

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula
Sunday May 10th 2020

Reading: “Reformation: the Spirit of the Wind”

My reading this morning is entitled “Reformation: the Spirit of the Wind” and was written by the Rev. Kristen Harper, who has served the mission of the Unitarian Church of Barnstable, Massachusetts since 2002. This reading comes from *Voices from the Margins*, a multicultural collection of meditations published by the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Some say the spirit of the wind is in the trees.
You can see it, they say,
If you close your eyes and stand real still.

Some say that the same spirit lives in the hills
Forging mountains and plains.

I smelled it the other night.
Lying in my bed, my window cracked
It crept through the moonlight
Up under my blanket
And wrapped its arms around me.

Entering my blood through my skin
I felt alive with an age I had not yet reached.
Made new again in a form I’d never known.

I cried out in pain and joy mingled,
Fear and expectation.
Ecstasy it has been called,
I call it reformation.

There was forgiveness in that spirit
Compassion for my wounds,
Strength for my weaknesses.

It was no miracle, nor nirvana.
I just closed my eyes and saw the spirit.

The spirit in the wind.
The spirit in the trees.
The spirit that lives in me.

Sermon: “Radical Acceptance”

Have you ever wanted something so badly that you could taste it? Has there ever been a time in your life when you were promised something or you were expected something or you simply wanted something so much that when you thought about it, you could feel it in your hands as if you were already holding it?

When I was five or maybe six years old, I convinced my parents to sign me up for a fan club that I’d seen advertised in a children’s comic. They helped me fill out the form, we put it in an envelope with some money, and into the mail it went. And then, I was sure, the mailman would deliver my new fan club materials the next day because, when you’re five or maybe six, that’s how you think the world works.

Boy, was I disappointed.

Every morning, I would wake up as soon as it got light — and this was about the only time in my life I’ve ever done that without an alarm clock — I would wake up as soon as it got light and head downstairs to see if the mail had been delivered. I would look through the mail for a package with my name on it, but there wasn’t one. I’m sure my parents grew tired of hearing me ask when it would arrive, especially when I woke them up to complain about the situation. And then there was Sunday, when, as I learned to my horror, no mail was ever delivered, and that seemed like an especially cruel thing for fate to do to me.

Now I would like to be able to say that having to wait a couple of weeks before my fan club badges and other materials were delivered taught me something about patience — or, at least, about not bothering my parents before they were ready to be awake — but then, I was five or maybe six years old. Eventually the package with my name on it was delivered, which probably reinforced my idea that if I wanted something enough, if I

wanted something so badly that I could taste it, then reality would make it happen for me.

And as I grew up, boy, was I disappointed — a lot.

Still, somewhere along the way, and at this point I don't even remember where I got it, I found a copy of the Serenity Prayer. It was printed on a piece of card — smaller than a postcard, but too big to fit in a wallet — and I remember that I always felt better when I read it. “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Wow, I thought to myself; that covers all the bases. There's figuring out if I can change something, and then courage will help me do that; but if I figure out I can't, then it's okay to accept that. What a relief!

Now, I grew up believing that if something wasn't the way I wanted it to be, I could change it. I am fortunate that the term “stiff upper lip” was not part of our household vocabulary, and while complaining about everything from the weather to the government is as British as it gets, I will note that that's just one tool for bringing about change, specifically by making somebody so fed up with all the complaints that they do something about it.

Most of the battle, when it comes to changing something, is to recognize that we do have the power to change it. Our UU Principles wouldn't talk about ideals such as peace, liberty, justice, equity and compassion in human relations if we didn't believe we had the power to do something about conflict, oppression, injustice, unfairness and cruelty. One of the foundational pieces of liberal religion — what are known as the Five Smooth Stones — concerns agency, too: it is not what we have but what we choose to do with what we have that really matters; our religious values must actually be lived in the world for them to be relevant.

Of course, changing something that we believe is wrong is easier said than done. Once we recognize that we can change something, though, courage will help us to overcome our own hesitations and work through our own fears to make it happen. And the good news is that if what we're fighting for is right, then we'll always have one another fighting alongside us.

