



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“The Way Less Traveled,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on June 15, 2014

If you are one of the people who took on extra responsibility during the four months I was on sabbatical, I want to thank you. I’ve been trying to do this in person, but I don’t know about all that you did while I was away. Thank you to everyone who does what they can to make us a welcoming, caring faith community.

Those four months came at a good time for me. It’s my ninth year in ministry, and I needed that sabbatical more than I knew. The winter months are particularly good for the kind of quiet inner work I was hungry for; to say nothing of the fact that I got away in January to a place where it was summer and there were rivers with trout in them!

The timing of it all seemed pretty perfect: leaving in January when winter was starting in earnest, coming back in May, when spring would be already underway. What could be better?

It’s so good to be back. But it hasn’t been easy. I should have known this. Leaving or coming back, any kind of transition, can be hard. I was naive. I thought, “It’s going to be May! Everything is easier at this time of year.”

Except when it isn’t. We’ve had deaths in our congregation and in the wider community that called me to jump right back into this good and hard work. There have been hard stories to hear, and conversations to attend to, and a budget to wrestle with. The blessing in all this is that the sustenance and depth I found on sabbatical has stayed with me and kept me grounded when I needed it.

That’s why it’s good to be part of a faith community like this one--so you have spiritual grounding and resources that nourish and sustain you, especially in hard times. So you’re in touch with what grounds and sustains you, when things get tough.

I know about some of your pain and struggle, because you’ve told me. Who among us hasn’t known hardship and disappointment, pain and loss? We can affirm, can’t we, what Buddhism says is the first of four noble truths: that life is challenging, that everyone suffers.

The problem is, we forget this! Buddhism’s second noble truth is that the cause of our suffering is our mind’s response to difficulty, our resistance to the truth that life is hard. We live in a culture that doesn’t understand this--that tries to convince us that we can buy protection from trouble.

That there must be a pill we can take, a car we can drive, even an insurance policy we can buy, that will keep us safe and happy.

But you know, don't you, that this isn't true. Our loved ones get sick and die. Our bodies fail us and we are reminded of our own mortality. We worry about our children, who are vulnerable to all kinds of trouble. To say nothing of the bad news we hear every day.

The question is, how are we going to deal with this? In the past, my inclination has been to mourn and offer condolences. To say, "I'm so sorry for your loss and trouble." And this is not a bad place to start. It helps, doesn't it, to know you're not in it alone, to feel you are companioned by love and care. It's a blessing that people show up when you need them.

But empathy is not enough. We need to develop our own strength and courage. We need to face difficulty and more actively engage it. On my sabbatical I regularly read Rilke's "Morning Prayer," which was our reading today. His words ring true for me:

"Aren't you in harmony with nature when you choose (what's hard)? Don't you think the seed would find it easier to stay in the earth? Don't the migrating birds have it hard, and the wild animals who have to fend for themselves? Life itself is what's hard. And you want to live, don't you?"<sup>1</sup>

His words challenge us to engage life directly, including the hard parts. Our culture used to know this, but now, not so much. We're told there's a way out of the pain of life, even that we can run away from trouble. And who wouldn't like to believe that? But it's not true. It never has been. The only way out is through.

Rainer Maria Rilke knew about this first hand. After his infant sister died, his mother was in mourning for years, and the child Rilke must have felt his own guilt that he had survived. For years Rilke's mother dressed him as a girl, trying to keep alive the daughter she had lost. Rilke's becoming a poet, and his engagement with the shadow side of life, was certainly a way to work through the pain and suffering that began in his early years.

The only way out is through. Jesus knew this. That's what he's talking about in the words I put at the top of today's order of service: "The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matt. 7:14).

And you want to live, don't you?

I have to confess that I haven't yet achieved what Rilke proposes: that you love what is hard. But I'm trying. And that's what I offer you today, this challenge I have also set out for myself: to embrace the difficulties that come our way, to love what is hard.

