



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Lent and the Stewardship of Pain,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on March 20, 2011

We just sang, “For all that is our life, we give our thanks and praise...” Do we really mean that? Were you paying attention to verse number three? “For sorrow we must bear, for failures, pain and loss, for each new thing we learn, for fearful hours that pass: we come with praise and thanks...”¹ We gave thanks for some things folks usually try to avoid. I love that this hymn includes these things because the way to make our own days glad is to be present to the pain as well as the joy, to understand that it is all part of a whole and a holy life.

Frederick Buechner asks, “What does it mean to take care of, take care with, the hurtful things that happen to you? How do you go about being the steward, of all things, your pain?”²

We are in the church season of Lent, that period of time between Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday, and Easter. In some traditions people go to church on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, to get a bit of ashes smudged on their foreheads and to hear the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Lent is a season of preparation, the same way Advent is. The word Lent comes from an Old English word that means lengthen, as in the lengthening of days this time of year. I look at Lent as a opportunity to do some good spiritual work, a time to do some interior work while the weather is still cooperative for that. I’m not saying that you can’t do good spiritual work in the summer--you can--but in my experience the brighter days of spring and summer are not the best times to look into the shadows. I know some of you are really ready for spring, but I encourage you to hang on and be here now.

Lent is a good time to be open to your pain and loss. You don’t have dawn without nighttime, you don’t get spring without winter, or Easter without Good Friday. Lent is a time to look into the shadows, to touch what is painful or troubling and work with it, to begin to heal the places you are wounded, so you can move into the light of spring and the joy of Easter.

¹ *For All That is Our Life*, #128 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, words by Bruce Findlow.

² The morning reading (and the inspiration for the sermon title) are from Frederick Buechner’s essay “Adolescence and the Stewardship of Pain,” found in *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*.

I saw my spiritual director just before Lent began, and our conversation led her to give me a short article she was carrying in her bag. The author, Christine Valters Painter, says we need to tell the truth about the pain in our lives if we are ever going to move through it. But we live in a culture that has little appetite for this, that tells us “to move on, to get over it, to shop or drink our way through sorrow... Even our churches,” she says, “often try to move us too quickly to a place of hope without fully experiencing the sorrow that pierces us.”

I’ll ask you the question she poses in her essay:

“What is the sorrow that you carry with you today? Is it because of personal loss? A death, a job loss, a broken relationship, or an illness? Is it sorrow over the war that rages on thousands of miles from us? Is it because of the 18,000 children who will die today because of preventable hunger? Is it the ongoing racism that devastates communities or the religious hostilities that divide nations? Is it the thousands of people who have died as a result of the earthquake in Haiti (or the one in Japan)?

“I invite you to take just a moment to be in touch with the grief that you carry with you.”³

Last Sunday morning, as many of you were gathered here, I was on a plane flying out of the U.S. to visit my father. He’d been asking me to come see him for over a year, and I’ve been putting it off. The last time I went was six years ago, and that experience was so painful I had no particular interest in repeating it.

When I was a child, my father was a successful lawyer, a leader in our church, a respected member of the community. I was named after him, and when I grew up, I was going to be just like him. He was my hero.

That was a long time ago. When I was in my mid-20’s I got a call one day telling me that my father was in trouble. He had embezzled a lot of money from his clients, money they had entrusted to him. Unknown to any of us, he’d gotten himself into debt. He took his client’s money and then lost it in an investment scheme. Most of that money belonged to the father of his best friend from childhood.

The story played out for months in the Charlotte paper because it was a dramatic tale of one man’s fall from grace. My father had been president of the Bar Association and was from a respected legal family: his father was a judge, and his grandfather had been a justice on the North Carolina Supreme Court. At the trial my dad pled guilty and was sentenced to nine years in prison. Fairly soon he was granted work release, which meant he went to a job during the day and back to jail at night and on weekends, and after a few years he was paroled.

