

# When Hope and History Rhyme

Unity Church

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For more than two years David James Brown's The Boys in the Boat topped the New York Times bestseller list. It is a fabulous story. In the depth of the Depression nine young men most of them working class kids dependent on tough summer jobs to get them through school survived the wind and weather and the cutthroat competition to win a chance to race against not only the arch rivals California Bears but the upper class crews of the Eastern elite. They took the National Championship and then enraged the German warlords by winning gold at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. The writing is taut and rich with detail.

Brown's accounts of the races left me breathless even though I knew the results in advance. But even the combination of great sports writing and snubbing our nose at the Nazis does not explain why The Boys in the Boat stayed atop the list so long.

The boat the nine boys rowed to gold was built by an Englishman by the name of George Pocock. He had grown up along the Thames and learned to row from men who did it for a living. He learned to build and love the sleek, fast boats called sculls from his boat-builder father. He approached his work with the reverence and discipline of one well aware of the spiritual dimensions of the sport. Brown writes: *(Over the years) George Pocock learned to see hope where a boy thought there was no hope, to see skill where skill was obscured by ego or by anxiety. He observed the fragility of confidence and the redemptive power of trust. He detected the strength of the gossamer threads of affection that sometimes grew between a pair of young men or among a boatload of them striving honestly to do their best. And he came to understand how those almost mystical bonds of trust and affection, if nurtured correctly, might lift a crew above the ordinary sphere, transport it to a place where nine boys became one thing—a thing that could not quite be defined, a thing that was so in tune with water and the earth and sky above that, as they rowed, effort*

*was replaced by ecstasy. It was a rare thing, a sacred thing, a thing devoutly to be hope for.*

By now I hope it has occurred to you that you are each and all among those who have survived the wind and the weather long enough to earn your place here in these pews. The boat George Pocock built, the Husky Clipper, is framed in spruce and northern ash with sugar pine keels, gunnels made of Sitka spruce and a washboard of Alaskan yellow cedar. Its sides are 3/8 inch red cedar varnished and hand-rubbed to reduce drag to the barest minimum. It is 60 feet long and less than 2 feet wide. The boys had to learn to bring their full strength to bear while maintaining their balance in a long, narrow, flat-bottom boat. An apt analogy for church don't you agree.

Truth be told much as I love the image of the church as a sleek fast-moving vessel with a seasoned self-disciplined crew we know full-well most of the time it just isn't true. Most of the time we're just getting by. Most of the time we have do the

best we can with what we've got. There are no tryouts for this team. And yet there are still moments when effort is replaced by ecstasy. There are still times when hope and history rhyme. The question for today is what are some of the ways of being together that will help us to nurture the "mystical bonds of trust and affection" that prepare us to respond when once in a lifetime justice does rise up and ask for all we have to give.

*There is a thing that sometimes happens in rowing that is hard to achieve and hard to define, Brown writes...It is called "swing." It only happens when all eight oarsmen are rowing in such perfect unison that no single action by anyone is out of synch with those of all the others...Only then will the boat continue to run, unchecked, fluidly and gracefully between the pulls of the oars. Only then will it feel as if the boat is part of each of them, moving as if on its own. Only then does pain entirely give way to exultation. Rowing then becomes a kind of perfect language.*

What practices, what ways of being alone and together, might we embrace that will usher in that sense of swing, that common rhythm we can rise to when the time comes. Let's set aside our habitual exceptionalism if only for a moment and admit that our nature and our needs are essentially the same as everybody else's. Effective religious communities ask three things of their people. We may not be as young and fit as those boys in the boat but we, like them, have three core obligations. The work begins within so strengthen yourselves. Develop a personal devotional life, which includes but is not limited to weekly worship. Daily practice is the first key living a loving and effective life. When you set aside some time each day preferably first thing in the morning for devotional practice you are choosing life abundant. You are saying to yourself, to your family and to the world around you, "This is my Sabbath time." Poet Christopher Giffen describes the constellation of feelings and possibilities that emerge when we long for and practice that daily personal Sabbath.

## My Soul Longs for the Sabbath

My soul longs for the Sabbath

I want to rest from being put together and up to speed

-I want to fall apart and fall behind.

I want to stop making the same mistakes

-the ones I make when I never stop.

I want to stop hurting people for a time

-and to mourn and to cry.

I want to be suspended between the strong tall towers of  
obligation

-in a hammock dreaming.

I want to float where I have stumbled,

dance where I am chained,

lose where I have found.

