

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Proud Flesh

Reverend Victoria Safford

Sunday 26 January 2020

The first reading is by Neil Gaiman, novelist and screenwriter, who serves as an ambassador for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. When he asked his Twitter followers what reminded them of “warmth,” he received over 1000 responses, from which he made this poem.

What You Need to Be Warm

A baked potato of a winter’s night to wrap your hands around or burn your mouth.
A blanket knitted by your mother’s cunning fingers.
Or your grandmother’s.

A smile, a touch, trust,
as you walk in from the snow or return to it,
the tips of your ears pricked pink and frozen.

The tink tink tink of iron radiators waking in an old house.

To surface from dreams in a bed, burrowed beneath blankets and comforters,
the change of state from cold to warm is all that matters,
and you think “just one more minute,” snuggled here before you face the chill.
Just one.

Places we slept as children: they warm us in the memory.

We travel to an inside from the outside.
To the orange flames of the fireplace
or the wood burning in the stove.
Breath-ice on the inside of windows, to be scratched off with a fingernail, melted with a whole
hand.
Frost on the ground that stays in the shadows, waiting for us.

Wear a scarf. Wear a coat. Wear a sweater. Wear socks. Wear thick gloves.

An infant as she sleeps between us.

A tumble of dogs, a kindle of cats and kittens.
Come inside. You’re safe now.

A kettle boiling at the stove.
Your family or friends are there. They smile.
Cocoa or chocolate, tea or coffee, soup or toddy, what you know you need:
A heat exchange.
They give it to you, you take the mug, and start to thaw.
While outside, for some of us,
the journey began as we walked away from our grandparents’ houses
away from the places we knew as children:
changes of state and state and state,
to stumble across a stony desert,

or to brave the deep waters,
 while food and friends, home, a bed, even a blanket,
 become just memories.

Sometimes it only takes a stranger, in a dark place,
 to hold out a badly knitted scarf,
 to offer a kind word,
 to say we have the right to be here,
 to make us warm in the coldest season.

You have the right to be here.

The second reading is from poet Jane Hirschfield, *For What Binds Us*.

There are names for what binds us:
 strong forces, weak forces.
 Look around, you can see them:
 the skin that forms in a half-empty cup,
 nails rusting into the places they join,
 joints dovetailed on their own weight.
 The way things stay so solidly
 wherever they've been set down --
 and gravity, scientists say, is weak.

And see how the flesh grows back
 across a wound, with a great vehemence,
 more strong
 than the simple, untested surface before.
 There's a name for it on horses,
 when it comes back darker and raised: proud flesh,

as all flesh
 is proud of its wounds, wears them
 as honors given out after battle,
 small triumphs pinned to the chest --

And when two people have loved each other
 see how it is like a
 scar between their bodies,
 stronger, darker, and proud;
 how the black cord makes of them a single fabric
 that nothing can tear or mend.

Proud Flesh

A parent, a mother, was sitting in a circle here one night not long ago, reflecting on the January theme. Her voice was quiet, trembling, almost confessional at first, with a catch in her throat and tears in her eyes. She said, “All the time, always, in all ways, I am trying to help my child to feel resilient. That’s what I do, that’s what I’ve been doing all along.” Her voice got stronger as she spoke this. She was telling us, I think, about her fear, but she was also fierce. It was the fear that every parent feels in raising up a precious child, and her tears were signs of powerful intention. I can remember holding a baby as old - as new - as Reverend Sara’s baby is this morning, just a few days old, and feeling a terror I had never known and an intention I had never felt, and in every breath over the crown of her head whispering prayers for resilience: that she would know and trust her power, her people, her story, her place in the big story, the story in which our lives and all lives are the chapters and the verses. It is, in my experience, a fear that grows as they grow, and an intention that does not go away but actually intensifies – and so our prayer this morning is for Sara, and Shawn, that they feel resilient too, and strong and glad for the journey ahead.

“To help my child feel resilient,” said the woman in our circle... “It’s like giving a baby good, nutritious food,” she said. Building, building, building, bones and hope, every day, replenishing spent resources. You can’t just feed a baby once and walk away. Always, every few hours, even as adults, we’re replenishing vitamins and confidence. “This is what we do,” said someone else in the circle, after a long pause, “as humans, for each other.” “This is what we do,” said yet another person, “in our families, in our church, at our best.” “I know I can’t protect my child always,” said the woman, “so I’m trying to help them feel, help them be, resilient. Help them trust their own core,” their intuition, their wisdom, the muscles of kindness and the unshakable trust that they are worthy and beloved - because that trust will be shaken. Because it has already been shaken, almost surely, and it will be again. We’re always being shaken to the core.

