

"The Difficult Embrace"

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Unity Church-Unitarian

Worship Leader: Bill Neely
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Minister's Prayer

Behind our closed eyes, let us envision a piece of the Holiness to which we pray this morning.

Humble before the timeless Mystery that nourishes all,
and knowing that we won't grasp the whole of the majesty,
let us nonetheless pause
and give space to our minds and room to our hearts
so that they may see,
behind the darkness of our closed eyes,
a piece of the Beauty to which we pray this morning.

Call her to your heart behind your closed eyes,
Call him to your side behind your closed eyes.

Feel that to which we pray
as the air expanding our chest,
as the warmth emanating from our hands,
as our steady pulses joining to make common, holy noise.

Breathe in each other's knowledge of holiness.
Be warmed by each other's ideas of majesty.
Know your place in the symphonic arrangement of our holy heartbeats.

Look deeply into that to which you pray this morning.
Gazing as one would gaze at an arresting photograph.
And in the mirror of that photograph,
allow your reflection to be transformed by
the piece of the Holy that gazes, smiling, lovingly, back at you.

And in the shared silence of this worshipping community,
let your heart say, what you've no choice but to say.

Amen.

Reading: *from Life Prayers* – Kahlil Gibran

Your pain is the breaking of the shell
that encloses your understanding.
Even as the stone of the fruit must break,
that its heart may stand in the sun,
so you must know pain.
And could you keep your heart in wonder
at the daily miracles of your life,
your pain would not seem less wondrous than your joy;
And you would accept the seasons of your heart,
even as you always accepted the seasons

that pass over your fields.
And you would watch with serenity
through the winters of your grief.

Reading: Morning Prayer, Late July – Kimberly Pittman-Schulz

I am brushing the loose fur from this cat
and singing some dumb song to him.
Can you hear me? He's nearly twenty, kidneys starting
to fail, hips a bit arthritic. When the sun arrives,
I'll pinch the spent blossoms from the hanging petunia
and trim the brown, crisp stalks from the marigolds
and black-eyed Susan's. Thank you for the rain
that came in the night, slow and heavy,
like fruit falling again and again
through the forest's million leaves. Right now
two bats pedal their blackness above the pond,
and the sky, remembering that rosy light,
practices its pink version of morning.

I've been saving his white fur in a plastic bag
with the tortoise-shell fur of his companion,
gone since last November. I've been turning
the old, dead flower heads, the crumpled
leaves and stems, into the garden soil.
As much as I can, in notebooks,
I've been keeping track of those bats
the evening tree frogs, the various shimmering
snakes -- especially the ring-necked one in the kitchen --
the birds that come and go (we're not far
from junco season, you know) and the animal tracks,
vague but visible on the trail (remember
the beetle tracks, delicate as embroidery
on a scrap of snow that one warm February?),
all the little miracles, the surprising ways in which
the world keeps becoming one thing then another.

I'm not sure what I am supposed to be
doing here. Lately there's been war
and cancer and children stolen
right out of their beds and the usual waning
of birdsong as autumn approaches,
and I can't figure out what to do about any of it.

Every day, someone -- a mother or father,
some finch or fox, a stand of spruce -- dies,
but so far I haven't been among them.

So, I'm just tending to what is here.
I've washed that teacup nearly every day
for more than a dozen years, swept squirrel scat
from the deck all summer, pulled strands
of my own hair, often gray, from my jacket
with a wad of tape. I let myself be happy
over nothing in particular -- just now a woodchuck
picking an overripe banana and a cantaloupe rind

out of the compost pile, holding one
and then the other in his nappy, black fingers
as he eats. He watches me
watching him from the window while I bite a peach,
the two of us feeding the same body.

Reading: The Healing Time – Pesh Gertler

Finally on my way to yes
I bump into
all the places
where I said no
to my life
all the untended wounds
the red and purple scars
those hieroglyphs of pain
carved into my skin, my bones,
those coded messages
that send me down
the wrong street
again and again
where I find them
the old wounds
the old misdirections
and I lift them
one by one
close to my heart
and I say holy
holy.

