

“Something Beautiful From What’s Been Broken”
A Sermon by Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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www.fvuuf.org

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Call to Gather by Annie Dillard

We are here to abet creation and to witness it, to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. Together we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach but we notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.

Sermon

“The first time photographer Angelo Merendino met Jennifer, he knew she was the one. They fell in love and got married in New York’s Central Park, surrounded by family, friends, and loved ones. Five months later Jen was diagnosed with breast cancer. From Angelo’s blog: “I remember the exact moment... Jen’s voice and the numb feeling that enveloped me. That feeling has never left. I’ll also never forget how we looked into each other’s eyes and held each other’s hands. ‘We are together, we’ll be OK.’” Throughout her battle, Angelo decided to photograph it. He wanted to humanize the face of cancer on the face of his wife. The photos speak for themselves.”¹

<Slides 2-30 [ending with tombstone]>

The spiritual challenge of vulnerability (our theme this month) involves more than just accepting that we are vulnerable. Often the human spirit calls us to take the unexpected or painful events of our lives and make something beautiful out of them. This doesn’t mean that everything happens for a reason. It doesn’t mean that you should be glad for a tragedy you have been forced to endure. Instead, says the Rev. Scott Tayler, the Unitarian Universalist who created our monthly theme structure, living a life of vulnerability means having “a faith stance which trusts that grace is woven into even the darkest of events.”²

That’s a tall order but he offers some hints at how to approach the task. In this month’s Journey Group resource packet, one of the spiritual homework options is to “Make (or Honor) Something Beautiful From What’s Been Broken.” Here are the instructions: “Think about something that was “broken,” lost or painful in your own experience and then do something to pull the grace from it. Make or find an object that helps tell the story of your efforts. Maybe you’ve already had an experience of creating or discovering beauty out of what was broken. If that’s true, then honor that experience once again by symbolizing the beauty you discovered or created.”

I’ve seen a lot of this grace-pulled-from-hardship during the last couple weeks, when we have lost three prominent and well-loved members of our Fellowship community. My favorite part of each of the unique

¹ <http://beyondblindfold.com/this-guys-wife-got-cancer-so-he-did-something-unforgettable-the-last-3-photos-destroyed-me.html#sthash.N30Tu698.dpuf>

² First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY’s March 2014 packet on Vulnerability, written by the Rev. Scott Tayler.

funerals and memorial services was the open sharing time, when everyone present was invited to tell brief memories and stories about the person who died. This is a human impulse, to honor the lives of those we care about and it is in fact a way to honor our own lives too.

Roger and I have heard from many of you that attending David's and Les' and Margaret's services have called to many of your minds questions about how you yourself might be remembered when the inevitable comes. I don't mean that it's inevitable that we each will die, although that is true. I mean that it's inevitable that people will remember us and desire to honor our lives in some way, however great or small. So it makes sense to think about that every now and then while we're still alive. Maybe you have a favorite song or reading you want included in a celebration of your life... or you know something you definitely don't want, like a certain someone in charge of the planning or a bouquet of your least favorite flowers. Leaving information is not only helpful for your loved ones but it increases your chances of being memorialized in ways that will be meaningful to YOU. On April 2nd I'll lead a one-time workshop called "Putting the YOU in Your Memorial Service." At this event we'll talk about some options and then everyone who wishes to do so will have a chance to indicate personal preferences on a form. Of course you can update or change it at any time but the Fellowship will keep this form on file. I recommend you also save the information and share it with the people in your life. If you feel this might be useful to you, please RSVP at the Sign-Up Spot in our front lobby.

This is not only a practical task, although I'll echo what Roger said a few weeks ago when he preached about his own funeral arrangements, which is to urge you to consider estate planning and creating a Living Will and Power of Attorney if you haven't already. These may seem like pesky logistics but they're also how we spiritually acknowledge that we are all vulnerable to death. That probably doesn't sound exactly fun but, paradoxically, the kind of preparation that puts us in touch with our fundamental vulnerability can also help us feel strong enough to live in the face of the unknown.

