

“Defying Gravity”, August 16, 2009
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“Come on Charlie Brown, kick it!”

As a child, it was my least favorite scene in the Charlie Brown special on television. Lucy Van Pelt is holding the football and encouraging Charlie Brown that this time, she will hold the ball steady and not fake him out. *This time*, she says, he’ll need to trust her, for she will hold the ball upright so that he can kick it to the far reaches of the football field. My six year old brain is only half full of hope – for I have watched this same special before (many, many times). Maybe she’ll give him a break, I think. Maybe he’ll be so fast that before she is aware of what is happening, good old Chuck will outsmart her once and for all and bam, the ball will be in flight before Lucy can blink! Charlie Brown agrees, for the hundredth time, to trust Lucy and give it a go. I sigh and lean in close to the 12 inch black and white, my heart clenched tight, for I am so hoping that Charlie Brown wins this time.

Of course, he does not. Poor Charlie Brown. Lucy pulls the football just at the pivotal moment and once again Charlie Brown, and not the football, is in flight. This is not a surprise, for we all know that Lucy is the bane of Charlie Brown existence. She torments him on the football field and he is the most frequent customer at her 5 cent psychiatric booth. At every turn, Lucy is quick to point out all of Charlie’s shortcomings, once even putting together a slide show of all of his faults and then demanding that he pay her \$143 dollars for her services! Despite this constant belittlement, Charlie Brown returns to Lucy again and again for advice and support. We wonder how he can expose himself to her constant criticism.

According to Buddhist teacher and author Sharon Salzberg, we all have an internalized Lucy. For some of us, this Lucy is just a speck of a thing: perhaps only a slight annoyance at our annual family reunion. For others, our Lucy tortures us on a regular basis. We are in conflict with her and the battle feels endless. We don’t feel in control of our lives because her presence is so constant and overwhelming. We struggle to feel peace because she is just over our shoulder telling us we can’t, we shouldn’t or we don’t deserve it.

In her recent book on faith, Salzberg describes an extremely painful childhood, during which she tragically loses both of her parents. These events caused her, from a young age, to develop a life story based solely on this loss. Her search for a way out of this story, which is the core theme of her book, is a journey that many of us share, despite the size or depth of our baggage.

When our old stories are a constant presence in our lives, we disconnect from ourselves, from our loved ones and from the larger world. I see this in my work as a therapist with children who have experienced trauma. I see this in the adults that I work with who have suffered great losses. A commonly held belief among some of my clients is that *they are their losses*. They are clinging to this life story, even if it is based on events that happened many years ago. When we hold on to these stories, Salzberg explains, we live as if our noses are “pressed to the bakery window, believing that none of the goodies are for us.”

When we are in deep despair, we usually have two responses. We either close our hearts, denying the pain and shutting out the world, or we absorb every piece of this suffering into our entire being. Both responses involve an embodiment of external events for which we had little control. We hope to feel “better” but lack faith in our own power to create any healing.

British Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott developed some of his most influential theories through his work with psychologically challenged children and their mothers. He theorized that “a false self”, is used when a child has to comply with external rules. He states that this mask is a “false persona that constantly seeks to anticipate the demands of others in order to maintain the relationship” Winnicott believed that the primary function of this false self is defensive, an unconscious process that evolved to protect the True Self from threat, wounding, or even destruction.

In their latest animated film, *UP*, the brilliant writers at Pixar Animation tell the story of 78 year old Carl Fredrickson. Carl meets the love of his life, Ellie, when they are both children. Ellie - a true Pippi Longstocking – is full of adventure and to Carl’s delight, slowly brings him out of his shell. The two of them dream about the life they plan to have, raising children and traveling the world. One of Ellie’s biggest dreams is to travel to “Paradise Falls” in South America. She has a postcard of this destination in her

scrapbook. Carl and Ellie marry and begin building a life together. They hold their dreams close, but plans change and many of these dreams do not come true. There are losses. The scrapbook with the postcard of Paradise Falls gets put on the shelf.