Sometimes, though, there's something we can't change. As a young child, I certainly didn't have the wisdom to realize that running downstairs at dawn and rooting through the mail and waking up the rest of my family to suffer with me, I didn't understand that none of that would make what I wanted come to me any faster. And my daughter now struggles against the idea that she can't see most of her friends right now, that she can't invite her friends in our neighborhood to play in our house or even in the back yard, and that we don't know when that will change.

As adults, of course, we've gained more wisdom to be able to tell the difference between what we can change and what we can't. If this were any other year, many of you, I'm sure, would have Mother's Day plans, going to see parents or children, maybe going out for lunch or dinner, doing something special that would involve being somewhere other than at home and being around other people. But this year, we're not doing that. We need to rely on the telephone to talk to our loved ones, or a video call to see them, but it's not the same as being with them in person.

So when we have the wisdom to know that there's something we cannot change, what are our options?

Well, one option is to deny the reality that there's something we cannot change. We can convince ourselves that maybe this isn't reality, and it's just a matter of time until we find out the truth.

Another option is to get angry about the situation, to find someone to blame, to blame ourselves, to figure out whose fault it is until shame or guilt fixes it.

A third option is to try to make a deal, to negotiate our way out of our situation by appealing to someone in authority, making a bargain with them to change it for us.

Or we might sink into melancholy and hopelessness, our pain, disappointment, sadness or loss overwhelming us until that's all that we can think about, losing interest in everything else.

Now, if you've heard of the Five Stages of Grief, as described by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, what I've described might ring a bell as the first four of those stages, namely denial, anger, bargaining and depression. And the fifth, then, is

acceptance, coming to terms with a reality, particularly following a loss, that we don't have to like but accepting it as reality and knowing that we're going to be okay.

Acceptance is not about giving up, and it's not about agreeing or approving of something bad; rather, it's about recognizing that this is our reality, and fighting against it will not change that reality but will only add to our suffering. As radical acceptance, a practice developed by psychologist Marsha Linehan, it doesn't mean we are no longer disappointed or sad or afraid; rather, it means we're no longer adding to our pain and making it worse for ourselves.

Of course, this is easier said than done. Like any skill that needs to be developed, radical acceptance needs to be practiced. I've been doing that over the last two years, with help from my therapist, who first introduced me to the idea of radical acceptance. Thankfully I'd already been seeing him when my reality imploded, and I was faced with so much in my life that I felt powerless to change. Of course, there wasn't anything that he could do to change my situation, either, but he helped me to gradually find a way out of my crippling anxiety by encouraging me to accept my reality without letting it define or control me.

There's no magic to it, of course. (I will freely admit that I am still learning how to practice radical acceptance, and I still occasionally succumb to denial, anger, bargaining or depression, but I am definitely much less of a mess than I was two years ago.) There's no magic, but there are some necessary pieces to practicing radical acceptance.

The first is to recognize your life for what it is, on its own terms and for its own sake, not for what you wish it were. It's okay to want some things to be different, to have a vision of what you want your life to be in the future, but this is about acknowledging your reality now.

Then there's realizing the difference between what you can control and what you cannot control. One of the first sermons I ever heard in a UU congregation helped me to understand that we do not, in fact, we cannot control most of what happens to us, but we do control how we respond. That also means that we're not responsible for most of what happens to us, but we are responsible for how we respond to what happens to us.

Next is looking at yourself without judgment, without shame, without putting yourself down. This is about finding compassion for yourself. In the words of our First UU Principle, remember that “every person” in affirming and promoting “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” includes you as well.

Then there’s acknowledging the facts of our situation, particularly when it comes to something we cannot change. We shouldn’t blame ourselves for things we don’t even have the ability to change! We don’t have to like the fact that we can’t change it, we don’t have to approve of what we can’t change, we don’t have to agree with it; we just need to acknowledge that we cannot change it.

All of these — and they’re not in any particular order, though all of them are necessary parts of radical acceptance — help us to accept reality for what it is, rather than fighting it — because when we fight reality, it’s not reality that suffers: we’re the ones who suffer.