Sermon: The Difficult Embrace

It was rather muggy in the large assembly room at the Minnesota Department of Health. I was one of a couple hundred people who had gathered for a diversity seminar, and while the room wasn't completely packed, we were sitting so close to each other that it seemed really hot and kind of sticky in the room. There was no breeze either, no ventilation, or at least I couldn't feel any in the area that I was sitting. And to top it off, this seminar occurred just this past Thursday, when the sun was shining and it had warmed up and the sky was blue. It was beautiful outside, and I was stuck in this hot, sticky room with a couple hundred people at a diversity seminar.

A filmmaker whom I've long-respected led the seminar. His name is Lee Mun Wah and he produces films and leads discussions on oppression that have a frankness and a candor that burst through the at times limiting presence of political correctness so that real, honest, painful, and healing communication can occur. This is the case in his most famous film, *The Color of Fear*, a film that is a dialogue among eight men of different races about how racism affects their lives. It's an intimate and honest – and for many – very difficult film to watch. Pain, anger, fear, and confusion dominate much of the conversation between the men as they honestly and emotionally share with each other their experiences and feelings about racism. Voices are raised and tensions flare, facts that to me indicate the honesty of the conversation as honest talk about racism really should include pain, anger, fear, and confusion. Lee Mun Wah brilliantly captures those feelings and uses them as bridges that can connect people living different lives, in different neighborhoods, in different worlds. It's pain, captured on film that leads toward healing.

So I was excited about seeing Lee Mun Wah and hearing him speak, but again, I was really hot in that room. And, to be completely honest, the bulging task list in my Microsoft Outlook program came to mind—all the things that weren't getting done while I attended that diversity seminar. And, to go a little further, I started thinking about the many other diversity seminars I've participated in. And since I knew what Lee Mun Wah's approach entailed, I wondered if I was really going to get anything out of this. I started convincing myself that perhaps this wasn't the best use of my time. Plus, it was really muggy inside, and going outside seemed very refreshing. I know I'm harping on this, but I never thought I'd get spring

fever in early-February in Minnesota, but when the sun is shining and the ice is melting, well, that's a welcome sight for these sore Southern eyes. And all this happened as I was sitting there waiting for the seminar to start. But luckily for me, Lee Mun Wah began just as this train of thought was really picking up some steam, so I decided to at least experience the first half of the three-hour seminar and then decide whether or not to stay for the rest.

Lee Mun Wah's seminar was about listening. It was called, "The Art of Mindful Facilitation," and what he was working with us to do was to be able to listen, particularly in times of pain or conflict, for the emotional message that underlies the factual content of what people are saying. Connecting with that emotion builds relationship and trust whereas relying solely on fact, at best, doesn't build either as well, or at worst, sometimes actually harms the relationship. He showed a clip from another film he has produced titled *Last Chance for Eden* in which a woman of color, after describing the pain that racism inflicts upon her, urges the white people in the room, "Don't explain [the pain] to me, feel it with me." Empathy is what she sought, and it's what Lee Mun Wah values most highly in communication — to listen beyond fact for feeling, to go deeper than explanation and explore emotion. And in the course of his work, what those feelings and emotions often uncover is raw pain.

The Buddhist Nun and lecturer Pema Chodrin, whose lectures have been transcribed into many books, speaks similarly of the need to turn toward pain as part of a journey of wholeness. She notes that the first noble truth of the Buddha is that people experience feelings of suffering or dissatisfaction, feelings that come about because we're not in touch with our basic goodness. For her, this is simply a statement, not a judgment. The fact that people aren't always completely in touch with their basic goodness is not to be understood as an inherent fault in humankind, rather it's an inherent piece of the human puzzle. It's not a proclamation of human sinfulness, nor is it a statement about the degree of holiness a person has attained. It's simply a part of each person, nothing to be decried, and nothing to be judged.