In his book *Legacy of the Heart*, therapist and minister Wayne Muller writes that over time, if we are still struggling with a painful past, “we form a habit of seeing everything through the lens of the most predictable dangers” (think of Charlie Brown sitting down to Lucy’s psychiatry booth, not with hope, but with a sense of impending doom). Buddhists refer to this phenomenon as “looking at the sky through a straw”.

We are quite committed to these narratives. We work hard to maintain these stories, to convince others that we are unlovable and unworthy. Muller says we place our past stories on the “altar of our lives”, holding them as sacred truth. When hurt comes again we are comforted, “ah, there it is again, the real story of my life”!

Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl argued that a person’s suffering is similar to the behavior of gas. He wrote,

“If a certain quantity of gas is pumped into an empty chamber, it will fill the chamber completely and evenly, no matter how big the chamber. Thus suffering completely fills the human soul and conscious mind, no matter whether the suffering is great or little. Therefore the “size” of human suffering is absolutely relative.”

So is the second common response to our struggles— we let our suffering fill every part of us.

There is a story told by the Buddha:

A young widower, who loved his five-year old son very much, was away on business, and bandits came, burned down his whole village and took his son away. When the man returned, he saw the ruins and panicked. He took the unrecognizable corpse of an infant to be his own child and he began to pull his hair and beat his chest, crying uncontrollably. He organized a cremation ceremony, collected the ashes, and put them in a very beautiful velvet pouch. Working, sleeping, or eating, he always carried the bag of ashes with him.

One day his real son escaped from the robbers and found his way home. He arrived at his father's new cottage at midnight, and knocked at the door. You can imagine, at that time, the young father was still carrying the bag of ashes and crying. He asked, "Who is there?" And the child answered, "It's me, Papa. Open the door, it's your son." In his agitated state of mind the father thought that some mischievous boy was making fun of him, and he shouted at the child to go away, and continued to cry. The boy knocked again and again, but the father refused to let him in. Some time passed, and finally the child left. From that time on, the father and son never saw one another.

After telling this story, the Buddha said, "Sometimes, somewhere you take something to be the truth. If you cling to it so much, when the truth comes in person and knocks on your door, you will not open it."

Back to the movie. When we meet present-day Carl, we see a grouchy, stubborn old man whose Lucy is pretty darn big. He believes that he has failed his wife; that their humdrum life was not the adventure she had hoped it would be. His response to his Lucy is a shutting down, a closing from within. By the time 8 year old Wilderness Explorer Russell shows up at his doorstep in the hopes of earning his "assisting the elderly" badge by befriending him, Carl's story is well wrapped around him, as Muller would say, just "like an old bathrobe".

Beliefs are the assumptions we make about ourselves, about others in the world and about how we expect things to be. Beliefs are how we think things really are. We search for beliefs when we are unsure of ourselves and our abilities. Freud argued that religious belief systems can be a delusional protection against suffering - a re-molding of reality. Salzberg argues that "beliefs" are the biggest threat to "faith".

When we hold a belief too tightly it is often because we are afraid. We fear change because our story has become comfortable, even in its painful. We would rather play the starring role in this narrative than take the risk of moving into a new one, one in which we haven't learned the script or figured out the plot or even learned to trust the players.

We *believe* we lack the power to create a new story; a new narrative that enables us to be the one in charge. Of course it requires tremendous courage and work to begin to even imagine a new life is possible beyond the comfort of these stories.

It requires a leap of faith.

As religious liberals, we struggle with this word “faith”. The phrase itself reeks of divine dependency. As I was preparing this sermon, the reaction that I had from others was fairly subdued. Faith. Belief. Hmm. Not much to say. Some of us have embraced this liberal religion because there isn’t pressure to identify what belief is or isn’t. Or if we have faith or if we don’t have faith. This freedom seems to work pretty well. But what about when we’re in crisis? When we have old stuff that just keeps hanging on?

The poet Rumi said, “the spirit and the body carry different loads and require different attentions. Too often we put saddlebags on Jesus and let the donkey run loose in the pasture”.