There is one more piece of practicing radical acceptance, and this shows some of the roots radical acceptance in Buddhism, though such an approach to reality isn’t exclusively Buddhist: Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote the Serenity Prayer, was a Christian theologian, for instance. In any case, radical acceptance involves mindfulness — particularly when it comes to our emotions, recognizing and being honest about what we’re feeling, especially if that’s uncomfortable — and, since nothing lasts forever, including painful emotions, living in the present moment. After all, part of refusing to accept reality is dwelling on the past or the future; radical acceptance, on the other hand, requires us to set aside our fantasies of the future or our wishful thinking of the past and instead focus fully on our life in the present moment as it actually is, without denial or judgment.

Let me tell a story to help us think about this.

There once was a king who decided that if he knew who the most important people to be with were, and what the most important things to do were, and when the best time to do each thing was, then he would certainly be the greatest king to ever rule the land. Although he had asked his advisers, none had been able to give him a good answer to these questions of who and what and when.

At last, the king decided to seek the advice of a wise woman who lived in the forest, so he dressed in the clothes of a commoner and set out. When he neared the wise woman's hut, he ordered his soldiers to stay back and then walked the last mile of the path alone.

The king found the wise woman digging in her garden, and she nodded a greeting at him but continued digging. The king told the wise woman that he had come to find answers to his three questions, and she listened to him but gave no answer and continued working. Then the king noticed that the wise woman was not only elderly but also quite frail and that she was struggling with her digging, so he offered to take over the work, and she allowed him to do so.

The king dug for an hour, and then he asked his questions again — “Who are the most important people to be with? What are the most important things to do? When is the best time to do each thing?” — but the wise woman didn't answer. He worked for another hour, and then repeated his questions with the same results. This continued for a few more hours until the Sun began to sink low in the sky. Finally, the king was discouraged. “I came to you for answers,” he said, “but if you have none, tell me and I will return home.”

Just then, someone came running along the path to the wise woman's hut. They turned to see a man with his hands pressed to his stomach and blood flowing from between them. When he reached them, he dropped to the ground at the king's feet.

The king and the wise woman knelt down and began tending to the man. The king washed and bandaged the man's wounds, but they kept bleeding, requiring fresh bandages. The king also helped the wise woman to fetch water, and to help the man to drink.

Finally, the wounded man slept, and he did not wake until the next morning. The king slept on the ground, waking often to check on him. When morning came, the man woke up and looked at the king.

“Forgive me,” he said to the king.

“You have done nothing for me to forgive you,” said the king.

“Oh, but I do,” the man said. “You were my enemy, and I had sworn to take revenge on you for taking my land. I heard that you were coming here, and I decided to kill you on the road, but when you didn’t return home, I left my ambush to find you. Then your soldiers recognized me and wounded me. I escaped them, but I would have bled to death if you had not cared for me. I meant to kill you, but now you have saved my life. If I live, I shall gladly serve you for the rest of my days.”

The king was so happy to have been reconciled with an old enemy that he immediately forgave him and promised to return his land. Then the king called for his soldiers to carry the man back to the palace to be tended by the king’s own doctor.

After the wounded man had gone, the king asked the wise woman once more if she would give him the answers to his questions.

“Your questions have already been answered,” she replied.

“But how?” the king answered, confused.

“How?” repeated the wise woman. “If you had not taken pity on me yesterday and helped me instead of returning him, that man would have ambushed you, maybe even killed you on the trail. Thus, the most important time was when you were digging in my garden; and I was the most important person; and the most important thing to do was to help me. Later, when the man came running up to us, the most important thing was to care for him. If you had not bound up his wounds, he would have died without making peace with you. Thus, the most important person was that man, and what you did was the most important thing, and the right time was the time when you were doing it.

“You see,” the wise woman continued, “the most important time is always the present moment. It is the only time that is important because it is the only time that we have any control over. The past we can only look back on and wish that we had done it differently. The future we can only imagine. Then, the most important person is always the one you are with in that present moment, and the only important deed is the deed that does what is best for others.”

At last the king understood, and so he thanked the wise woman and returned home, to rule wisely one moment at a time.

The only time over which we have any control is the present moment. If we live well in this moment — mindful of our response to it, acknowledging our situation, recognizing our life for what it is, and accepting reality on its own terms — then all present moments can be well lived, too.

May it be so.