I want to say NO where my dutiful YES has chimed forth!

I want to have six devoted days worthy of a holy seventh!

I want to lay down the burden of my ego in the soft, warm  
cradle of tenderness!

I want to know the truth, and to speak the truth and to let it  
destroy me!

I want to stop measuring my worthiness and “love-ability”  
-and be weak and powerful and naked.

I want to release my strength and kneel down  
-still and silent as it crumbles into deep dark soil.

I want to dangle on the branches of my life’s deepest purpose  
-and to ripen into richest color and flavor.

I want to need someone again,  
I want to need someone again.

I want to give away what I have kept,  
fall down from where I have climbed,  
received the deepest blessing of inheritance  
which is mine to share with another

in the wide restful heart of Sabbath.

And I want to stop wanting.

When we realize we want to “give away what we have kept” we need to embrace the second core obligation of living a conscious, mindful, loving and effective life. And so we work to strengthen one other as we learn the how best to be with other people one on one or in small groups. Our hope is that in time we will learn to go deep quickly, especially with strangers.

Listening well, becoming intimate and honest with others is, it seems to me the second key that helps open the door of our hearts. And lastly, when daily practice and intimate conversation inspire compassionate connection, put it work, organize it. Ask yourselves, where are our values needed most? How can I, how can we, best bless the world?

Do these three things, my friends and your beloved church will flourish. Set these three expectations in place for your people and they will become generous out of gratitude instead of duty because their lives, your lives will be transformed. Do these three things and the ministry we share will soar on eagle’s



wings, radiant and holy, so that not only you, but the City we call home and in the truth, the world wide will more richly blest.

Good news my friends. We've come to a moment when our theology is threatening to eclipse our culture. It is deeply troubling and at the same time it is profoundly true that the world we can imagine, the world we long to see, is not the world we live in. Quaker teacher, Parker Palmer asks us to consider what he calls "the tragic gap" between our stated aspirations and our social realities. For 50 years we've rowed through rough water. For 50 years and more well-meaning white liberals have decried the evils of racial disparity even as we've lived our lives steeped in the privilege that disparity provides. We've made some small progress but most of the time it feels like we're rowing hard against the wind.

But I for one believe we've come to a watershed moment as a faith community and as a Nation. The scales have fallen from

our eyes. The Black Lives Matter movement is calling out in ways that we can hear demanding that we old white liberals, especially we old white liberal men, step back, shut up and learn to listen. We are finally beginning to acknowledge the fact that we don't know where to go from here. We've understood ourselves as leaders for so long that we've forgotten how to follow. Much as we love the old ways, much as we love the hymns we sing, much as the way we've always done things around here, the time has come to risk it all in service to a larger love than we have ever known before.

I've been a leader in our little movement now for many years. I'm used to holding forth and being listened to with deference and even, dare I say it, with respect. But more and more these days I find myself dismissed, objectified and set aside. Young radicals, people of color, activists leading the way are prone to make assumptions about us ministers who are old white men. It hurts. It hurts to be dismissed. It hurts to be objectified. It hurts to be ignored. I hate it and it's good for me. It's good for

me to suffer some small taste of the agony people of color have to live with every day. It stings but it keeps me awake. If we're ever going to change, if we're ever going to in James Baldwin's words, "end the racial nightmare, realize our country and change the history of the world," we simply can't go back to sleep.

In closing I want to return to the redemptive power of trust that rare and sacred thing devoutly to be hoped for. But this time instead of the boys in the boat I recall for us all Adrienne Rich's great poem *Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev. Leader of a woman's climbing team, all of whom died in a storm on Lenin Peak, August 1974. Later, Shatayev's husband found and buried the bodies.*) After telling the story of the climb and the terrible storm Rich imagines Shatayev reflecting on the experience:

*In the diary I wrote: Now we are ready  
and each of us knows it I have never loved  
like this I have never seen  
my own forces so taken up and shared  
and given back*

*After the long training the early sieges  
we are moving almost effortlessly in our love*

*In the diary as the wind began to tear  
at the tents over us I wrote:*

*We know now we have always been in danger  
down in our separateness  
and now up here together but till now  
we had not touched our strength*

*In the diary torn from my fingers I had written:*

*What does love mean*

*what does it mean "to survive"*

*A cable of blue fire ropes our bodies*

*burning together in the snow We will not live  
to settle for less We have dreamed of this  
all of our lives*

God bless you and may God bless the ministry we share. May it be so and amen.