



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“In the Shadows,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on January 22, 2012

When I was a little boy, I had quite a temper, and a habit of throwing tantrums. Then one day when I was five or six, my Dad said to me, “It’s time you got hold of that temper.” I idolized my father, and he was a man of few words. When he talked, I listened. So I stopped having tantrums. I put my anger away. I put it in that bag that Robert Bly described in our reading today, the long black bag we drag behind us.¹

I grew up in the South in the 1960s. I grew up hearing the words, “Be nice.” I was told, “If you can’t say something nice, then don’t say anything at all.” Like lots of kids, my siblings and I were told that children should be seen and not heard.

What about you? I wonder what you were told, what parts of yourself or which behaviors weren’t acceptable. When you were a teenager, what parts of yourself did your peers make you to put in the bag? I wonder if you would be willing to name some of those things out loud. If we could spend a minute voicing those things that we were told not to do, and not to be, then it could be a way of beginning to let some of those things back out of the bag. And if we all spoke these things at around the same time, you could hear yourself, but it wouldn’t be like everyone in the church would be listening just to you! So are you willing? If so, take a moment to think about what you were told, and what you hid away. And when you’re ready, please name those parts of yourself that someone told you weren’t acceptable or ok.

Now, if you said something, or thought something, hold on to that. Try not to push it away. This week, give yourself the time to hold it, gently, and wonder whether there is a part of yourself that you might be ready to help come out of the shadows, a part you are ready to reclaim.

One thing that saved me, as a child, was getting away from our house. Outside, we pretty much ran free. We took hatchets and knives and went exploring in the woods. We pretended we were soldiers and adventurers. The kids on our end of the street formed an army and we waged an ongoing war against the kids who lived at the other end. My younger brother and I wrestled and fought all the time, until he got bigger than me. Then we stopped.

¹ This reading can be found online at <http://www.mfarnworth.com/360Readings/TheLongBag.htm>, roughly the first five paragraphs.

The point is, I had plenty of opportunities to act out that more aggressive side of myself, in relatively healthy ways. I was lucky. I worry about children these days, who are so much more supervised than we were, who most of the time are in activities led by well-intentioned adults, so they don't get as many chances to run wild and make up their own rules, and learn by making their own mistakes.

It's the middle of January. We have two full months until the first day of spring. The days may be getting longer, but it's still a little soon to tell. I see these next two months as a good time to do some inner work, like touching parts of my own shadow, work that I am less inclined to do on warmer, brighter days.

Might we see these cold winter days, and these long nights, are a gift? As an opportunity to spend some time paying attention to our interior lives. I know some of you struggle with these dark months, and I encourage you to do what it is that helps you get through them. And I wonder if we are too inclined to want to pass them by, or wish them away, rather than going more deeply into the darkness for a while.

Some of the greatest mystics are those who are, as Robert Frost put it, "acquainted with the night." The German Rainer Maria Rilke offers images of the dark as a fertile place, full of possibility. His is not a naive, romanticized view of the shadow, but a hard-won appreciation.

A year before he was born, Rilke's parents lost their first child, a girl. In her grief, Rilke's mother dressed him in girl's clothes for five years, until he went off to school. He later wrote, "I think my mother played with me as though I were a big doll." When he was ten, the pendulum swung the other way, and Rilke was sent to board at a military school, which he found both traumatizing and, at least occasionally, rewarding. By any standard, his was not an easy childhood.

The Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner, whose father took his own life when Buechner was a little boy, talks about being a steward of your own pain. That is, taking what is broken and difficult and not banishing it forever, but rather making something good and useful from it. That's how I understand Rilke's life and work--his poetry is an attempt to redeem what he has suffered, and in the shadows he finds ways to bring into some kind of wholeness the broken parts of his life. Listen to this poem of his:

I love the dark hours of my being.
My mind deepens into them.
There I can find, as in old letters,
the days of my life, already lived,
and held like a legend, and understood.

