



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Beyond Comfort,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on November 6, 2011

Last week, because of the snowstorm, we didn't have power here. It was dark and chilly, but we had church! It was actually a good day for that, because it was our All Souls service, when we remember those who have died, so we lit more candles and it was lovely. One of the hymns we sang was “Comfort Me,” which is a soothing, comforting song, and appropriate to that day. It makes me glad that many of you find this congregation to be a place of refuge and comfort, where you can lay down your burdens for a while and be refreshed and renewed.

We certainly live in a time where people are looking for comfort. This world can wear you down, particularly in this tough economy. I know about some of the pressures you're under, at work or at home or both. Some of you are taking care of your parents and your children, or grandchildren. Many of you have plenty to be concerned about.

Is it any wonder that our society seems, more and more, to be focused on finding comfort? We seek refuge from the world, if we can, by creating comfortable homes with cushy couches and plush bedding, we crave comfort food, we're drawn to entertainment that's an escape from reality, or a glimpse of “reality” from a safe distance. And there's nothing wrong with this, in moderation anyway. Each of us needs a certain amount of comfort to be grounded, to be sane. I know that I do.

But what I worry about is if we start to think that comfort is the end, the goal. Because if that's the case, then we begin to insulate ourselves from those things that make us uncomfortable. We begin to push away those things we find disturbing, challenging, troubling.

We do comfort pretty well here. But lately I've begun to worry that we might do it too well. That we--and I participate fully in this--have been more interested in creating a community of comfort rather than one of courage.

One of the main reasons I went into the ministry was because of pastoral care. I wanted to be with people at the pivotal moments of their lives, because in those moments the illusions fall away and you're left with what is real. Because of my own history and experience, I came into the ministry inclined to see my job as offering comfort to those in trouble or need. There's an old saying, that the church should “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” and there's truth in that. I got pretty good at the comforting part.

But I've begun to see that comfort alone isn't enough. In a crisis, yes, people need to be seen and heard and comforted. But when you are in a difficult relationship, or struggling to make sense of a tragedy, or seeking to find meaning in what feels like a meaningless life, offering only comfort is shallow and unhelpful. What you need in those circumstances, is encouragement to change and grow. Encouragement-- to find your own strength, your own resilience, your own courage.

Last week, talking about death, I cited as an example the story of Harry Potter, who learned that death is not the worst thing; that betraying his friends or his ideals was much worse. This is what separated him from his enemy, Lord Voldemort. Voldemort was afraid to die, and would do anything to avoid that. But Harry had a deep sense that he was loved, and that made all the difference.

That's what I hope for here--that this church is a place that reminds you who you are--that reassures you, when you forget, that you are worthy of love and respect, that your life is for something, that you do have a part to play. We should be like a refueling station, where you find strength and courage and wisdom and companions for the living of these days. A car needs fuel to run on. But a car is made for the open road, not the garage or filling station. This church does not exist for itself, no, but to be a place where people come for refuge and refreshment, yes, but also for encouragement and challenge to go out to do the work you have been given to do. My mom, who's an Episcopal priest, reminds me, "You're not doing the work of ministry if you're spending too much time in your office."

We are doing our work here, if when you leave, you take the church out with you--if it gives you encouragement to live a more loving, more committed, more whole life. If it compels you to stand on the side of love and of justice. If we can say that the church has left the building, and we are practicing our faith out in the streets, wherever we are called and compelled to be.

A few minutes ago we sang that great hymn, written a hundred years ago, that's known as the Black National Anthem. Written during the time of Jim Crow segregation, it describes the bitter reality of slavery: "stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod, felt in the days when hope unborn had died."¹ Have any of us known that kind of oppression? Our struggles, by comparison, seem small, don't they?

But "Lift Every Voice" is not a lament, it is a hymn of hope and courage. That verse continues, "Yet with a steady beat have not our weary feet come to that place for which our fathers (and mothers) sighed?"

The writer E.B. White 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."

Isn't it a sign of privilege even to be able to choose between spending your time enjoying or improving the world? You are lucky if you can decide whether or not to leave your comfort. Some people don't have that choice.

¹ *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, words by James Weldon Johnson, #149 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

Those of us that do, what are we going to do with our privilege? First, let's acknowledge that we have it. We have gifts and abilities. Are we putting them to use? Are you aware of your own light, and are you letting it shine? Or have you been hiding it under a basket, pretending it doesn't exist, because you are shy or insecure or afraid it's not worth much?

I hope this church will help you to let your light shine! That's why we're here! And yes, I know this can feel risky. Do you know what happens to people who stick their necks out? Did anyone ever warn you about that?

I used to do a lot of downhill skiing. And if you are a skier, you know what it's like to push off at the top of a hill that's a little steep for your comfort. The tendency is to lean back, towards terra firma, because it feels safe to do that. But it's not. Leaning back, your skis shoot out ahead of you, you pick up speed and lose control. But sticking your neck out, literally, out into thin air, getting your weight out over your skis, you find, paradoxically, that you're on solid ground.

Could it be that this posture, sticking your neck out, taking a risk, is actually safer than holding back, and more who we're supposed to be? Franz Kafka said, "You can hold back from the suffering of the world. This is something you are free to do. But perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering you might be able to avoid." I know from experience that holding back is its own kind of suffering. As one who has spent enough of my life dallying in the shallows, sticking a toe in and fretting about what might happen if I jumped, I'm here to encourage you, and myself, to get on with it.

Lately I've been rereading Edwin Friedman, a rabbi who says that we have gotten to a place in our culture where we are more interested in safety than in adventure. And this troubles him, because he believes what made this country great, and what makes human beings great, is our capacity for courage and risk-taking. Next week we'll look at our Unitarian and Universalist traditions, which certainly did not start off as a safe for comfortable alternative, but rather, an adventurous faith, and ask, are we heading in the right direction?

But for now, I want to ask, are you on the Way? I want to be like that person described in our reading² this morning, who is on the Way. Don't you? A person who, "when fallen upon hard times in the world, will not seek out someone who offers refuge and comfort and encourages their old self to survive."

No, We want to seek out, don't we, "companions who will faithfully and inexorably help us to risk ourselves so that we may endure the suffering and pass courageously through it, thus making of it a 'raft that leads to the far shore.'" Yes?

I want to challenge you to take a risk this week. To do something, one thing, that makes you nervous, that you are afraid of; something you feel compelled to do. Speak your truth. Stand by

² "The Way of Transformation," by Karlfried Gras von Dürkheim, available online at <http://www.indranet.com/spirit/transform.html>
The reading we used in church was adapted for clarity and to make it more gender inclusive.

someone who needs you. Take up that spiritual practice or that justice work that's been calling to you.

Do this for yourself. Because, Durkheim said, "only to the extent that we expose ourselves over and over again to risk and discomfort, can that which is indestructible arise within us. In this lies the dignity of daring. The aim of (spiritual) practice is not to develop an attitude which allows us to acquire a state of harmony and peace wherein nothing can ever trouble us. On the contrary, practice should teach us to be open to what perturbs, moves, insults and stretches us - it should help us to let go our search for a comfortable life" so that we can wake up to what is real, so we can bear witness to what is beautiful and what is broken, so we can truly see ourselves and one another.

When you are on the way, you know there is no way to get out of the pain and the suffering of this life. The only way out is through. My hope and my prayer is that we are on the way together, comfortable enough, but not too comfortable. I hope that you are assured of your worth and dignity; aware of your light and eager to let it shine. My prayer is that we are a community going beyond comfort to courage, that we are moving from safety toward adventure, that we are on the way.

Amen.