Chodron tells a story of the Dalai Lama having a conversation with a group of teachers of Buddhism when a western teacher asked him about self-hatred, about how people in the west tend to view themselves with disdain as innately flawed. Westerners perhaps tend to link through causation their belief in the inherent flaws of humanity with the first noble truth of suffering. This belief in humanity's inherent flaws might be associated with the doctrine of original sin. It's plausible, and actually seems quite probable to me that the doctrine of original sin is so imbued in our culture that even those of us who claim to reject it still have the seeds of those beliefs in our beings.

This perceived causation between inherent flaws that lead to suffering can create some of the self-hatred that the western Buddhist teachers identify as a barrier that westerners must overcome to fully embrace the tenets of Buddhism. Chodron reports that the Dalai Lama had no idea what self-hatred was and had to poll the room and ask other western teachers what they thought about self-hatred to begin to understand the term. While the first noble truth indicates that suffering is part of existence, and the other three noble truths indicate directions toward relieving that suffering, the notion that this suffering or dissatisfaction indicates a fault in the individual is a western concept. For Chodron, and apparently the Dalai Lama, it's not a fault to suffer or to be dissatisfied. It's human. Perfectly human. Suffering is simply intrinsic to the human condition, an inseparable patch on the quilt of our lives.

Chodron believes that we should notice that patch, that we should embrace even its negativity as part of existence and not try to pretend it is not there, and not judge ourselves harshly when forced to confront the pain in our lives. When we embrace that pain, we can learn from that pain, as our minds will awaken to greater truths about the human experience. Lee Mun Wah was urging us to listen for others' pain, and Chodron urges us to listen for our own, but really, they are urging us to do the same thing. For turning toward pain, and embracing its difficult presence in our lives, draws us closer to our truest, most complete selves, and to authentic relationships with others. Another Buddhist writer, Sharon Salzberg, phrased it as, "By coming to know our own pain, we build a bridge to the pain of others, which enables us to ... offer help. And when we actually understand how it feels to suffer — in ourselves and others — we are compelled to live in a way that creates as little harm as possible" (Salzberg — *A Heart As Wide As The World*).

In that diversity seminar, Lee Mun Wah started us on some of that bridge-building that very day. After about an hour of an engaging give-and-take presentation on empathetic listening, he had us break up into groups of four. He asked us to group with people we did not know, and to make the groups as diverse as we could. He then gave us a series of questions about conflict in our family, "how conflict was dealt with in our family, what it looked like in our family, etc." And we each took turns speaking about that topic for about five minutes while the other three people listened in specific roles. One person was an empathetic listener, listening for emotional content. One person was the factual listener, trying to

remember the general outline of what was said. And the last person was the nonverbal listener, the person who noticed your expressions and gestures.

I thought it would be fun to do that exercise here ... but we won't. Maybe in another setting, but not right now. But I do want you to think for a moment about that topic, about how conflict lived or lives out in your family either the family or families you grew up in or the family you're in now. Think about it, because it's a difficult subject for many people, something I'm sure Lee Mun Wah knew when he introduced the topic. Conflict is a difficult topic in general, but conflict in our families can take many of us to painful places rather quickly.

It does for me, as any discernment of how conflict plays out in my family necessarily causes me to bring to mind the very strained relationships I have with two of my three siblings. I'm the youngest of four, and my oldest sister has completely detached herself from the family, no one has heard from her in more than a decade. And my brother and I have always had a difficult relationship but for many years now we haven't really talked at all. He's got children I've never met and I've got a wife he's never seen and I'm not sure if that'll change anytime soon.

And as luck would have it, I was the first one to share about conflict and my family in my small group. I sat in a tight circle with these three women whom I had never met before and who were ready to listen very, very closely to whatever I said, and reflect it back to me. And I hesitated to bring up the real conflict in my family, thinking instead that I could come up with a more benign example of discord that wouldn't require me to talk about such a painful topic, again. You see, I've talked about my sibling relationships quite often over the past couple of years. Part of preparing for the ministry entails figuring out how your family system is going to influence your leadership in the family system that is the church. Actually, I found that to be the main learning objective of my clinical chaplaincy unit, and I know I was not alone in that. So I'm used to talking about my family, I'm familiar with turning toward that pain.

