



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Strong-Souled, for the Living of These Days,”
a sermon given by Rev. Frank Clarkson
on July 19, 2015

I was moved by the beautiful and powerful sermons Bill Taylor and Nancy Rusk have preached here the past two Sundays. Bill spoke about the killings at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston and said that white people in America have to do better at combating racism and being allies to people of color. Nan talked about how an ethic of risk and radical acceptance can help us to be peacemakers and justice-builders.

If you missed either of these sermons, you can pick up a printed copy on the round table in the Murray Room or read them on our website, and you can listen to Bill’s sermon on our podcast—the link for that is printed on the back of the order of service.¹

Today I want to continue the conversation that they started about how we can do a better job of helping to mend what is broken in our world. Thinking about this, about the call that we have as people of faith to repair the world, what in Hebrew is known as *tikkun olam*; and thinking about the enormity of that task, I recently wrote these words in my journal: “This summer I am feeling haunted by my own inadequacy in the face of suffering and injustice.”

I was on vacation when I wrote those words, and it was a nice quiet week at the Rosene’s cottage up on Vinalhaven Island in Maine (which you should bid on at our church auction!). The reading I took on vacation was not exactly what you’d call beach reading. One book was a testimony on being a modern believer called *My Bright Abyss*, by the poet Christian Wiman. Another was an essay Richard Smyth gave me about “Religion without Religion,” a powerful testimony for both religious openness and justice-making. And I finished a book one of my kids gave me, a fictionalized account of the Vietnam war. Light summer reading all around.

This reading left me both inspired and kind of exhausted—it reminded me how high the stakes are, with all the trouble and suffering in our world; reminded how our human nature too often leads us to hurt others and ourselves; reminded me, as I said, of my own inadequacy in the face of suffering and injustice.

The writer E.B. White, who spent much of his later life on the coast of Maine, once said, “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”

¹ <http://uuhaverhill.podbean.com/>

The poet Mary Oliver, who lives in Provincetown, at the tip of Cape Cod, regularly goes out at low tide to walk the harbor beach there. She doesn't think she's going to find anything useful, "No," she says, "I go out simply to notice things—everything and anything. I go looking, across these soft and briny levels, for a more serious reason—for pleasure. For pleasure is necessary to affirmation, and affirmation is the food of the soul. And I would be strong-souled. The better to honor this world, and my little voyage through it."

I hope you are taking pleasure in the simple joys that summer offers. I hope you have ways to affirm and strengthen your soul, and that you practice them regularly, because yes, we ought to honor this world and our little voyages through it. And the truth is, our world needs all the strong souls it can get.

What I want to offer you today is something of a paradox: that one way to strengthen your heart and soul is by practicing being vulnerable. By taking risks, like being more truly yourself; or venturing into uncertain territory, being led to places you did not plan to go.

Near the end of that week on Vinalhaven, I started reading this book by Brené Brown: *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*. Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, where she's spent a decade studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame. What she's learned is the importance of vulnerability in helping us to become who we were born to be.

Who among us didn't grow up hearing things like, "Never let them see you sweat," or "Big boys (or big girls) don't cry," or "Keep a stiff upper lip"? Yes, you have to learn to live in this world. But too often we have taken to heart these messages that say showing your emotions, or asking for help, or, God forbid, asking directions—we're taught these are all signs of weakness. When actually they are signs of strength.

Sometimes people tell me that they find themselves crying here in church. They don't always know why—something about the space, or the music, or a memory perhaps. Though you may find this inconvenient, or even embarrassing, it makes me happy, that you can cry here—that this is a sanctuary where it's safe to do that, where I hope you know your tears are a blessing. And now, thanks to the Caring Ministry folks, we have these handy boxes of Kleenex!

I confess that I don't cry nearly as much as I should. I learned that lesson well, that big boys don't cry. So the place where I feel safest crying is alone in my car. I need practice in being vulnerable too.

Brené Brown says that we are naturally drawn to people who are real and down to earth; who are authentic and therefore, imperfect. We like this in others, so why do we resist practicing it ourselves? Because we want to appear to the outside world that we have it all together, because admitting that we don't makes us feel vulnerable.

Thank God for the places where you don't have to pretend to be anyone other than who you are. Think about twelve step groups, that begin with a confession: "My name is Bill and I am an

alcoholic.” These programs understand that healing and wholeness begin with telling the truth about who you are. I hope this church is a place where you can do that; we can be real with one another; where we don’t have to pretend to be other than who we are.

If you are thinking, “But if they only knew about my drinking or my overeating, my compulsion to shopping or my secret prejudices, they might not like me or welcome me here.” If you ever have thoughts like this, if you ever have fears that you are not good enough, then please hear me. This church is built on the proposition that you are good enough already, that you have inherent worth and dignity. Our Universalist faith says that all are worthy of God’s love, that nobody gets left behind, that we are here to share that love with one another. “Love is the doctrine of this church,” we say. The question is, do you believe it? Can you trust in that this is a place to practice being human, in all your glorious imperfection?

This is not just for your own health and happiness, as important as that is. No, our world needs you to be strong-souled. Especially these days, when there are pressing issues, like the race problem in our country, that need our attention and engagement, if we are ever going to undo the systemic racism that is poisoning our country and leading to the loss of so many black lives.

But are we up to the task? Doesn’t it seem that we as a people have become more fearful, and less daring, than we used to be? More easily distracted and discouraged, more cynical and more vengeful and less generous of spirit? More concerned with our own comfort and safety than with liberty and justice? Have we become more fragile and less resilient?

That’s what Courtney Martin says in a recent essay called “Transforming White Fragility Into Courageous Imperfection.”² It’s about how whites could better respond to the racial challenges we’re facing these days. But Martin, who is herself white, says those of us who are progressives, we want to be seen as the good guys. So we can get defensive when people point out how we are beneficiaries of a system that is rigged to favor whites. “I’m not a racist,” we say, stopping the conversation before it starts. It’s clear that what’s needed right now is people who won’t shrink back when the going gets tough, people grounded enough to realize it’s not all about us, that there are bigger issues at play. We need to have the courage to be vulnerable, willing to risk showing our ignorance and imperfection in service to a greater good.

I’ve made copies of this essay and hope you will take it and read it so we can engage with this work. I also hope you might consider reading Brené Brown’s *Daring Greatly*. Would anyone be interested in getting together later this summer or early in the fall to talk about this book? Its invitation to have the courage to be vulnerable is just what’s needed these days, if we want to live more wholehearted lives, if we want to help heal and bless our world.

Rumi says

This being human is a guest house.

² Article available online at http://onbeing.org/blog/transforming-white-fragility-into-courageous-imperfection/7701?utm_source=On+Being+Newsletter&utm_campaign=5ce75b1839-20150711_rami_nashashibi_Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1c66543c2f-5ce75b1839-65867825#

Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Can we be grateful for whatever comes, trusting that it comes as a guide that will lead to where we need to go? I began by saying that I'm feeling haunted by my own inadequacy in the face of so much suffering and injustice. I can't go it alone. I need your help, your leadership and your companionship in this struggle. We need one another, don't we?

Here's my prayer for these days, words from the great hymn by the Protestant minister Harry Emerson Fosdick, "God of Grace and God of Glory:

Lo, the clouds of evil 'round us hid thy brightness from our gaze;
from the fears that long have bound us, free our hearts to faith and praise.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days.

Fill us with a living vision, heal our wounds that we may be
bound as one beyond division in the struggle to be free.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, ears to hear and eyes to see,
ears to hear and eyes to see.

Amen.