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Look around, you can see them:
nails rusting into the places they join,
joints dovetailed on their own weight.
The way things stay so solidly
wherever they've been set down --
and gravity, scientists say, is weak.*

There are names for what binds us to each other, to our hope, to our trust (despite the evidence sometimes) that this life is beautiful, miraculous, and we ourselves a good and worthy gift. There’s all kinds of evidence mounting all the time against these crazy claims, “evidence” to shake us to our core. All our lives we’re building resistance capacity, in ourselves and in each other. I don’t even know what resilience or trust means in a person by themselves. The image is embedded in our culture, in our minds, of this inner strength some people have, some heroes have, this inner strength to withstand all manner of affliction – bullying when they are young, loneliness, depression, disappointment, derailments of dreams and decisions, illness, accidents, loss upon loss. We have this idea that some people, have this resilient power, as if it were a kind

of virtue, and others have it less. Others maybe try less hard. But resilience is not a congenital quality, nor is it only learned. It is a gift more than a discipline, and it is held in common, in the stories we tell, the kindness we offer, the light we shine back to a person who's discouraged, the way we say to one another, "I see you shining there, even though you feel dingy and dim and depressed and maybe desperate. I see your humanity. I can't spare you the struggle, but I can tell you that I see your shine, your dignity, your integrity, the inherent strength and grace and goodness that you yourself can't see right now, and I can place myself beside you, because the fact is we're all in this together. On this small planet, this brief life, we're all in this together." That's the only kind of resilience - reciprocal, communal - that I can really understand.

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And see how the flesh grows back
across a wound, with a great vehemence,
more strong
than the simple, untested surface before.
There's a name for it on horses,
when it comes back darker and raised: proud flesh,*

That's what we honor in each other, lift up for each other.

And when two people have loved each other

she says, taking as her example the experience of lovers- but we're all lovers in this life, of one another and the living world, all on our shared journey-

*[when people love each other], see how it is like a
scar between their bodies,
stronger, darker, and proud;
how the black cord makes of them a single fabric
that nothing can tear or mend.*

We're resilient together, not alone. Really, it's a kind of covenant.

Sometimes, says Neil Gaiman, in his poem constructed of a thousand tweets from people telling him what they need to feel warm, truly warm,

*Sometimes it only takes a stranger in a dark place,
to hold out a badly knitted scarf,
to offer a kind word, to say we have the right to be here,
to make us feel warm in the coldest season.*

He's speaking about refugees, the millions and millions of members of our family who are scattered now and far from any home, permanently far from home. He's speaking about refugees specifically, for whom warmth and strength and the courage to go on will only come from people, other people, who say, and mean it, mean it with their money, our money and our laws and our whole hearts, *welcome. We see you.* The seeds of resilience are ratified by

trustworthy hospitality. “Give light,” we sing here sometimes, the words of the brilliant change agent, Ella Baker. “Give light and the people will find a way.” That’s what’s needed on a global scale and it is what we all need, sometimes – just a little light to go by, a little warmth to hold us that we can’t kindle on our own. It sparks up the embers of our latent resilience. We spark up each other’s resilience.

Imagine, with open eyes or closed, imagine running the palms of your hands over the contours of your spirit, as if your spirit, like your body, as it’s aged along, has accumulated scars and bruises, dents and scratches, creaky joints that ache when the weather turns, sensitive spots that most days feel fine, but sometimes flare with inflammation, indignation, still tender, still raw. Imagine running the palms of your hands gently over the contours of your spirit, finding the places where proud flesh, toughened and darkened, reveals an old wound in your soul that somehow you’ve survived and keep on surviving. Somehow, battered and bumped, broken and repaired so many times, you’ve got stronger in time in some ways; you’ve grown not a thick skin, not armor, but muscles you can trust, soul muscles. The wounds themselves keep you open, and compassionate. You understand that other people, all other people, have known injury as well. The echoes of your own pain keep you humble and alert, grateful now and kind of amazed that you’ve come this far. In the Black church, in the gospel tradition, the people sing, “My soul looks back in wonder, how I got over.” Bernice Johnson Reagon, musician and historian raised in that tradition, answers that song with words of her own: “I don’t know how my mother walked her troubles down. I don’t know how my father stood his ground. I don’t know how my people survived slavery. I do remember – that’s why I believe.” She remembers, tells the stories, runs her 78 year-old hands over the landscape of her soul and the history of struggle and finds that she believes in hope against the odds and evidence, in spite of and because of pain. This is one of the great gifts of intergenerational community, to be among elders who share bits of their biographies when we bother to ask – not war stories, not *I walked 10 miles to school in the snow when I was your age, and it was uphill both ways* – not war stories, but **love stories**. How did they walk their troubles down or stand their ground?