We suppress what can comfort us most and we let the old story take charge. When we think of faith, we often think of faith in something or not in something. There is another possibility. In Pali, the language of the original Buddhist texts, faith is defined as *Saddha*, which literally means “to place the heart upon”. In this description, the word faith is used as a verb. To *fai*the is to search for our own true nature. To *fai*the, to have faith, does not require anything beyond us at all.

In her book, Salzberg describes the different stages of faith development in detail. These stages, which parallel the stages of growth in any relationship, involve arriving at a faith not dependent on externals, but on a faith that we can carry with us; a faith based on our own experiences.

This faith can only be achieved when we are able to let go of Lucy and her messages and fully engage in life now. It is sometimes referred to as *abiding faith*. It is another option for responding to our struggles, a way out of our old narrative, and it involves the power of a wakeful heart.

Carl’s journey toward an abiding faith takes some interesting turns. He goes to extreme measures to find relief from his Lucy. When his house is at risk of being torn down, he decides that he can wait no longer to fulfill Ellie’s

lifelong desire to see Paradise Falls. So, he attaches thousands of balloons onto his house, and accompanied by Russell, the accidental stowaway, sets sail for South America. Carl's house is a perfect metaphor for the old pain that we carry, the Lucy that has prevented Carl from living an authentic life. Carl believes that if he hauls his house to Paradise Falls, he will finally be relieved of this Lucy, for he will have given Ellie what he believed was always missing from her life.

Not all of us resort to such drastic measures to get relief from our Lucy's. But some of us come pretty close.

The late Australian family therapist Michael White is the founder of narrative therapy, a therapeutic approach that is grounded in the premise that "the person is not the problem. The problem is the problem." The task, therefore, in therapy as in life, is to "re-author the dominant stories in people's lives." In working with individuals who have experienced trauma, sometimes we encourage them to put an imaginary "bracket" around their traumatic experience as a way to define a beginning and an end.

This approach gives children and adults power to re-author painful histories. I believe that in order to do this, we must arrive at this abiding faith, a possibility that life can be different if we trust ourselves to heal ourselves. This is hard work.

The word courage derives from the french word, "Coeur", to be full of heart. Our faith unfolds as we recognize, with perhaps only a glimmer of possibility, that life can be different. This courage comes from both a softening and an opening of the heart. It is here where you develop the faith to write a new story.

The Broadway musical *Wicked* profiles the life of the Wicked Witch of the West before Dorothy and the tornado. The main character, Elphaba, has struggled with a painful story (she was born green afterall) and the climax of Act I involves a spectacular moment in which Elphaba realizes her own power. When she first discovers that she can fly, she must put aside all previous signposts, the negative messages from her childhood and her previous perceptions of the Wizard of Oz. To counter all of this gravity –all the things that pulls her down -requires a leap of faith, the courage in

herself to do something different than what was expected of her. There is both joy and loss in this decision; the friendship with Glinda that she has to leave behind, and the masks that she wore that have become comforting to her. Her decision not to be defined by her history is portrayed exquisitely in one of the most powerful pieces of the production, the song *Defying Gravity*.

Here is a poem from Rilke:

So you must not be frightened if a sadness rises up before you larger than you have ever known, if a restiveness, like light and cloud-shadow passes over your hands and over all that you do. You must think that something is happening with you, that life has not forgotten you, that it holds you in its hand; it will not let you fall.

The sense of falling that many of us feel when we are suffering can be rescued and held by an abiding faith. This faith allows the container that holds our fears to widen and deepen – making space for new possibilities.

For Carl Frederickson, the journey to Paradise Falls did not turn out as he had intended. He meets an amazing array of wounded and inspiring characters along the way. He is able to drag his house to the edge of Paradise Falls, but his transformation does not occur with this effort. As it turns out, there was more to his story all along. (You'll have to see the movie to find out!) He too defies gravity. He too rewrites his narrative with this new understanding.

The philosopher Kierkegaard referred to a leap of faith – believing in something without evidence – as a leap *to* faith. The core part was the leap. We can silence our Lucy's. We can step into the bakery and sink our teeth into that chocolate éclair. The faith that is required to do so does not come from a mysterious place. It comes from within the core of who you are and from what you know to be true.

There is a Buddha alive and waiting in all of us.

May it be so.

Amen

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