

The Endless Wonders of Human Community

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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.

It turns out that Eliza Webb could have made a very different choice. She could have done what we almost always do when we're upset. But, instead, she chose another path.

I offer you a parable of sorts; a story with a moral message; this one just happens to be true.¹

It all began when Eliza wandered out to her car one morning last summer in Seattle.

At first, when it became clear her car had been ransacked, she thought that perhaps her husband had been in the car the night before, frantically searching for something in the dark.

But she soon spotted an unfamiliar cell phone, obviously left behind by whomever had rifled through her gym bag and taken her running shoes and sunglasses.

“[Eliza], who works with high-school students and is married to a man who has paid dearly for a youthful indiscretion, paused before summoning police.”

She figured the person who did this was probably a teenager.

“She opened the phone and began going through text messages and phone contacts. She pushed the contact listed as ‘Mom’ and[, in no time,] reached the prowler’s mother.”

¹ Author unknown, “The kinder side of vigilante justice,” McClatchy Newspapers, 18 July 2013.

In a moment of quick but deep discernment, Eliza decided that she “wanted to meet [the person who did this, talk to his parents and see if there might be another way.”

She felt that if she “could get him to own up to what he’d done and understand there were consequences, it could be a much better outcome.”

At first, the prowler’s mother, when Eliza reached her on the phone, “thought she should press charges.”

She “thought it would be the only way he would learn that there are consequences for criminal activity.”

But after talking with Eliza and her husband, who shared the story of how the repercussions of his own bad judgment at age 18 had haunted him throughout his adult life, the mother “saw how disastrous that could be.”

Eliza explained how her husband’s experience had shown them how “bringing the police and courts into something like this [could] have long-term, devastating consequences for kids...”

In the end, the young man’s mother said “she would support whatever decision [Eliza] made, and she invited [her over] to her house and [to] talk to her son.”

“When [Eliza] and her husband got to the house, about five blocks from their own, [they] found the 19-year-old and his twin sister crying.”

“The teen quickly owned up to what he had done, said his actions had been fueled by alcohol and boredom, and apologized. [Eliza’s] husband then told the teen his own story.”

“When he was 20, Blake [explained, he] was charged with underage drinking after he went out partying with friends and decided to walk home rather than get in a car. An officer saw him on the road, [and] asked whether he’d consumed any alcohol...”

Blake told the truth.

“Although he now works at a cancer-research facility, [he] still has to disclose that criminal conviction on job, rental and school applications twelve years later.”

By sharing, “[they] just wanted [the teen] to know that everybody does things they wish they could take back...”

Hearing this, the young man confessed some more. He admitted that he and his friend had actually broken into another twelve cars that night.

Hearing that gave Eliza pause. She now realized that there were other victims. He hadn’t made one dumb mistake; he had made at least thirteen.

The teen assured her that there had not been any damage to the vehicles, as they had all been unlocked, just like her own car.

“Eliza then asked the teen if he would be willing to return the stolen items to the owners and try to make things right.”

He “agreed, but said that all of the stolen items were[, at that point,] in the trunk of a friend’s car.”

So, in short order, Eliza, Blake, and the youth “went to the second teen’s house, where they spoke to a ‘very disappointed and dismayed’ father who roused his sleeping 18-year-old.”

When Eliza’s plan was explained, “the second teen agreed to go along with them.”

“They gathered [up] the pilfered items— cell phones, laptop chargers, sunglasses, a fedora, [and Eliza’s] gym shoes— and headed back to [the scene of the crime].”

The two young men went door to door through the neighbourhood, apologizing and returning the “items they’d stolen from

[the] thirteen unlocked cars—
[making] a lasting impression not only on the boys and their families,
but also on many of [their] neighbours.”

“They were not able to find every victim that morning,
but [Eliza] said they left word that the stolen items could be retrieved at her
house. Since then, only one person...contacted [her] to retrieve belongings,
but many have stopped by to talk about what she did.”

At the annual block party in their neighbourhood later that summer,
the two teens shared a letter of apology, explaining
that it “felt terrible” to hear that people were worried and felt
they had to lock their doors because of what they had done.

Looking back on the experience, the first teen said,
“In a funny way, I feel closer to my neighbours and kind of look forward
to seeing them around in different circumstances.”

With that, here ends the parable.

I encourage you to take a moment now
and give thought to what strikes you as meaningful about this story.

On one level, this is a beautiful story of what’s called “restorative justice,”
an approach that is sometimes used, in the wake of a crime or some other form
of injury or injustice, to bring healing and health to the situation.

The victims and the offenders are both actively involved in the process.
All the stakeholders are given an opportunity to discuss how they’ve been
affected, and then work together to decide what should be done
to repair or restore whatever has been broken.

The offenders are usually asked to take responsibility
and make amends for their action.
But punishment isn’t the primary goal; the goal is healing.

Such an approach may leave those with a different taste for justice unsatisfied,
but studies show restorative justice typically yields

the highest rates of victim satisfaction and offender accountability.²

I think what this teaches is that there's much more to justice than vengeance and retribution.

