

Real Self Reliance

Unity Church
June 13th, 2010

There are times when love and loyalty demand that we step outside ourselves, that we go beyond our usual ways of being in the world and risk it all. One of my favorite films tells just such a story. The Straight Story, a co-production of the unlikely team of David Lynch and Disney, is the story of Alvin Straight whose long-estranged brother Lyle has had a stroke. Alvin, whose eyes and legs are so bad he can't get a driver's license, decides to make his way from central Iowa up to southwestern Wisconsin on a beat up ride-on lawnmower. He builds a tiny trailer with a bed in it and over the objections of his daughter and every sane person in town, Alvin takes to the highway.

One night sitting by a campfire, Alvin's solitude is interrupted by a teenage girl. He can tell she's on the run. She says she's hungry so he gives her food. He asks her what she's running from. Predictably, she's pregnant. She says she just can't face her family. She wraps herself in a spare blanket and goes to sleep close by the safety and the warmth of Alvin's camp site. In the morning, over coffee, Alvin hands her a stick. Try and break that, he says. The stick snaps easily in two. Then Alvin asks her to gather up five or six sticks just like the one that she just broke in half. Now, try to break them all together. She tries, she tries hard, but they won't break. That's family, Alvin says. She thanks him, says goodbye and heads back down the road toward home.

The arc of human history can be seen as reaching from a time of when we were utterly dependent on the tribe for food, shelter, identity and protection to today when an ever-increasing number of individuals are set free from bondage to their origins, to eat what they like, to live where they will, to construct their own identities and to be protected by governments established for that very purpose and constrained by covenantal constitutional agreements. This is what Unitarian prophet and preacher, Theodore Parker meant when he wrote, “the arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.

In 1841, when Emerson first published Self Reliance, oppressive social constraints were far more stringent than they are today. The essay is a clarion call to America. It invites us into personal authenticity. It asks us to set aside old ways of learning and of being. At a time when children learned exclusively by rote, Emerson and others of his circle, particularly Bronson Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody were setting the foundation for a new philosophy of education, providing a platform on which, a generation later, John Dewey and his disciples would change the way that children learn by making the child’s sense of self the start and center of their learning.

I could go on to list a wide array of evidence of progress toward human liberation but the truth is self reliance is a two-edged sword. Even as individual freedom of expression has expanded so has dislocation and materialism. Emerson is attacked in many quarters not only for his somewhat florid literary style but also because he seems to some to say that we don’t need each other, that we can thrive without the deep

communal connections on which we have always relied. I would argue his critics misread him but one can't deny that individualism can be very costly.

Eliot writes in "Choruses from 'The Rock'"
*What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of God.
Even the anchorite who meditates alone,
For whom the days and nights repeat the praise of God,
Prays for the Church, the body of Christ incarnate.
And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads,
And no one knows or cares who is their neighbor
Unless their neighbor makes too much disturbance,
But all dash to and fro in motorcars
Familiar with the roads and settled nowhere.*

I'm not as despairing and forlorn as Eliot. Every day I still stand witness to the fact that liberation need not cause us to sever all sense of belonging. Some people still choose to say yes and work hard to find the balance between personal freedom and communal accountability. This church is in part a workshop for that effort. Real self reliance is not a license for self-indulgence. Real self reliance is born of the realization as Martin Buber said in defining humility, that one is a wave in the ocean. Do you see? Both you and I are infinitely powerful and utterly dependent at the very same time.

This is a hard one of those of us who revel in the notion that we have free will. But the truth is that personal power is inseparable from and dependent upon the power that is immeasurably larger than ourselves. *The ruby and the sunrise*

are one, says Rumi. Be courageous and discipline yourself. In Emerson's day our charge and challenge was to assert our individuality over and against a social structure which enforced uniformity and obedience. But as poet James Russell Lowell reminds us, "*new occasions teach new duties.*" The charge and challenge of this time and of this place is to balance our fierce individualism with a practiced appreciation for the blessings living in community can bring.

We need to learn again to hold one another in the discipline of mutual respect. We need to learn to listen well. We need to be both kind and courageous as we stumble toward telling each other the truth. We need to stand against the forces that keep us from knowing our neighbors. And we need move from conflict to creativity in how we respond to the crises of the day. Sometimes we need to let our well-constructed selves dissolve. Sometimes we need to start over. Sometimes we need to hold each other thoughtfully as though we are imaginary friends just so we can rest assured that someone somewhere knows and loves us. Just so we can "*relax a moment in the matter of remembering ourselves, just so we can close our eyes and let the whole factory of identity go drifting in the dark.*" If we can do that then, together, you and I can find new ways of being as we step outside ourselves and risk it all for loyalty and love.

Our Buddhist friends have much to teach us about what it takes to live balanced and effective lives, about what we need to be truly self reliant. They say it takes three basic sources of nourishment and inspiration in order to grow deep and strong in spirit. The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha; the teacher, the teachings and the companionship of others on the path. Imagine yourself then as one single strand. Alone we have so little strength. But braid around yourself the teacher, the teachings and all the true companions on the path, braid all four into

a sturdy cord and we will find the strength we need to be among the “guides, redeemers and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort” as we align our lives with others who really do care. May this be our promise. May this be our prayer. So be it and Amen.

Readings June 13th, 2010

Narcissus Lullaby

If someone anywhere right now
is imagining me,
saying my name thoughtfully,

with her pink tongue touching
the smooth ceiling of her mouth
softly to pronounce the *T*,

like the first brush stroke
in a figurative landscape painting of
He-Who-Is-the-Subject-of-This-Poem,

--then I can relax a moment
in the matter of remembering myself,
I can close my eyes and let

the whole factory of identity go
drifting in the dark
like a big brick warehouse full of anxious secrets

in an unsafe neighborhood
gone quiet at the end of day,
yet guarded and protected and caressed

by the softly conscious flashlight
of my imaginary friend's
imagination.

Tony Hoagland

from Self Reliance

There is a time in every person's education when he or she arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that one must take oneself for better or for worse as one's portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to anyone but through his or her toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to that person to till. The power which resides in each person is new in nature and no one but that person knows what he or she can do until they've tried...Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great people have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And now we are mature human beings, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; we are not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort and advancing on Chaos and the Dark.

R. W. Emerson (adapted)

The Sunrise Ruby

In the early morning hour,
just before dawn, lover and beloved wake
and take a drink of water.

One asks, "Do you love me or yourself more?
Really, tell me the absolute truth."

The other replies, "There's nothing left of *me*.
I'm like a ruby held up to the sunrise.
Is it still a stone, or a world
Made of redness? It has no resistance
to sunlight."

This is how Hallaj said, *I am God*,
And told the truth!

The ruby and the sunrise are one.
Be courageous and discipline yourself.

Completely become hearing and ear,
and wear this sun-ruby as an earring.

Work. Keep digging your well.
Don't think about getting off from work.
Water is there somewhere.

Submit to a daily practice.
Your loyalty to that
is a ring on the door.

Keep knocking, and the joy inside
Will eventually open a window and look out to see who's there.

Rumi