To build resilience you attend to the tender, tired places, and consider how healing occurs.

Take your vitamins.

Eat your good, nutritious food.

Drink water.

Sleep.

Stay healthy – I’m talking about literal strategies now, not metaphors.

Stay close to dogs or little children or birds or trees, all the lovely, lively creatures that parse the world and piece it back together differently from you, with a different, sparkling intelligence.

Learn from this.

Work your program, whether you're addicted to alcohol or chemicals or spending money or self-harm or self-interest or technology or work— work your program, start over when you stumble, and find some other people – a meeting, a church, it almost doesn't matter – so you can ask for help and offer help as needed, round and round and round, because both will heal us up, *only* both will heal us up. Resilience is built by believing you can build it, and cheering each other along.

It's never been harder, and never more urgent than now. Last summer I read an article sent round to our staff team by Anna Gehres, our Operations Administrator, a report on a recent study of therapists in Washington, D.C., documenting a mounting concern that the very people trained to help the rest of us cope with anxiety, depression, burn-out, addiction, and grief are themselves overwhelmed now, emotionally, by what some in their field are calling "Trump trauma:" the impact of so many assaults on so many aspects of our public life and global life and our own private lives all at once. Clients and patients are carrying truckloads of this trauma to their therapists, and the difference between this comprehensive trouble and other issues a client might raise in a session is that the therapist feels it too, profoundly, because it hurts them too, they see the same news, and then they're listening intently for 7 or 8 hours a day while pretty much everyone expresses it. One professor who teaches advanced classes for psychologists on sexual abuse and sexual assault shared a story. In September 2018 when Christine Blasey Ford testified about Brett Kavanaugh, this woman's students, all adults, all professionals, spanning a variety of genders, races, ages, could not continue with the scheduled lectures, discussions and assignments, and nor could she herself. It wasn't just that they needed to stop on the day of the hearing and address this new wrinkle, this pertinent item in current events; it was as if the air went out of the room, and out of their bodies, and it did not come back, not easily. After decades of teaching this material, she said, she felt that day as if everything she knew about health and healing, and honesty and recovery from trauma was just empty words, because all around, at the highest levels of our government, the Supreme Court, it was clear that none of that really mattered any more. And likewise so many, many other issues – the very people trained and paid to nurture resilience and offer strategies for building it, are rapidly, and not surprisingly, losing altitude.

Last month an op-ed in the *New York Times* by Michelle Goldberg picked up a similar theme. She writes about the weight of what she calls "democracy grief," the feelings of "rage, anxiety and bottomless loss, amplified by denial," and derision; she compares it to climate grief. She, too, has reached out to a number of therapists, who report a "state of alarm" at the "politically induced misery" they find in their patients. One psychologist in New York said she sees it most profoundly and articulately among Holocaust survivors: a deepening despair that the institutions we most trust and cherish are in the process of betraying us. These survivors have seen it before. Goldberg says that obviously our nation has failed in the past to live up to its ideals, but, she writes, "the ideals themselves used to be a nearly universal lodestar. The country could be shamed by the distance between its bright democratic promises and its reality. This is no longer true," because the lodestar itself is gone, as those in power have no interest in "pluralism, free speech, fair elections, or any version of the rule of law that applies to the powerful as well as the powerless." Public education, health care, clean water, clean air, sacred land, reproductive rights, women's rights, civil rights, equality, incarceration, labor, moral leadership on the international stage – the catalog of losses is unprecedented and some will be irreparable.

Goldberg says we have to speak about despair, not to whine and moan and mourn only, but bravely to lance the wound by speaking the sorrow, our sorrow as well as our rage, the soul wound as well as our endless opinions, the wound at the source of those opinions. Despair left to fester, she says, can puddle into toxic apathy and lethal withdrawal, but “channeled properly, despair can fuel an uprising.” She interviewed one woman, an army veteran and mother of three in Georgia, who says of the country right now “It’s more grief than depression. It’s like watching someone you love die of a wasting disease,” but the difference is we ourselves are the cure.

You don’t feed a baby once and walk away, or any living thing. We’re always replenishing our vitamins and confidence, building bones and hope, replacing spent resources. Resilience builds, but requires constant reinforcement, more light, more warmth, stories from the elders, music from the young, testimony, in every circle where we gather, about our rage, our grief, and our proud flesh, the scars that prove we’ve weathered crisis before. Through many dangers, toils and snares we have already come, and grace has brought us safe thus far, and grace and grit and love and hope will always lead us on. Through all the tumult and the strife, we hear this music, this old song of fortitude and flexibility, we hear this music ringing. It sounds an echo in our soul – how can we keep from singing? That’s a mandate, that old hymn. Resilience is required.