And I think it affirms that healing is a far more worthy way to justice than punishment alone can ever bring about.

I fully understand—and am the first to admit—that this approach isn't always our first impulse.

Who among us hasn't at least, occasionally, wanted to see those who've hurt us pay for it, to be made to suffer, or at least made to squirm a bit in a very uncomfortable way?

That is a perfectly understandable response to being injured. It's a natural human urge.

But it's not the highest or noblest response of which we are capable.

As the great sages have reminded us from time immemorial, an eye for an eye will only leave the whole world blind.

Sometimes it can feel deeply satisfying to stew in our upset or lash out in anger.

While anger can be a healthy and appropriate feeling, acting on that anger or storing it up for use at what we're sure will be some opportune moment, doesn't always turn out so well.

More often than not, the result is to add insult to injury.

And, yet, resisting that urge is so very hard to do.

I know it's certainly been hard for me, at times.

² Lawrence W Sherman and Heather Strang (2007). "[Restorative Justice: The Evidence](#)". University of Pennsylvania.

To open my heart to the other,
to see those who've caused me pain
not as some horrible, separate entity that I can shake my finger at,
but as an integral part of the interconnected web of which we are all a part.

That's what I love about those words of invitation by Rumi
found at the top of your Orders of Service.

The mystic Sufi poet from the 13th century wrote:

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I will meet you there.”

He goes on to say:

“When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase ‘each other’ doesn’t make any sense.”

It is to such a field that Eliza was prepared to invite
the young man who had stolen her things.

They did, of course, eventually get around to talking about wrongdoing
and how to make things right,
but before that conversation was even possible,
Eliza had spent time among those tall grasses,
recognizing just how closely tied she was to whomever had caused her injury.

Before she knew his name or what he looked like,
she could see the bond that she shared with this other person,
and rather than make him the “Other,”
decided to honour the bonds that she knew,
on such a fundamental level, existed between them.

“Break not the circle of enabling love,
where people grow, forgiven and forgiving;
break not that circle, make it wider still,
till it includes, embraces all the living.”³

³ “Break Not the Circle,” Hymn #323 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, sung earlier in the service.

I don't know whether Eliza has ever spent time in a Unitarian congregation, but she clearly holds a deep understanding of our first and seventh principles: the ones that affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person and call us to honour the interdependent web into which our lives are irreversibly woven.

She was able to demonstrate, to practise, really, a powerful capacity for what the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers called “unconditional positive regard”—an ability to extend basic acceptance and support to another regardless of what they have done.

An ability Rogers felt we had to master in order to live happy, healthy lives.

Knowing next to nothing about who had caused her harm, Eliza chose to look upon that person, whoever he or she might turn out to be, with genuine concern and, I would argue, radical acceptance.

This is so difficult to do, it's no wonder that great teachers down through the ages have tried to remind us of it's vital importance: the Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tzu and Jesus all calling us to compassion, imploring us to practice mercy.

This is so difficult to do, it's no wonder that we forget, again and again, and especially in those moments when we've been hurt by another and find ourselves recoiling in pain.

That's why cultivating our capacity for compassion is such a fundamental spiritual practice.

It takes discipline, and, frankly, it takes lots of practice to be able to grant to another unconditional positive regard, to be able to see whoever might have hurt us as more than their failings or shortcomings or damaging actions.

To get there, to hone the ability

to meet others with unconditional positive regard
requires that we do our own inner work—
that we meditate or pray, enter therapy,
or do whatever we have to do to examine and deal with our own stuff.

It involves cultivating a practice of curiosity
when judging might feel like a lot more fun.

It means strengthening within ourselves a willingness
to accept people as the humans that they are,
and to see in that the vulnerability that we all share—
with all our multitude of imperfections exposed.

And yet the beauty of these efforts, the reward,
is the possibility of living into real, authentic community.

That is the place to which our Healthy Congregation Team is
ready and willing to help us go.

Their mandate is to support us all in developing our toolkit
for engaging one another in genuine and loving community.

Here's why this matters.

Through the years, you've likely heard me many times refer to

Beloved Community, a concept made popular by Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the formal, idealized sense of the term,
the letters B and C are capitalized.

The Beloved Community is a vision of heaven on earth.

To borrow the language from the Christian tradition,
it is about making the Kingdom of God manifest in the here and now.

About bringing into being a world that is defined by love and justice.

Obviously enough, Beloved Community remains a very distant dream.

Yet the principles of our faith and the longing of our hearts,

call us, relentlessly, to move ourselves and our world
ever on in that direction.

That's why I call this congregation
a little loving laboratory of the human spirit.

It is a place where we are invited and empowered to take up this call
and practice it like the ancient craft that it is.

To do the messy and wondrous work of being human, together,
moving ever onward and outward to build up the Beloved Community.

With that vision in our hearts,
may we stir up within this place the collective courage to be real.

May we discover that in making ourselves vulnerable
our truest strength is to be found.

May we meet everyone we encounter with an unconditional positive regard.

And may we know, today and always,
a boundless sense of gratitude
for the endless wonders of human community
that makes every bit of our vision possible.

Blessed Be and Amen.