



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Live Free or Die,”
a sermon given by Julie Lombard
on October 12, 2014

On Tuesday, I sat behind a red light on my way to another exciting visit to Market Basket sandwiched in a long line of cars. As we waited, I watched as a bald eagle circling over the Merrimack River. I completely forgot about the traffic or that there was a red light ready to change. As the light turned green a horn wailed. It startled me out of my American Dream. When I came to, I noticed that none of the cars in front of me had begun to move. We were all reveling in the sight of that eagle soaring overhead.

I love living in NH. It was where I was born, raised, got married to the boy next door, and it's where we started a family of our own. I have lived other places, but I was never away for long. It's part of who I am. I am a “live free or die” gal.

NH hasn't always been a place where eagles soar over rivers. If you told me as a child I would someday see a bald eagle in NH, I wouldn't have believed you. I would have replied, “You mean Alaska, right?” I thought bald eagles were gone forever, I was wrong. After many years of cleaning up our environmental acts, they returned. That's not always the way life goes, sometimes things are gone forever, but sometimes under the right conditions, new life returns.

I bring all this up because as a live free or die kind of gal, I believe we have a choice to live free or die just like that eagle. In 1971, the year I was born, the NH state legislature mandated the phrase “Live Free or die” appear on all non-commercial license plates, replacing the word “Scenic.” NH is certainly scenic, but I have never met a person who liked NH for solely for it being scenic. When folks hear that I am from NH they tell me, “I love your state motto”. Who can blame them? It's gotchutzpa. After all, don't we all admire that? It's not afraid to be who it is. I have to tell you, NH's population grew in the 1970s and I half wonder if it was because people were attracted by the idea of not being afraid of who they are.

Why is it we can admire NH's trait of being authentic in its motto while we fear living authentically ourselves? The reading earlier said, “It is one thing to invite transformation for the sake of growth, improvement, and new possibilities. It's another thing to feel so dissatisfied with yourself that no amount of change could possibly convince you that you are worthy and lovable.” Do you feel worthy and lovable? Do you, like the author of the reading, keep a mental tally constantly recording all the ways you've messed up? I have, it's not healthy. That kind of self-loathing, if you're not careful, can kill you. Can someone actually die from self-loathing? I think you can and I think people do every day. The question is what can we do to reverse this kind of self-loathing death? What can we do to live free?

I wish I had all the answers for you, but I don't. I struggle with these questions just as you do. Everybody does. At times like these I turn to the experts to help me better understand these ideas. In this case, I turned to Brene Brown the author of Daring Greatly: how the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way to live, love, parent, and lead.

The title of the book written in 2012 was taken from a speech Theodore Roosevelt delivered in Paris, France on April 23, 1910. This is the passage that made the speech so famous:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles; or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly."

The author of Daring Greatly believes that vulnerability is not the knowing of victory or defeat; it is understanding the necessity of both. She thinks vulnerability is not weakness; instead it dares us to show up, face our fears, and to have the courage to let ourselves be seen as we truly are.

Brene Brown has a Ph.D. in social work and before writing Daring Greatly she's wrote The Gift of Imperfection. She also gave a TED talk on subject of vulnerability. She's an expert on vulnerability not only because she's lived a vulnerable life, but because she's researched it at length hoping she would find a way out of it. Studying this topic she's learned that connection is why we are here in this life. We humans are hardwired to connect with others; it gives our lives purpose and meaning. Without connection, there is suffering. At the heart of suffering are heartbreak, betrayal, shame, and the fear of not being worthy... worthy of love, acceptance, and belonging.

In The Gift of Imperfection Dr. Brown came up with a list of things to cultivate in our lives. She says to cultivate authenticity, self-compassion, gratitude and joy, cultivate creativity, play and rest, calm and stillness, and meaningful work. In order to cultivate these things she urges us to let go of these things; let go of what people think, perfectionism, powerlessness, the need for certainty, let go of comparison, productivity as self-worth, anxiety as a way of life, and let go of self doubt.

That's easier said than done, but if we remain on the self-loathing track too long then we are ultimately choosing death. Nobody wants that kind of death. Don't we want to live wholeheartedly? Yes, it's true, we all have to die someday, but let my death come from death by chocolate before it's ever death by self-loathing. Let us live knowing we are imperfect and vulnerable. It's ok to be afraid, but that doesn't change the fact that we are brave people, worthy of love and belonging.

Everybody struggles with life, so why does it seem that some people are able to deal with these struggles better than others? Dr. Brown believes the individuals that are able to hold on to the belief that they are worthy are the ones that are not blown over by life's many trials. They have found a way to cultivate their worthiness and practice it regularly.

Do you need to get into worthiness shape? Have you heard of taking the gratitude challenge? Maybe you've seen it on Facebook or taken it yourself. It's a daily practice listing what you are grateful for. Do it enough days in a row and it can change the way you see the world. It can give you a new way to look at life.

So, could we do that for authenticity and what about creativity? When is the last time you recorded a running list of your play or rest? Or are you too busy listing what you're not doing rather than what you are doing? Business is not going to bring us the feeling of being worthy of love or belonging, it's just going to make us tired and cranky. Take it from me, I have tried to win the cranky contest and the metal of honor weighs too heavy. It's not worth it; no award is worth giving up a life defined by courage, compassion, and connection.

Leaning in to vulnerability is the key, not hiding it away or wearing some kind of armour that will protect us from all that may harm us. But isn't that scary to lean into what we fear?

I am a white water paddler. I take my kayak and paddle on rivers with rapids. I'm not as good as my husband, but I'm good enough. I know that when I come to a hole I should use caution. A hole is the part of the rapid where the water pours over a rock and dives deep to the bottom of the river before it returns to the top again and is pulled back towards the rock. Getting stuck in a hole can be a dangerous thing; it can hold you and it can flip you around making you lose control. So, what should a kayaker do if they are heading for a hole? Paddle away, right? Yes, some holes you definitely want to stay away from, but in some cases it's better if you actually lean into it. Yes, towards the rock and unpredictable water. It sounds counter-intuitive, but actually it gives you the more control.

Believe it or not, there are some kayakers who purposely paddle into holes and surf them for the fun of it. I've done it to a small hole called Angel's Kiss. Even still, it was scary at first. I wanted to know what was going to stop me from crashing my head on that rock that made Angel's Kiss a hole. I spent a long time in the calm waters near that hole before I entered it willingly. I watched as others went in and I witness the leaning in that was necessary to keep control. Sure, I saw many people dump their boats, but it was clear by the time I entered the hole myself, leaning in was the key to success. Just like leaning in to our vulnerability is the key to daring greatly and living authentically.

Don't we all want to believe that it's perfectly okay and even wonderful to be exactly who we are? Sure, we can get better and improve ourselves because it's a beautiful thing to embrace life-long growth. Life is transformation, staying static is a kind of death. Let us realize we are beautiful just as we are; it's paramount that we live as our authentic selves.

Be courageous, my friends. You only get one life. Be compassionate, reach out with love, and forge connections as deep as you can. You are worthy of love. You belong here. In the silence of your heart when you are alone and ask yourself whether to live free or die, I challenge you to respond boldly to live an authentic life.

May it be so. Amen.