



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Plain as the Nose on your Face,”
a sermon given by Betsy Tabor
on November 21, 2010

“Now I don’t even have my nose!” I couldn’t see David—he was calling from a San Francisco sidewalk, distraught, a big bandage on his face. It turns out his beautiful, important nose had a boo-boo. He’s fine now, but that day he was freaked out: “Everyone’s turning away from me, disgusted!” he said.

I doubt that. Most folks look the other way out of compassion, not disgust. But we don’t like it when people can see our infirmities—a blemish, a limp, a paunch, an illness. And we don’t like it when they can see our troubles—when they know we’ve lost a job, been betrayed by a partner, or even not gotten invited to a party....When people see our vulnerability, see in a little too closely, we feel exposed. We imagine it reflects badly on us, and we can get pretty worked up about that.

I know a smart, strapping high school athlete who burst into tears before a college interview, screaming at his mom: “Anyone can see I’m not ready for this!” It turned out that, despite his many gifts and great height, the source of his pain, his shame, was a smooth face—he didn’t yet have a beard! Because of that, he’d convinced himself, to the point of panic, that he wasn’t college material.

Teenagers don’t corner the market on feeling deficient. This time of year, I recall a story from the kids’ library reading hour about Agnes, a practically bald turkey who was humiliated by her appearance. She’d lost some feathers out in the thicket, and others had been dropping from fright after close calls with a fox. Without her trademark plumage, Agnes was convinced no one liked her anymore. She didn’t like herself anymore. “Don’t even look at me!” she cried to her friends. She refused to go out! Agnes had lost touch with who she was. All of us, even turkeys, can be hard on ourselves. In this story, children find Agnes’s lost feathers and she is restored, at this challenging time of year for turkeys, to her fluffy puffy self.

This morning, I invite you to reflect with me about how easily we let noisy self-doubts pull the rug out from under us. One response to that is to regain our balance by really stopping to notice what this month of November can offer us.

The stories I just told express how much of our suffering is of our own making. When David, the teenager and Agnes convinced themselves they didn’t measure up, they panicked and

lost sight of who they really are. When we crawl into a hole of vulnerability, we feel as if we're losing ground. But we never do lose our ground. We never lose who we really are.

I've always wished Agnes's story ended with her realizing that looks don't matter. But she's a turkey of low self-awareness, and her sense of worth was cured forever once she looked good again! By contrast, you and I judge ourselves all day long. Our inner critic has a knack for it. We guess at what people think of us, then the inner critic goes for the jugular and convinces us that our worst fears are true.): "Betsy, who do you think you are? You just don't have it! You'll never have it! Who cares what you think?" I'll bet that even the most arrived of us are familiar with fears and delusions like these (that is what they are)....

When we give them full rein, they pack a punch. They knock us off balance, off center, and we begin to feel as if we're losing ground...or are completely off the ground, spinning, our worries spiraling bigger and bigger. You might say we get carried away. Carried away from ourselves, from our ground—perhaps carried away from, and apart...from what's holy—from God. Especially this dark time of year. I've recently come to believe that November offers us comfort.

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Listen to the email I got the other day: "Here we are, already in the chill and grey gloom of 'stick season'! Bare trees...against a gloomy sky...over lots of brown!" Whoah.

November reminds me of my life-loving dad. One of the truths he taught us kids was that November is a terrible month. "I hate it," he'd decree, "it's the worst month of the year!" Dad kept busy. He'd go 'til he dropped, take a catnap and then go some more. He liked to say, "Everything worth doing is worth overdoing." I've come to wonder how much the exposed cold quiet of November had to do with his avoidance of it.... After retiring, every November he and Mom would head south to warm-weather friends and "wait it out."

Clear about the awfulness of November, I was stunned one day to learn that it's my friend Rand's favorite month. Incredible! I scribbled down his words: "I really like the cloudy hunkering down that happens in November," he said, "It's the only time of the year you get to see the earth." Then another friend said that Andrew Wyeth, the artist, wrote, "I love to see the bones of the trees." The bones of the earth! The bones of the trees! We gazed out the window that day at the unadorned brown world around us. We reveled in the crown of each individual tree, in how beautiful and extraordinary they were.