But it's still difficult to do, and I don't particularly enjoy it, and I wasn't sure if I was really up for it that afternoon. So, as is often the case when I don't know what to say, I just started talking and hoped that something coherent would come out. And about three words into my time, I started talking about my brother, and for the rest of the five minutes, I shared whatever came to mind about the nature of the conflict in our relationship. I held nothing back and as always, it was painful, and made me feel a little vulnerable, although that's becoming less the case the more often I do it.

And when the listeners reflected back what they heard me say, they all shared similar stories of discordant relationships in their families. Some involved relationships with siblings, some with their parents, some with other family members. But what we shared was the feelings of pain at the emotional distance between our selves and someone in our family. We didn't try to solve each other's problems, we didn't attempt to offer the magic solution that would make everything better. We just listened to each other and reflected back what we had heard, filtered through our own life experiences. Each of us was a living canvass for five minutes, reflecting a true vision to the group, and having the group engage and recreate the image in front of us, with the recreation including parts of our own stories.

And in those too-brief moments of honest sharing about pain in our lives, you could almost see the veils between us drop to the floor. We four strangers, diverse in numerous ways, alone in a room full of hundreds of people, sharing in an uncommon way the common knowledge of pain that we all carry in our hearts. Smearing the borders painted to separate us from each other so that we might become one people if for just a moment. Showing each other our wounds, sharing the pain, and appreciating each other's scars.

In the film *Frida*, the bio-picture that tells the story of the life of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, there's a scene in which Frida and her future husband Diego Rivera are intimate for the first time. Diego was a painter, too, also a revolutionary, as was Frida. Frida was in a horrible bus accident when she was a teenager that left her with a huge scar across her lower back. It seemed to cause her concern as she and Diego moved toward romance. As they started to kiss and stuff, she tells him, "I have a scar." He says, "Let me see it." She turns around and shows it to him. And he gently touches the scar on her back and says, "You're perfect. Perfect."

If he had said that to me, I'd have probably married him too. And that scene takes us back to the final reading that Laura offered, in which the poet is able to look at her life and see her misdirection's and wounds, both tended and untended and name them as "holy." Truthfully, many days, I'm not really in that place. Nor am I very close to the ideals of Pema Chodron or Sharon Salzberg or God knows, the Dalai Lama. They're great teachers, and I deeply appreciate the direction

that they can point us in, and I know that pain and suffering is natural and is part of existence. And I do consciously reject theologies that link pain to divine punishment, that's one of the things that I like the most about the Buddhist approach. But sometimes the teachings of those really spiritual, completely centered Buddhist thinkers and writers seem inaccessible in our daily endeavors, in our common experiences of pain or dissatisfaction.

But in those moments of pain, be they originating for the first time or being re-lived through memory, I do know that they need not be lived out alone. That in honest sharing between people committed to caring about each other, we can find similarities and support that can lighten the burdens of sorrow that falls upon all of our backs sometimes. That perhaps we can create the purpose of pain in our lives as something that draws us closer to each other, something that heightens our willingness to form relationships based not on illusions of perfection, but on our perfect scars. That in doing so we bring our truest selves to the table of our common humanity and we embolden others to do the same. And when this happens, the celebrations of our joys and the manifestations of our passions will be stronger and more vivid, full of more spirit and more hope, because they'll be rooted in a fuller appreciation of the lives we all share. A purpose that sometimes seems inaccessible to me as one, seems easily within grasp to me as part of many. May we place ourselves among the many, caring each other and allowing ourselves to be cared for, for all that is our lives.

Amen.

Benediction: Project Ploughshares, adapted

Lead us from death to life,
from falsehood to truth.
Lead us from despair to hope,
from fear to trust.
Lead us from hate to love,
from war to peace.
Let peace fill our hearts,
our world, our universe.