I hoped his punishment would set my father straight; that he would try to make amends for his wrongs, but that never really happened. Ten years ago, about the time I was getting accepted into seminary, he phoned one day to tell me he was in trouble again, this time for his part in a

³ Christine Valters Painter, “Ash Wednesday: Practice Truth-Telling,” available online at <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Ash-Wednesday-Practice-Truth-Telling-Christine-Valters-Painter-03-01-2011.html>

fraudulent investment scheme. On the day he was supposed to turn himself in, he fled the country to avoid going back to prison.

Lent is typically associated with penitence and fasting, with giving something up, like sweets or swearing, or these days, Facebook. But I'm convinced these forty days are better spent paying attention to what is broken in our lives so we might be stewards of our pain.

Frederick Buechner says that there's no shame in burying your pain, that sometimes that's the only way one survives. But, he says, "it is not a way of growing."

"The alternative to ignoring your pain," he says, "is of course to be trapped in it." It's to be a perpetual victim, using your pain as an excuse for your failures and shortcomings. It's to be one who is always saying, "If only that terrible thing hadn't happened... then I might have made something of my life."

You can bury your pain, or be a victim of it. Or you can be a steward of your pain. But you may be thinking, "Why would I willingly do that? It hurts!"

I know it does. I also know that when it comes to pain, grief and loss, the only way out is through. You don't lessen your pain by running away from it or using it as a crutch, you only extend your pain by doing that. To be a steward of your pain is to "endure the suffering and pass courageously through it, thus making of it a 'raft that leads to the far shore.'"

The invitation of this season is to embark on this way of transformation; to face your pain, to stand in its presence as best you can, to work with it. So you can begin to transform that pain into something less hurtful and more helpful, and perhaps even into something beautiful.

I know some of your stories. You've told me of the brokenness in your lives and how you are trying to move toward healing and wholeness. I am humbled by the courage that some of you have shown in facing your troubles, and the ways you are redeeming hurtful and difficult experiences, transforming them through your sweat and tears. Helen Keller said, "Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it."

I put off visiting my father because I was angry at the ways he had let me down, and I didn't want to reward his running away. More than that, I didn't want to be reminded of my disappointment and shame and loss. It was with me often enough--I didn't need to see it up close.

I decided to go back because it was time. It was past time. He turned 80 almost a year ago, and this could be the last time I see him. Maybe also because I was tired of not facing the situation head on. He ran away, but I don't have to. I told my spiritual director that I saw this trip as part of my Lenten practice. I went there expecting it to be painful, and only wanting to show up and face that pain directly. I went there with the intention of letting go of my attempts to fix my father or his cruddy situation.

The blessing of low expectations is that things are sometimes better than you fear! And that was the case this week. It was about as good a visit as it could be. With no help from my father, I found a kind of healing from a wound that I've been carrying for a long time now.

Each of the three days I was there I went for a run first thing in the morning. The second day, storm clouds were streaming in as I ran back toward my hotel. As raindrops began to fall, I stood outside and prayed that they might wash over me, and bless me. That they might wash away my regrets, my disappointments, and my expectations of my dad, so that I might be able to love him as he is. I stood there and let it wash over me until I was soaked to the skin by that warm tropical rain.

I remembered the prayer by the minister and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr that is familiar to many of you:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

As odd as it may seem, I'm grateful for this painful journey I've been on for twenty five years now. Other than the unconditional love I have known, nothing else has had a greater influence on my life as a father and a minister.

I hope I haven't shared too much of my own story today. What I want you to hear is that healing is possible. As is reconciliation and forgiveness. It can take a long time, and be a lot of work. But it is possible. And it is what we are meant for. We are not supposed to live lives imprisoned by our pasts, by our failures or by the things we have suffered. We are meant to be free. So we can be awake to the wonder of this day, and of this one precious life we each have been given. We are meant to be healed, so that we might help heal others.

We can't do this all by ourselves. We need one another for courage and support, and we need the grace of God, or Spirit, whatever you want to call it, that amazing grace that is at work in the world, inviting us and encouraging us to be who we were born to be. Let us always give our thanks and our praise for that grace which has brought us safe thus far, that grace which will lead us, if we will let it; that grace which will bring us, all of us, safely home.

Amen.