Joy Harjo is United States Poet Laureate currently. A member of the Mvskoke/Creek Nation, she was appointed in June 2019, the first Native American Poet Laureate in the history of the position. (And isn’t it surprising that of all the damage wrought at the federal level, somehow they’ve not yet touched this most dangerous and subversive position, that of the national poet? There may be hope here after all...) She writes, in a piece called *Grace*, about how resilience is an urgent thing, and sometimes just a small and simple thing – enough to go on, one more step, one more day, one more circle round the sun.

I think of Wind and her wild ways the year we had nothing to lose and lost it anyway in the cursed country of the fox. We still talk about that winter, how the cold froze imaginary buffalo on the stuffed horizon of snowbanks. The haunting voices of the starved and mutilated broke fences, crashed our thermostat dreams, and we couldn’t stand it one more time. So once again we lost a winter in stubborn memory, walked through cheap apartment walls, skated through fields of ghosts into a town that never wanted us, in the epic search for grace.

Like Coyote, like Rabbit, we could not contain our terror and clowned our way through a season of false midnights. We had to swallow that town with laughter, so it would go down easy as honey. And one morning as the sun struggled to break ice, and our dreams had found us with coffee and pancakes in a truck stop along Highway 80, we found grace.

I could say grace was a woman with time on her hands, or a white buffalo escaped from memory. But in that dingy light it was a promise of balance. We once again understood the talk of animals, and spring was lean and hungry with the hope of children and corn.

I would like to say, with grace, we picked ourselves up and walked into the spring thaw. We didn’t; the next season was worse. You went home to Leech Lake to work with the tribe and I

went south. And, Wind, I am still crazy. I know there is something larger than the memory of a dispossessed people. We have seen it.

We have seen it too, so many times. Resilience is about shaping strong dreams, sustaining dreams, powerful road maps of where we mean to go and how we mean to travel, and when we lose the map or lose our way, when it's ripped from our hands by wild winds, we recalculate. We discern what from that original dream, or longing, or intention, was the core thing, the essential thing, (not the details) and then build a new dream around it. This is how we will survive, how people always survive, revising, replenishing, reimagining. I'm thinking not so much about "democracy," now but our own small lives. We're resilient by grace, by practice, and always in relation. This is our great covenant – to help one another.

At the end of the sermon, we listened together to the music of *Rising Appalachia*, their song "Resilient:"

Resilient: Rising Appalachia: Leah Elizabeth Smith / Chloe Anne Smith

*I am resilient
 I trust the movement
 I negate the chaos
 Uplift the negative
 I'll show up at the table
 Again and again and again
 I'll close my mouth and learn to listen
 These times are poignant
 The winds have shifted
 It's all we can do
 To stay uplifted
 Pipelines through backyards
 Wolves howling out front
 Yeah I got my crew but truth is what I want
 Realigned and on point
 Power to the peaceful, prayers to the waters
 Women at the center
 All vessels open to give and receive
 Let's see this system brought down to its knees
 I'm made of thunder, I'm made of lightning
 I'm made of dirt, yeah
 Made of the fine things
 My father taught me
 That I'm a speck of dust and this world
 Was made for me so let's go and try our luck*

I've got my roots down down down down down deep
I've got my roots down down down down down deep
I've got my roots down down down deep/ I've got my roots down down down deep
So what are we doing here
What has been done
What are you gonna do about it
When the world comes undone
My voice feels tiny
And I'm sure so does yours
Put us all together we'll make a mighty roar
I am resilient
I trust the movement
I negate the chaos
Uplift the negative
I'll show up at the table again and again and again
I'll close my mouth and learn to listen...

Words in Closing: Emergent Strategy Mantras from adrienne maree brown

i am no victim of life; i shape change
we are not victims of circumstance; we shape change
i practice what i want to become
we practice what we want to become
i am a microcosm of all the possible justice, liberation,
pleasure, and honesty in the universe, and i act accordingly.
i remember that i exist only in relationship to other people
and systems.
i accept that i cannot change others, but i can hold
standards for my own life.
i create more possibilities in the face of scarcity thinking.
Together we create possibilities.
i act from and towards love.

Always we act from and toward more love.

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- Britt Peterson: "D.C. Types Have Been Flocking to Shrinkers Since Trump Won. And a Lot of the Therapists Are Miserable," *The Washingtonian*, 14 July 2019
 - Michelle Goldberg, "Democracy Grief is Real," *The New York Times*, 13 December 2019
 - Joy Harjo, "Grace" from *In Mad Love and War*, Wesleyan University Press, 1990.