After the lush exuberance of summer, we're left with the plain, simple structure of the land—uncovered, exposed. On the one hand, we tremble at that. On the other, these stark days we can find a strength, a beauty in the contours of the earth. We see the ground on which we stand. Author Geneen Roth writes about the holy as an experience of "unruffled peace." We know what that is, right? "Unruffled peace" is the opposite of the mind-spin that throws us so. After my friends spoke about November like poets, "unruffled peace" is how I now think of November's quiet, muted landscape—flat here, rolling there, jagged there. When we stop and really take in the bones of the earth and trees, our minds settle down. We appreciate and settle into a sense of ground, of holding, of holiness. I'm reminded of a prayer my daughter wrote in college about

“coming home to these mountains, to [my school] nestled in their granite arms.” “Nestled in their granite arms”—poetry!

Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron, says to sit with the din of the chatter in our heads and ask, “How can I stay in this moment of discomfort and begin to soften?” Author Mary O’Reilly says, “It’s good...when your ideas quiet down....because [they can] obscure...what we were put on earth to see and feel: the precise hang of a star, the full heft of one’s own body....” As her co-worker puts it: “If you can’t breathe, see the stars, be quiet, what the hell?”

In the piece Pam just read so thoughtfully,¹ the poet paints fall’s last leaves as “exhausted by the ceaseless effort to hang on....What is it,” he asks, “about living things/that we expend so much energy.../clinging to old habits/despite the pain and the discomfort?”

A habit we cling to is believing it when our inner critic puts us down. Just for a minute, let’s put “the worth and dignity of all people” aside-- just for a sec!—what about our own? We don’t use ugly, marginalizing words about others—what is OK about using them against ourselves? About singling ourselves out for hostile treatment?

We live in flat, rolling and jagged times. We get stirred up about things we think define us—our looks, our relationships, what we do, what other people are doing, what they think of us. Like November trees without leaves, like our exposed friend Agnes, when those things aren’t going well, it feels as if part of us has been stripped away. But you know? Times that happens, the next breath comes. And the next. Then a day and another. And we’ve come through it, we’ve grown from it, all along—undeniably—being held. It’s all right. Standing in the November cold, it’s all right. Even when everyone can see when we’ve lost some feathers, it’s all right. Our value, our worth and dignity, is always there. It always will be. It’s our bedrock, our birthright—no matter what our mind tells us, no matter what kind of day we’re having.

Part of our spiritual work is being aware of our self-doubt and doing something about it. When we are able to notice that we’re dissing ourselves, something happens: at least momentarily, our chatter pauses. My teacher Paul Gordon suggests we all have two piles: one is the gigantic pile of all our messy, emotional baggage. The other is a much smaller pile...the pile of our awareness. As we live our lives, we figure things out. Every time we have an insight, our pile of baggage comes down a little, and our awareness grows.

Stopping...and noticing November’s hushed, solid landscape and the distinct shapes of great trees against the sky can help us grow our piles of awareness. November’s unruffled peace can help us turn down the mental noise and reclaim some hushed, solid ground—rediscover some of our own hushed, solid value.

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¹ David Bumbaugh, “Dancing in the Wind,” in *How We Are Called: A Mediation Anthology*, Kirstie Anderson, ed., (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003), p. 25.

I know some of you love the holidays, but I confess that this is a tender place for me, guaranteed to knock me off center. Already, the pump is primed for my inner critic: “You can’t get it all done! You’re too disorganized! You’re in trouble! You can’t take the heat! The music, the crowds, the lists, the malls....What makes you think you of all people can pull it off? It’s gonna get the best of you! Always does!” Oy vey!

Fellow travelers on the path to awareness, fellow shiverers in the November cold, fellow KMART shoppers quaking with crazy expectations of ourselves for the next few weeks, let’s notice when we are feeling rattled and aren’t cutting ourselves enough slack. Let’s notice when we feel like we’re losing ground. When we get down on ourselves...may the unique, majestic crowns of November’s trees remind us and re-kindle in our hearts a sense of our uniqueness and our intrinsic worth, just the way we are.

Let us dip into the unruffled peace of November. Let us be held in its depth. In this season of Wyeth’s beautiful bones of the earth, let us hunker down and appreciate the structure of New England’s bare hills and valleys. Let us appreciate what holds us—from the pew in which we sit, to the ground beneath our feet, to the mass of bedrock beneath us all.

May we sense our own spiritual ground—true, solid, real. Always there. We have our value, our worth and our dignity. We always do. Plain as the nose on our face.

Amen.