

“Those Cracks in Everything”

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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.

So, a few weeks ago, it came to Shawn’s and my attention that we hadn’t adequately planned to honour and affirm Black History Month.

It was what you’d call a “worship planning fail” —

And these things do happen, in the overlapping calls of various events, themes and needs in a complex congregation like ours.

Yet with Shawn leading a study group soon on “What it Means to be White” it seemed especially important that Black History Month not be overlooked.

Recognizing the mistake was uncomfortable.
Embarrassing, even.

But whether I liked it or not, it had happened, so I contacted Moara and said, oops...what do we do now?

Then she and I talked about how we could affirm this annual celebration that is very important to so many people in our congregation and community...

How we could integrate more Black voices into all worship services especially in February...

And most importantly how we could do this together.

Moara helped me understand that it's not just about recognizing an annual observance, but about deepening relationships... having conversations.

You might say there was a crack—a flaw—in the planning for this month.

But through that crack, that mistake, that gap in understanding—

The light of new relationship and new connection came in.

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I don't know about you,
but I don't generally enjoy having cracks pointed out...

Whether they're cracks in an argument...

Or gaps in my understanding...

“Blind spots” (if I may use an admittedly ableist term)...
which is to say, something outside my current perception
that prevents me from moving forward
with full and necessary awareness.

When we're in a moving vehicle,
we know that a blind spot can cause a collision
unless we make an intentional effort to see
what we otherwise might miss.

That's uncomfortable for many people in our culture
because we've been socialized to try to “have it all together”...

Or to pretend we do, even when we don't.

And that means we don't reveal the cracks,
even when they become painfully wide and gaping.

We're afraid that if we reveal our vulnerability,
we'll be rejected...we will not be loved and accepted.

Yet the promise of our Universalist heritage
is that we are inherently lovable and acceptable—
not in any unachievable perfection,
but, rather, warts and all.

And that indeed, the “broken” or “wounded”
places of our lives—

As well as in our relationships and psyches—

Can create an openness that makes room
for creativity and deeper relationship.

When Leonard Cohen wrote,

“Ring the bells that still can ring,
Forget your perfect offering...

There is a crack, a crack in everything
that's how the light gets in...”

He wasn't saying anything new.

(We'll hear that song two weeks from now, by the way.)

Our Unitarian ancestor Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “There is a crack in everything God has made, except Reason.”¹

I leave you to debate that.

Way back in the 12th Century, the Sufi poet Rumi said, “The wound is the place where the light enters you.”

We hear similar comfort and reassurance in the Japanese concept of “wabi-sabi”—that

“Nothing is perfect, nothing is finished, and nothing lasts.”

It suggests that there is some value in the transience and imperfection of the world...

Some beautiful gift, however hidden,
in the cracks in everything.

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I can't help but think that teachings like these have been so popular and perennial because human life involves such suffering, failure and loss.

We seek light...
and yet we cast shadows.

We seek wholeness...
yet it necessarily includes the broken.

We may wish it were not so...
and we might do our best to hold everything together.

¹ *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Harvard University Press: 1966), 198.

But even the most beautiful and lasting gifts we receive eventually change or end.

Whether we like it or not—and we probably don't—life has a way of breaking.

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Recently, Shawn and I, and perhaps some of you, witnessed the awkward and uncomfortable death of a beautiful wellspring of wisdom we'd depended on for years.

On the evening of Wednesday, December 18th, a harmless-looking email appeared in my inbox, apparently in error.

"Dear Mr. Riley. It's been awhile since I've received a beautiful poem and image from you. I would very much like to receive them again. I hope you are okay."

Then came the response, not from Joe Riley, as expected, but from a certain Joan Brady:

"I wasn't aware you hadn't been receiving them. I will reinstate you to the list.

All the best, Joanie."

And with that, was unleashed a torrent of accidental group emails to the Yahoo group called "Panhala."

Under the name Joe Riley, it sent a daily poem and nature photograph to thousands of subscribers around the world.

Thanks to Panhala, the voices of Joy Harjo, Danna Faulds, Maya Angelou, Mary Oliver and many others made their way into sermons and chalice lightings.

Indeed, I'm sure that many ministers just like me depended on it... professionally and personally.

The last poem we received was Wendell Berry's "The Peace of Wild Things."

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,*

*I go and lie down where the wood drake rests
in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.*

*I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.*

I come into the presence of still water.

*And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light.*

*For a time I rest in the grace of the world,
and am free.*

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For two months since that poem appeared, Panhala had been silent.

