

# Enoughness

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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.

The day had started out pretty much like any other.

More than twenty years ago,  
I walked to the restaurant where I'd just gotten a job.

It was a job I very much needed,  
having recently made the move from Dallas to Boston  
with only enough money in my pocket  
for the deposit and the first month's rent  
on the apartment where I lived.

My plan had been to fall back on waiting tables,  
like I'd done before,  
while I sorted out my options for school and a steady job.

That morning, I quickly got my tables squared away,  
glassware and cutlery polished,  
salt and pepper shakers filled.

I went to the shift meeting in the kitchen  
and, then, by all reports,  
I promptly passed out,  
breaking my nose  
and splitting my chin in the process.

It wasn't all bad.

When I came to, I was being held in the arms  
of my co-worker, the hunky actor I'd had a little crush on,  
and who I still see on television every so often.

But, in truth, it was bad.

I was a mess,  
highly confused and covered in blood.

An ambulance was called,  
and I spent the rest of the day in Emerge.

I had all manner of tests and scans run on me,  
and answered round after round of questions.

No, I had never passed out like this before.  
No, I hadn't had anything to drink the previous night.  
Yes, I had had a good night's sleep.  
No, I wasn't doing drugs or taking any medications.  
Yes, I had had plenty to eat that morning for breakfast.

In time, I got stitched up and sent home—  
without any answers,  
without any sense of why it happened,  
and, most jarringly,  
without any certainty that it wouldn't happen again.

As I left hospital, with bandages all over my face,  
I walked to the subway  
(because I couldn't afford a taxi,  
especially since I had missed my shift that day).

I felt anxious, and I felt tremendously alone,  
not knowing anyone in the city well enough  
that I could ask for help.

I felt vulnerable, wondering if I'd black out again,  
if I'd injure myself even worse the next time.

And I felt deeply afraid,  
fearful that if this happened again,  
I might lose my job, and not be able to make rent.  
I feared that my new life in a new city  
could come completely unraveled.

Once inside the subway station,  
I kept my distance from the edge of the platform,  
a behaviour I practice still today, twenty-three years later,  
for fear that I might take a tumble onto the tracks  
at an inopportune moment.

A current habit rooted in a now distant memory  
about how hard it was to feel  
so very terrified of what might come.

That I've never passed out again  
does little to diminish the memory,  
or the caution I admit I still carry with me.

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Once I was on the subway train that evening,  
I was, it seems, the most interesting person to look at.

With my bandaged face and bloody shirt,  
and just barely holding my emotions together,  
I apparently looked a lot tougher than I actually felt.

People seemingly thought I'd just lost a rough street fight.

To the couple looking my way, inquisitively,  
I just said, "you should've see the other guy."

It was, after all, less embarrassing  
than confessing I had lost a fight  
with the unforgiving terra cotta tiles  
of the restaurant kitchen floor.

\* \* \*

The enduring lesson I have kept from this experience  
is that I never want to feel that way again.

And, by that, I don't so much mean  
the agonizing pain I felt in my body,  
with my swollen face and pounding headache,

but the devastating fear and vulnerability I felt  
deep down in my soul.

That is what fear will do.  
It's what vulnerability will do.

Make us want nothing more than to feel invincible.  
Cause us to put on a brave face,  
and try to keep whatever we fear at bay.

It's actually amazing, sometimes,  
the lengths we will go to do this well.

The colourful masks we'll create to disguise what we feel.

The elaborate facades we'll erect  
to make it appear as though everything is okay.

The fanciful stories we'll tell to conceal—even from ourselves—  
the hard truth that being human involves vulnerability and fear,  
and that to be alive means that we are susceptible  
to hardship and heartache,  
to grief and loss, to disease and to death.

In the words of Buddhist teacher Bo Lozoff,  
the challenge of being alive is to accept—  
and to know it in our bones—that,  
“Anything that can happen to a human being may happen to me.”

That, “Anything that can happen to a human being  
may happen to me.”

This can be such an incredibly difficult thing  
for us to even acknowledge, let alone embrace.

And it can be such an easy thing for us to forget.

That is, until we are shaken awake  
by the end of a relationship we didn't see coming,  
a diagnosis we weren't the least bit prepared for,  
or the news of a sudden loss,

that just doesn't make any sense.

It's easy to forget, until we truly know  
that not every aspect of life can be controlled.

It's easy to forget, until we are reminded anew,  
that to live is to be vulnerable—  
and that to be vulnerable  
means that we live with fear  
as a sure and steady companion.