Then the knowing comes: I can open
to another life that's wide and timeless.

So I am sometimes like a tree
rustling over a gravesite

and making real the dream
of the one its living roots
embrace:

a dream once lost
among sorrows and songs.²

I've said to you before that none of us can get out of the pain and suffering of this life. The only way out is through. And what we often find, when we move into the shadows, is that it is not as dark there as we had feared, and we find, that though part of this is a solo journey, we find companions in the darkness too. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," the psalmist wrote, "I will fear no evil; for You are with me" (Psalm 23:4).

I want to encourage you to explore this idea of a 360 degree personality. I'm not suggesting that we are going to start running everywhere we go, the way little children do, or saying everything that comes to mind, with no filters: "I'm bored. Who is that funny man? What happened to your hair?"

But I do wonder. What if we felt more free to speak our truth? What if we held back less, and shared those parts of ourselves we keep hidden? Any of you feel free to share your voice in worship? Leading the prayer or giving a testimonial or singing in the choir? Would some of you start to lift your voice during the sermon, the way our friends at Calvary Baptist Church do? I know it's not the custom here, but I loved it when I preached over there, how the people would say "Amen," and "All right," and "Well?" There is a liveliness in that back and forth; so I hope you know you don't have to be quiet here, if you don't want to; if something moves you to speak then go for it!

The shadows can seem scary. To spend time exploring your own shadow, those things that you pushed away, because you were ashamed of them, or because someone said they were bad; to bring those things out into the light of day can feel risky. Yes, that's true. But it's not the whole truth. Recovering parts of yourself that you have hidden away, taking things out of that bag you've been carrying all these years, can be liberating. It can even be fun.

Five years ago, when I was the assistant minister over at the North Parish in North Andover, some people in the congregation decided to put on a night of entertainment. A variety show, with skits and singing, just a time to get together and have fun. The couple who were organizing it told me they had an idea for a skit they wanted to write, with a role that would be perfect for me.

It was a take off on the "Pirates of the Caribbean" movies. The part they wrote for me was Captain Frank Sparrow, of the SS Nor' Parish. I was secretly quite pleased to be cast in a role played on the big screen by Johnny Depp, who I understand some people think has a kind of sultry sensuality. No one has ever described me that way! So I threw myself in the role. I found a blousey shirt and bandana, and bought a curly black wig and pirate's hat. To be more authentic, I put a little flask in my hip pocket, and I wasn't afraid to use it. I was a pirate! My wife Tracey did

² Rainer Maria Rilke, a translation by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows, from *Rilke's Book of Hours*.

my makeup. When she was done, she stepped back to admire her handiwork. The black stubble beard she'd given me prompted her to say, "You don't look that much like Johnny Depp." Her eyes twinkled. "You actually look more like Orlando Bloom."

I had such fun in that role. And people seemed to love seeing me play a part so out of character for a minister. But a couple of days later, someone stopping by the church office said to me, in all seriousness, "It must have been hard for you to play that role." I don't remember how I responded. But I thought to myself, "Are you kidding? I loved the chance to let this other part of my self out for a while!"

I got the chance to play that role one more time. When I left that church to come here, they threw a surprise going-away party, that included a reprise role for Cap'n Sparrow. And they gave me this stole. It has these beautiful fish on one side. But on the back, on the shadow side, if you will, it tells another story.

You probably can't see it from where you sit, but the fabric on this side is pirate ships and jolly roger flags. It's the kind of fabric you'd see in a little boy's room. I love it. It reminds me that there is room in the ministry for at least a little pirate too. That there is room in church for playfulness and adventure and fun.

We come in this world, William Wordsworth wrote, "trailing clouds of glory." We're here to live into our wholeness, into as many of those 360 degrees as we can. What parts of yourself have you pushed away? What parts might you let come out and play? My hope and prayer is you will seek and find some of what has been lost, so that you will live a more whole, and more happy, and more holy life.

Amen.