Then on that fateful day in December, a new letter appeared in my inbox every few seconds.

First, "Please put me back on your list.
I love receiving your poems!"

Then, "I'm receiving too many emails! What is happening?"

Then, "Remove me from this list immediately."

and then "Help! Something is broken!"

As the hours passed it, it became more and more clear
that this happily utopian community of a list-serve
had suddenly turned bad.

All Yahoo groups were being shut down,
and along with them, the ability to safely unsubscribe.

Thousands of people were unwittingly "replying all"
and asking to be removed or reinstated to the list.

One person wrote, "This is hilarious,"
but a surprising number of people seemed angry.

They also had apparently missed the important information,
included in the first exchange, that Joe Riley might not be
Joe Riley at all...

But rather Joan Brady, an American watercolour painter...
(Though upon investigation that, too, seemed unlikely.)

Whoever the person was, whoever had brought Panhala
into being...I could only imagine their dismay...

...as they watched their labour of love transform
into an email nightmare for so many.

And I hoped that, despite the chaos unfolding,
Joe or Joan would be reading the countless emails
that expressed such deep gratitude.

"Thank you so much for enriching my life in this way."

"I read your email every morning.
Please continue to send them to me."

And this one:

"Please tell me how I can continue receiving these poems.
I would pay anything."

Something so beautiful...
an example of "the grace of the world"...was broken.

The grief and longing expressed
by the hundreds of emails attested to that fact.

And yet, the gratitude and love and beauty
that remained because of one person's gift of generosity
also spoke to a wholeness--

A wholeness that could not be damaged
by something so mundane as a malfunctioning email chat.

A wholeness that spoke instead to the timeless beauty and wisdom of
the poems themselves...which someone had been moved to share.

In the blizzard of plaintive, irritated, grateful, sad, hostile, bewildered
and amused emails that went out to all of us in the early hours of
December 19th...

The broken Panhala...

(a word which in the Maranathi language
means tube or conduit)

...itself became a poem.

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Now, for all this talk of imperfection's gifts...
I wouldn't recommend going around breaking things
all the time.

We may have heard the advice "fail fast, fail often"
which encourages us to take risks and learn from our mistakes.

...but wise observers have pointed out
that this approach can lead to harm.

When people make mistakes, others get hurt.

A slower, more mindful and thoughtful approach
can lead to learning just as a mistake can...
while also preserving relationships.

It's also important to acknowledge that intense suffering and tragedy
are extremely painful...

And that any blessings they contain
may remain hidden for a very long time.

To suggest otherwise in a superficial or simplistic way
is to risk another kind of mistake

which can be as harmful as it is well-intentioned.

And yet, there are ways
that light comes in through the wounds of our lives.

Through our own suffering, our hearts can be opened
in compassion to others.

Through the witnessing of injustice,
we can be moved toward action
to correct the systems of power that have caused—
and continue to cause—
such great harm.

In seeing ourselves or others at their worst,
we can be inspired to start anew,
to make amends, to transform our lives
as we orient toward the Greater Good.

And to be sure, the Greater Good
of wholeness and creativity uses everything.

The broken and the intact,
the beautiful and the ugly,
the symmetrical and the unbalanced,
the success and the obstacle.

In the light of Wholeness, in fact,
we need not get hung up on these opposites
or dualisms.

They are fully intertwined.

As we too are whole,
in both the conscious
and the shadow sides of ourselves.

In all the ways our lives go as we wish...
and equally, in all the ways they break...
opening us up to wisdom, love and grace.

In a few moments we'll hear a beautiful new
arrangement of a classic hymn...

That both calls out for peace and comfort
while at the same time provides peace and comfort
through the gift of creation that is ongoing always.

First, though, I'd to leave you with a blessing
from a book called "Broken Open: How Difficult
Times Can Help Us Grow," by Elizabeth Lesser.

"When you feel yourself breaking down,
may you break open instead.

May every experience in life
be a door that opens your heart,
expands your understanding,
and leads you to freedom.

If you are weary,
may you be aroused by passion and purpose.

If you are blameful and bitter,
may you be sweetened by hope and humor.

If you are frightened,
may you be emboldened
by a big consciousness far wiser than your fear.

If you are lonely, may you find love,

may you find friendship.

If you are lost,
may you understand that we are all lost,
and still we are guided—

by Strange Angels and Sleeping Giants,
by our better and kinder natures,
by the vibrant voice within the beat.

May you follow that voice,
for This is the way—the hero's journey,
the life worth living,
the reason we are here.”

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