The challenge is to make peace  
with the presence of fear in our lives,  
to make peace with the knowledge  
that being human means being acquainted  
with vulnerability and with risk.

If and when we do this,  
we can start to get real about the world around us.

And if and when we do this,  
we can start to get real about ourselves.

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The Australian poet and cartoonist Michael Leunig,  
writes that in this world:

There are only two feelings: Love and fear.  
There are only two languages: Love and fear.  
There are only two activities: Love and fear.  
There are only two motives, two procedures,  
two frameworks, two results.  
Love and fear. Love and fear.

The question, he seemingly suggests, is which one we serve.  
Which one guides our actions most of the time.  
Which one, in the end, will give ultimate shape to our lives.

But I wonder what would happen  
if we could more readily see

that what we and others fear  
is very often tied to what we love?

For we fear because something vital is at stake—  
something precious, something of great value—  
be it our life or livelihood, the safety of our family,  
or the well-being of our community.

Love can very often be found on the flip-side of fear.

So, it's not so much a choice between the two,  
but of coming to know them as of a piece,  
as two parts of life's whole, two parts of a whole life.

When we grasp that,  
the landscape around us can start to shift.

When we can see through fear  
to find the love that may be at risk,  
we can better understand another's motives,  
and we can better understand our own.

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There is a story told of “travelers  
across a long and seldom used trail  
in the Amargosa Desert [of Death Valley,  
who] would pass an old pump that offered  
the only hope of fresh drinking water along their journey.

“Wired to the pump handle was a tin baking powder can  
and inside the can was a handwritten note [that read]:

“This pump is all right as of June 1932.  
I put a new washer into it  
and it ought to last five years.

But the washer dries out  
and the pump has to be primed.

‘Under the white rock I buried a bottle of water

out of the sun, the cork end up.

‘There’s enough water there to prime the pump,  
but not if you drink some of it first.

‘Pour about one fourth and let it soak to wet the leather.  
Then pour in the rest medium fast and pump with gusto.

‘You’ll get water.  
The well has never run dry.  
Have faith.

‘When you get watered up, fill the bottle again  
and put it back like you found it for the next [person].’  
(signed) Desert Pete.

‘p.s. - Don’t go drinking up the water first.  
Prime the pump with it and you’ll get all you can hold.’”

I’m not sure I’ve ever heard  
a more concise articulation of Unitarian Universalist theology  
than that: “Don’t go drinking up the water first.”

But, how hard it can be to trust—  
to have faith as Desert Pete put it—  
that what we have will be enough.

To know, when we’re dying of thirst  
in the middle of some desert,  
that what we have on-hand  
must sometimes be completely spent  
to bring forth that which will sustain us.

To know the sacred trust we hold  
with those who will follow after—  
the trust that morally obligates us  
not to drink up the bottle of water  
just because we have it and are afraid,  
but to use it in love,  
as the key that it is to upholding life.

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Each traveler to that pump  
was confronted, as we all are,  
with how we balance what we love with what we fear.

Fear and vulnerability would tell us  
to drink our fill from the bottle, and be done with it.

To not take a chance  
on some worn out pump  
and a dusty hand-scrawled note from a stranger.

But love tells us to take the risk, to trust, to have faith.  
To prime the pump to serve a greater good,  
with confidence that we, too, will somehow be okay.

Love and fear.  
Fear and love.

In such a moment of vulnerability, what would you do?  
What do you hope you would do?

Rarely, in this life, do we find a note  
with such explicit instructions.

Most of the time, we just struggle to strike the right balance,  
without ever having as much information as we would like.

We make a calculation between love and fear,  
and simply do the best we can with what we know.

It's a very vulnerable place to be.

But being there,  
living there as we do, each day,  
and embracing our shared vulnerability  
can change things when we grow our ability  
to see through fear  
to find the love beating at its heart.

In doing so, we may well find  
that there's less reason to be afraid.

This doesn't mean that risk and vulnerability go away.

It doesn't mean that there's nothing left to fear.

It is, instead, that we can be more compassionate,  
and more understanding,  
when we bear witness to the vulnerability  
that binds us one to another.

When we recognize the shared struggle  
that is the human condition,  
we become more humane.

This shift in our perception can be a great blessing,  
for it leads on towards life.

For it is love in times of vulnerability that gives us the courage,  
even in the face of our fears,  
to pour out the water, to the very last drop,  
in the faith that there will be enough.

May it be so.

Until we truly learn how to be led not by our fears,  
but by our faith—our faith in others, in ourselves,  
and in the life-giving power of love.

Amen.