this pulpit.

When Marge Piercy wrote her poem "Councils," she called us to come down from these places of supposed authority that we set up—both men and women—in order to begin to truly listen to one another in a spirit of humble curiosity.

The paradox is that if I did come down, some of you wouldn't be able to see me...and that's something I'll come back to a little later.

Instead of speaking about what I don't know, I'd rather listen to the stories of women: in particular, women of colour, women of sexual orientations different than mine, women who grew up in different community settings and at different times in history.

The more I can do that, the better I can understand something called "intersectionality."

The word was brought forward in 1989, by feminist writer Kimberlé Crenshaw.

She recognized that cultural patterns of oppression are influenced by "intersectional" factors such as race, gender, class, ability and ethnicity.

The way these factors overlap and intersect in women's lives affects the way women experience injustice.

Not all “women’s experiences” are created equal.

Not only that...because gender identity is a continuum, many people can experience life as both man and woman.

The complexity and diversity of human experience can be both beautiful and confusing at times. It can lead us to a place of not-knowing and humility. And that can be uncomfortable.

In our culture, we like to think of ourselves as “knowledgeable.” We like to label things. It gives us a sense of security.

Yet an attitude of “not-knowing” is deeply valuable, when it comes to healing conflict and creating genuine connection with others.

Often, too, the people who appear to be less “powerful,” at least through some cultural lenses, may hold greater power than we can imagine.

§

Last Sunday, I spent time with the Grade 1 through 4 children, downstairs in Shaw Hall.

In that session, we got to know a little about Malala Yousufzai. She’s the 16 year old activist for girls’ education in Pakistan.

She was shot, on her schoolbus, by the Taliban, two years ago, when she was just beginning to speak out for women’s rights and education. Around the world today, 13 million girls are unable to go to school.

Malala survived, and last year she became the youngest person ever to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The children and I watched Malala’s interview with late-night talk show host Jon Stewart.

My favourite moment came when Malala reflected on what she thought she might do, if she was confronted by the Talib.

She said, “at first I thought I would just hit him with my shoe,” –and the audience laughs—“but then I thought, if you hit a Talib, then there would be no difference between you and the Talib.”

“You must not treat others with cruelty...You must fight others through peace and through dialogue and through education.”

She said, “I would tell him how important education is and that I would even want education for your children as well.

“That’s what I want to tell you, now do what you want.”¹

At that moment, the powerful white male talk-show host was left speechless.

I wondered whether tears had sprung to his eyes, as they had to mine.

Malala’s extraordinary statement of fearlessness reminds me of a well-known Zen story:

A soldier bursts in on a meditating monk and brandishes his sword. The monk keeps on meditating.

The soldier angrily says, “Don’t you understand? I have the power to take your life!”

The monk smiles and says, “It is you who don’t understand. I have the power to let you.”²

The point of these stories, of course, is not to glorify submissiveness or victimization.

Instead, it is to draw attention to a rare kind of courage that seems to draw strength from something deeper than the individual self or one’s own individual life.

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjGL6YY6oMs>

² Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing* (San Francisco, Jossey Bass, 2003), 73.

I think we see it in all great leaders who effectively bring about social change.

It's evident in the stories of women who received the 2014 International Women of Courage Awards in Washington.³

Among the honorees this year are a woman in Mali who communicated with fellow activists by cell phone while hiding under her bed as extremists attacked...

...a prominent civil right lawyer in Zimbabwe who accepts cases others turn down out of fear of retaliation. She continues her work even after being assaulted and arrested many times.

And a woman named Laxmi, who survived an acid attack in India in 2005, and now works fearlessly to stop violence against women in that country.

Picking up on what Janice said earlier, we know that even though International Women's Day has been observed now for more than one hundred years, violence against women continues all over the world.

Hundreds of thousands of girls and women continue to live in poverty with no access to health care or education.

Here in Canada, women and girls remain vulnerable to violence—especially aboriginal women, as we were reminded with the recent murder of Inuk university student Loretta Saunders, who ironically was completing academic work on that very subject.

We know that the work of justice takes time...patience...and steadfast resolve.

It also takes inspiration and hope...an inner spark that can't be put out, no matter how many times people try.

It seems to me that that unquenchable spark comes from a deep sense of connection to a source of deeper meaning.

³ <http://mashable.com/2014/03/05/women-of-courage/>

Sometimes that sense of deep inner knowing has been called “wisdom.”

§

In the ancient Hebrew tradition, spiritual wisdom was named Sophia and was referred to as feminine.

One person who has explored this ancient concept of spiritual wisdom is an Episcopal priest and writer named Cynthia Bourgeault.

In her book “The Wisdom Way of Knowing,” she affirms that spiritual wisdom shines at the heart of all religious traditions—despite the fact that it has frequently been obscured by dualistic and oppressive church doctrine.

She compares Wisdom to the invisible white light made up of all the colours of the rainbow...colours that are only visible when the light of Wisdom shines upon them.⁴

And she explains that spiritual practice such as meditation and prayer can open the door to that radiant strength...which can be used to serve others and the earth.

Thinking back to Malala, I’m reminded that she is a devout Muslim, who prays every day, and argues against the misinterpretations of scripture promoted by the Taliban.

Fundamentalist thought—whether it be Christian, Muslim, or atheist—tends to label, divide and conquer rather than invite, join and heal.

When Malala spoke to the United Nations General Assembly on her 16th birthday last July, she said:

"This is the compassion that I have learned from Muhammad-the prophet of mercy, Jesus Christ and Lord Buddha.

⁴ Bourgeault, 50-51.

This is the legacy of change that I have inherited from Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

This is the philosophy of non-violence that I have learnt from Gandhi Ji, Bacha Khan and Mother Teresa.

And this is the forgiveness that I have learned from my mother and father.”

§

Because of my own religious heritage, I can't help but think of the passage from Isaiah: “A little child shall lead them.”⁵

But of course, the child Malala is now powerful and very famous. She is on a high podium and can be seen.

Thus she is at risk, not only of losing her life, but of losing the humility that allowed her to speak with such healing grace.

As any of us gain power and privilege, we must continually teach ourselves to use it wisely and for the benefit of all—indeed, for the benefit of all life on this planet.

We do so, I think, by returning again and again to the home of our soul...by moving to a place beyond the dualistic judgments of good and bad, man and woman, “self” and “other”.

We gain wisdom when we learn to embrace paradox and ambiguity.

When we learn, as Marge Piercy says, “to sit in the dark...and to realize that it is not I who speaks, but the wind that speaks through me.”

This “wind” may be the truest sense of our identity.

It is embodied and active, and something that cannot be expressed in words.

⁵ Isaiah 11:6.

This wind, it seems to me, is often more about letting go than about grabbing hold...

...more about release, rather than forcing, even in situations when it might seem that force is justified and even necessary.

When Malala Yousafzai said, “instead of taking a shoe and hitting the Taliban...I would tell him that I would want his daughters to be educated too.”

She speaks for Wisdom, in a way that unites and elevates all people.

And she invites us, women and men, to step into a larger sense of life, where we are no longer bound by fear, and where we are never disconnected from love.

Blessings to you all.