I'm not proposing this, and I hope you don't hear it, as any kind of masochism or self-flagellation. Life is hard enough; it doesn't help to beat yourself up. No, what I'm suggesting is that we learn

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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, "Morning Prayer" from *The Inner Sky*, available online at <http://iheartverbs.blogspot.com/2011/05/read.html>

and live what mystics and wise people have known throughout time, that life is hard; and, we are up to the challenge. It is in facing life's difficulties head on that we will be transformed, made capable of embracing, even loving, what comes our way.

Listen again to Rilke:

"Your duty is to love what's hard. That you carry the weight doesn't say much, you have to rock it in its cradle and sing it to sleep and be there when it needs you, and it can need you at any moment. You have to be so ready to help, so gentle and kind, that you spoil it, spoil your difficult thing like a child, so that it can no longer exist without you, so that it depends on you."

These words remind me of the work of contemporary psychologist Miriam Greenspan, who's written a book about the healing that comes through the hard work of befriending our dark emotions: grief, fear and despair.<sup>2</sup>

All this can sound like heroic individualism, but it's not. Yes, you have to do some of this work on your own. But you need companions, and help is available, if you seek it. This week, one of you told me how she was in a difficult place this winter, and her usual resources weren't available. But she found, in this congregation, people and practices that helped her, that made a real difference when she needed it.

How many of you remember the book *The Road Less Traveled*, which came out in 1978? It was a groundbreaking book, pointing out the need, in our age, for greater spiritual and psychological maturity. In the first paragraph author Scott Peck says

"Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult--once we truly understand and accept it--then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."<sup>3</sup>

This isn't that different from what Buddhism says about suffering. Franz Kafka puts it this way: "You can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world," he says, "that is something you are free to do and it accords with your nature, but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could avoid."

Holding back, trying to avoid the fact that life is hard, is its own kind of suffering. The invitation is to jump in, with both feet. You want to live, don't you?

My friend and colleague Kim Crawford Harvie, minister of Arlington Street Church in Boston, preached a beautiful sermon about this. She said,

"After my friend Sylvia gave birth to her fourth child in five years, she climbed up on a step stool in her kitchen and painted on the rafters, 'This too shall pass.' We think that people show up at church because their kids have started asking questions about God or death, or we're afraid they

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<sup>2</sup> Miriam Greenspan, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear and Despair*.

<sup>3</sup> M. Scott Peck, M.D., *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*.

will. Or we want them to be raised with something, whatever that means. I think parents show up because no one told us how hard it was going to be; we're overwhelmed by the relentlessness of raising these little peeps, who, after all, arrived without operating instructions. I don't know anyone who woke up one day and said, 'I think I'll go to church because life's a party and it's just one more way to keep the party going.' We come because when the going gets rough, we're looking for some relief, some encouragement that we can do it. Some company and a little enlightenment would be nice too."<sup>4</sup>

Kim quotes Bo Lozoff, founder of the Human Kindness Project, who says, "We have a saying around Kindness House, the community where I live: 'You can do hard.' The reason that we say this is that, in our modern era, the words 'It's too hard' have become an anthem for giving up. Have an ache or pain, reach for a pill; get depressed after losing a job, take Prozac for a while.

He says, "'You can do hard' is one of my community's ways of reminding us that we need not run away in fear just because something is greatly challenging. It might be daunting, but we can do daunting. It might even be scary, but we can do scary. No matter how bad it is--and it could be very bad for a while--we can do it... We can do hard."<sup>5</sup>

This is the way less traveled. This is why we are here. To encourage one another, to be stronger and more loving and more courageous than we think we can be. To get to the point where we love what is hard, because it is just part of life. And we want to live, don't we?

Kim Crawford Harvie reminds us: "Diamonds are just coal that has done well under pressure... We can do hard."

Life calls to us, and says, "Jump in with both feet. Live the life you have been given. Be open to the pain, and the joy, that comes your way." Life says, "Come and go with me to that land where we're bound."

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Kim Crawford Harvie, "Doing What Comes Hard," sermon given October 14, 2012, podcast available online at <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/asc-sermon-podcast/id95710635?mt=2>

<sup>5</sup> Bo Lozoff, *It's a Meaningful Life: It Just Takes Practice*, quote available online at <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/books.php?id=2131>