



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“This Thing Called Presence,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on March 1, 2015

Our worship theme for this month is brokenness. But I have to confess that when I started thinking about this, I wasn't so sure. In this time when many of us are feeling worn down by this winter, when spring can still seem a long way off, couldn't we have the worship equivalent of a few weeks in Florida? And the answer is yes—but not quite yet!

And this past week, as I hung out with brokenness, I realized this is right I need to be. We live in a world in which so much gets broken—just listen to the news. And on the relational level, we know too well the ways we hurt and disappoint one another, don't we? You remember the ways people have hurt and disappointed you. And you remember the ways you have done this to others, yes?

Some of you know that my wife's mother died about a month ago. Tracey and I are so grateful for your kind expressions of sympathy. I've been reminded how something as simple as a card with a few heartfelt words can mean so much in that time of loss.

But recently I became aware that I had not been as present to my wife in her grief as I could have been. She told me so. And when she told me, I didn't respond so well. I tried to defend myself, when what she really needed was for me to just hear her and be there for her. I'm not proud to admit this, because this is something that I'm supposed to know how to do; how to be present to people, especially when they find themselves in hard places.

So I'm preaching a sermon today that I need to hear. I imagine it might be one you need to hear too. And it's a good time for this. We're in the season of Lent right now, a time to look inside, to pay attention to the shadows, as well as the light; to tell the truth that we are imperfect people living in a broken world.

There's a poem I've shared with you before, called “What I Learned From My Mother,” by Julia Kasdorf. Listen to what it says about showing up for people in times of grief and loss:

I learned from my mother how to love
the living, to have plenty of vases on hand
in case you have to rush to the hospital
with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants
still stuck to the buds. I learned to save jars
large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole

grieving household, to cube home-canned pears
and peaches, to slice through maroon grape skins
and flick out the sexual seeds with a knife point.
I learned to attend viewings even if I didn't know
the deceased, to press the moist hands
of the living, to look in their eyes and offer
sympathy, as though I understood loss even then.
I learned that whatever we say means nothing,
what anyone will remember is that we came.
I learned to believe I had the power to ease
awful pains materially like an angel.
Like a doctor, I learned to create
from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once
you know how to do this, you can never refuse.
To every house you enter, you must offer
healing: a chocolate cake you baked yourself,
the blessing of your voice, your chaste touch.

This is something you in this congregation already know how to do very well. Last Sunday I shared a card from Ron Berry, who's been undergoing a long series of chemotherapy treatments for cancer, and he had written to say how much your cards and visits and prayers have meant to him in this difficult time.

So today I may be preaching to the choir, because you are already pretty good at showing up and being present. But in a world that sometimes can seem to be spinning out of control, when the brokenness can threaten to overwhelm us, I do think we need to be reminded that there are things we can do to be of use, ways we can abet healing and wholeness. And this starts and ends with presence.

About a month ago, David Brooks wrote a column in *The New York Times* called "The Art of Presence."¹ He told the story of the Woodiwiss family, who suffered some hard losses: the death of a young adult daughter while working in Afghanistan and the serious injury, not long after, of their other daughter. He tells what they learned from those difficult experiences, and his column is so good and helpful that I've made copies, and left them at the back of the sanctuary and on the food table at coffee hour. Here are the main things Mary and Ashley Woodiwiss say they learned when their lives were broken open.

First, the importance of people showing up. They were moved deeply by those who came offering love and support, especially when this came from unexpected people and places. And they were surprised by the close friends who didn't come, who were too "afraid or too busy" to show up.

When bad thing happen, they say, "Don't compare, ever. Don't say, 'I understand what it's like to lose a child. My dog died, and that was hard, too.'" Even if the comparison seems germane, don't

¹ David Brooks, "The Art of Presence," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2014, available online at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/21/opinion/brooks-the-art-of-presence.html?_r=0. The seven paragraphs including and following this citation are based on Brooks' column; quotation marks indicate direct quotes.

make it. Each trauma should be respected in its uniqueness. Each story should be heard attentively as its own thing.”

But they say do bring food, and write cards, do practical things that can help. Sitting down to eat a meal that someone prepared for you with love and care, this can be more of a balm than you, the cook, will ever know.

“Don’t say it’s all for the best or try to make sense of what has happened.” Don’t say “You’ll get over it.” People who are grieving need the time and space to become accustomed to their new reality. They need friends who will companion them in their new landscape of brokenness. When we try to fix them, when we push them to move on too quickly, we are only showing our own discomfort with what has been broken.

This is an invitation to do our own work. To quietly be mindful of our own discomfort, and stay there, as best we can. The good news is that you can build your capacity for being present to pain and brokenness, the same way that time on the treadmill will strengthen your heart and lungs. Who among us doesn’t want to be more compassionate? Which simply means “to suffer with.” That’s the invitation and challenge of brokenness—to be present to it, in the midst and the mess of it.

David Brooks concludes that what “these experiences (of brokenness) call for is a sort of passive activism.” We have a tendency,” he says, “especially in an achievement-oriented culture, to want to solve problems and repair brokenness — to propose, plan, fix, interpret, explain and solve. But what seems to be needed here is the art of presence — to perform tasks without trying to control or alter the elemental situation. Allow nature to take its course. Grant the sufferers the dignity of their own process. Let them define meaning. Sit simply through moments of pain and uncomfortable darkness. Be practical, mundane, simple and direct.”

This practice of presence doesn’t apply only to times of grief and loss. We’ve taken the first steps here to have deeper conversations about race. One of the challenges for those of us who find ourselves in the dominant group, whether that’s about race or class or gender or sexual orientation, is to hold open a space where those who have been oppressed can share their experiences. This can be uncomfortable. What’s needed is the courage and the commitment to sit with your own discomfort; to be present to it, when you’d rather argue, or cover your ears, or run out of the room.

Woody Allen once said, “80 percent of life is showing up.” But this is easier said than done. To really show up means being present emotionally and spiritually as well as physically. Present to what is going on, even when it’s hard. Especially when it’s hard. The good news is that our presence is more of a balm, is more healing, is more powerful than we imagine.

In words that I put at the top of today’s order of service, David Brooks quotes Ashley Woodiwiss: “This thing called presence and love is more available than I had thought. It is more ready to be let loose than I ever imagined.”

And isn't that what we are called to do? What we are privileged to do? In this world of brokenness, to offer our selves: our souls and bodies, in the service of healing and wholeness. To let loose this thing called presence, so that it—so that we—might help to heal and bless our broken world.

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what anyone will remember is that we came.

I learned to believe I had the power to ease
awful pains materially like an angel.

Like a doctor, I learned to create
from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once
you know how to do this, you can never refuse.

To every house you enter, you must offer
healing: a chocolate cake you baked yourself,
the blessing of your voice, your chaste touch.²

There is a land, not far from here, where healing and wholeness happen. This is what we are made for. This where we are headed. Come and go with me, my friends, to that land, where we're bound.

Amen.

² Julia Kasdorf, "What I Learned From My Mother."