



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“360 Degrees,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on March 17, 2013

When I was a little boy, I had quite a temper. I’d get mad, and red in the face, and storm around like a little terror. Then one day things changed. I still remember it--I was four or five, in the car with my dad, having a tantrum about something. And my dad, who was a man of few words, spoke sternly to me. He said, “Frank, it’s time you got hold of your temper. Throwing tantrums is not something big boys do.”

So I wiped away my tears and swallowed my anger and that was that. I put my anger in that bag which Robert Bly describes; that bag we each drag around behind us, which holds those parts of ourselves that others said weren’t okay.

Early on I learned that feelings were unmanly. I was told to keep a “stiff upper lip,” so I pushed those feelings down deep. Maybe that’s why I had so many stomach aches when I was a child, because I decided to eat my emotions.

My dad wasn’t wrong. To live in this world, you do need to filter your feelings. You have to understand there are acceptable ways to engage with others. Societal norms and boundaries are generally good things, that help us to get along with one another. What would life be like if we ran around throwing tantrums and giving voice to every thought that came into our heads?

But children aren’t capable of the nuanced understandings adults are. They hear what is meant to be helpful as, “Doing this makes you unlovable and unworthy.” And for some of you, it wasn’t nuanced at all, or intended to be helpful. You’ve told me how people and institutions, including churches, told some of you that you weren’t welcome unless some part of yourself changed, or you hid that part away.

Robert Bly is right, isn’t he? There are part of ourselves we suppress or deny, because we’re taught to. We can carry painful memories of this for a lifetime.

I wonder what you are thinking of right now. What part of yourself did you separate from, because someone you loved said it was not acceptable or okay? Anybody want to say that out loud, what you were told not to do or not to be?

If you’re having trouble thinking of what might be in your bag, try this. Think of someone who bugs you, who really gets under your skin. What annoys you about them is probably the fact that

they are living out something that you've suppressed. They trigger that part of you that wants to get out of the bag.

I hope that being here, in this church, helps you to start taking some things back out of the bag. I hope being here helps you to become happier and more whole. Otherwise, what's the point? The test of religion and spirituality is whether it causes you to lead a happier and more helpful life. The feminist theologian Carter Heyward puts it this way: she says "the only theology worth doing is that which inspires and transforms lives."

Of course, we don't all have the same path. What works for one is not right for another. Some of you remembered and got in touch with parts of yourselves through the spiritual direction groups we had here last fall--I know, because I witnessed you telling your powerful stories. Others of you are primarily fed by interpersonal and community connections, by gatherings like our fellowship groups and potluck suppers. Others are nourished by expanding their minds, by reading, discussion and study. Others by taking action. The truth is, we need some of each of these. It's like a balanced diet--though we have different tastes and want them in different proportions--a healthy life engages the mind and the heart, the body and the soul. A healthy spirituality includes both light and shadow, sorrow and joy, action and contemplation.

Starting today, some of us will be fasting for three days. I've done this off and on, over the years, since being introduced to the practice when I was a member of the UU church in Portsmouth. I can't say that I enjoy fasting--it's not the most fun thing to do. But it's not awful either.

I don't do it out of some sense of asceticism or piety. No, I fast because it's good for me--it helps clarify things. It helps me to be in touch with those things I have pushed down or ignored; with what I've put in that bag. I fast because I find it freeing. At the top of our order of service today are words from the prophet Isaiah, criticizing those who fast out of false piety, saying a fast, like any spiritual practice, should set people free: "Is this not the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (Isaiah 58:6).

The UU minister Marta Flanagan says, "We are all hungry people. Usually we fill our hungers with food, with drink, with distractions, with busyness. But these do not ultimately satisfy us." Some nights I come in late from a church meeting, and the first thing I do is look around for something to eat. I stand at the counter and snack mindlessly. My wife says, "Are you hungry?" She knows I'm probably not. I'm hungry for something, and food is convenient and available.

What are you hungry for? Do you know? I fast because letting go of food for three days clears the air around me. I'm forced to sit with my hunger, and pay attention to it, and meditate on it. I'm reminded that one out of seven people in the world doesn't get enough to eat.

Even in a country as rich as ours, with food readily available, does anyone doubt that we are hungry people too? Ronald Rolheiser wrote a book about this, called *The Holy Longing*. He says desire, restlessness and longing are part of the human condition, and that we should pay attention to them, rather than push them away or bury them. He writes,

“Sometimes desire hits us as pain--dissatisfaction, frustration, and aching. At other times its grip is not felt as painful at all, but as a deep energy, as something beautiful, as an inexorable pull toward love, beauty, creativity, and a future beyond our limited present. Desire can show itself as aching pain or delicious hope. Spirituality is, ultimately, about what we do with that desire.”

What if we listened to our deep desires, and followed where they lead?

One year I was fasting, and going without food made me cranky. My wife and I got in an argument, and she said, “You know, if you would just eat a sandwich, this argument would be over!” She was right. She usually is, but I didn’t want to push down my anger any more. Fasting helped to uncover what needed to come out, what I needed to be in touch with.

I don’t want to go around throwing temper tantrums like when I was a little boy, but I’m learning that anger does have its place. I’ve experienced what’s called “fire in the belly,” that comes when something is not right. I’m learning that anger, befriended and channeled, is a powerful source of energy and passion, that can be used for good.

There is so much pressure in this world to conform, to fit in, to deny who you really are. Thoreau said most people “lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.”

You don’t want to live like that! No, the invitation is to reclaim as much of that 360 degree personality, that you were born with, as you can. I’m not saying that we should revert to being children--no, we need as many grownups as we can get! Nor am I advocating for narcissism or selfishness, or saying we should throw away rules and boundaries. There is always the need, in a family, in institutions, in society, for a balance between the needs of individuals and the needs of the community.

But it’s not a zero sum game. Becoming more fully yourself should not take away from anyone else--it actually adds to the mix. Howard Thurman put it this way: “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” What our world needs is for each of us to reclaim as much of those 360 degrees as we can.

Taking it a step further, I’d say that if you aren’t doing this, if you aren’t in touch with who you were born to be, then you’re actually doing harm in the world, to yourself and probably to others. The invitation to each of us, and the challenge, is to take responsibility for our own lives and our own growth and learning. To look inside and reflect on what we find. To claim our own light and our own shadow, rather than projecting it on to others. Especially, to explore and claim those parts of ourselves that we fear are not good enough, those parts that we have pushed away. To welcome them back, gently and carefully, so that we aren’t dragging around a heavy load of regrets; so we don’t get to the end of our days and realize that we haven’t fully lived. You don’t want to go to the grave with your song unsung.

If you were here two weeks ago, when the Boston Gay Men’s Chorus sang, you know what I’m talking about. The air was electric that night with seventy men singing out about their lives and

passions and over two hundred of us giving back that love. There is power and liberation in singing your heart's own song. And doing this, you are a blessing to others.

There are parts of yourself--passions, creativity, talents--that you have to share, and that our world needs. There may be parts of yourself that you put away long ago, that it's time to reclaim. Are there clothes in your closet you've never tried on?

The invitation is to live as fully as you can the life that is your own. That's what we are called to do. To be awake to life, to its beauty and its pain, to do our own work and be in touch with our selves, and with one another, and with the wonder and mystery that surrounds us. To live into as many of those 360 degrees as we are able, so that we will radiate out light and love, and help heal and bless our world.

Amen.