And yet, not every death can or should be anticipated. After all, even a young and healthy person can get breast cancer while still a newlywed. And how is that fair? During our recent run of loss here at the Fellowship, my head and heart kept returning to Jordan Davis. Jordan was a 17-year-old high school student in Jacksonville, Florida, very near where I used to live. He was shot to death by Michael Dunn, a 45-year-old white male software developer who was visiting the city for a wedding. The incident began when Dunn asked Jordan and his friends, who were African-American, to turn down their music. The kids tried to leave but Dunn fired nine bullets into the car. It's in the news again now because the jury was unable to return a verdict. For now, Dunn is free while Jordan is dead. Understandably, the case has been compared to the stalking and murder of another African-American child, Trayvon Martin, which also happened in Florida and also left free the older white man who was responsible.

How might we make sense of this tragedy, then? Well, The Rev. John Guns and his Baptist church in Jacksonville made headlines when he noticed a young man at services wearing a hoodie, like Trayvon Martin was when George Zimmerman killed him. The pastor brought the kid up on stage and told him that whenever he went into a store he needed to take the hood off. Better that than to wind up dead! Clearly the pastor wanted to protect the youth in his church, maybe as his way of making or honoring something beautiful from what's been broken. But Tonyaa Weathersbee, columnist at *The Root.com*, has another perspective. She writes, "To be sure, [that] advice is sound and pragmatic—and a lot of black parents who love their children are probably repeating it. I understand it. But I don't like it."³ Why

³<http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2014/02/jordan-davis-case-how-keeping-our-sons-safe-encourages-racist-behavior.html>

doesn't she like it? Because she says that a focus on keeping black kids safe sidesteps the real issue, which is racism.

Writing in *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates talks about what it means to be in a community where your children are targeted for violence based on who they are. That's vulnerability if I ever heard a definition of it. In the aftermath of Jordan Davis' murder, Coates talks about the vulnerability of being himself brown-skinned and having brown-skinned children who must be taught to not wear hoodies or listen to loud music or talk back or even dare to seek help after a car accident to name just a few incidents that recently made the news when they led to white people taking the lives of black people, most of whom were actually children under the age of 18.

Coates' version of making/honoring something beautiful from what's been broken is to demand structural change and he doesn't sugarcoat it. He says that this kind of tragedy will keep happening because "our heritage isn't color-blind....our legacy [as black people] is to die in this land where time is unequal, and deeded days are unequal, and blessed is the black man who lives to learn other ways, who lives to see other worlds, who lives to bear witness before the changes."⁴

That's not easy to hear, at least for me personally, but I think what he's saying is that vulnerability can interrupt life, sometimes fatally. Jordan Davis was vulnerable to fate, and to other factors too, like racism. Our monthly theme asks one very specific question about this. What does it look like to live a life of vulnerability? For me, it means looking at the world with an interest in and a commitment to seeing others' vulnerabilities. What is it like to notice that other people are not impenetrable fortresses, but human beings that experience pain and brokenness, like Jennifer in the pictures we saw earlier or like Jordan listening to music with friends or like our own dear worship leader today, who heard some hard news from her beloved son? What is it like to witness vulnerability—including our own—and then dare to wonder how we might make something beautiful from it?

Even whole nations can take on such a practice of grace. Remember the Norwegian massacre in 2011, when right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people, because he felt the government encouraged acceptance of Islam? Memorial plans have just been unveiled.

<Slide 32 (land with slice taken away)>

Jonas Dahlberg, the Swedish artist of this project, says, "It should be difficult to see the inherent beauty of the setting, without also experiencing a sense of loss...

<Slide 33 (aerial view)>

...It is this sense of loss that will physically activate the site." This piece is called Memory Wound.⁵ Isn't that an evocative definition of vulnerability?

Lucia McBath is an individual person determined to make and honor something beautiful from what's been broken. She is Jordan Davis' mother. Recently, she told the press, "[I forgive] Michael Dunn [but it] doesn't negate what I'm feeling and my anger. And I am allowed to feel that way. But more than that I have a responsibility to God to walk the path He's laid. In spite of my anger, and my fear... I am still called

⁴ <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/02/black-boy-interrupted/283881/>

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/06/norway-massacre-memorial-jonas-dahlberg-anders-behring-breivik>

by the God I serve to walk this out." And from that calling to walk her path she has wisdom for all of us who might wish to make a world where kids like hers are less vulnerable: "It doesn't matter how educated we've become. It doesn't matter because there still is an issue of race in this country. No, we have not really arrived. If something like this can happen, we have not arrived."

Later in this same conversation, she addresses the opposite of vulnerability: strength. The journalist with whom she is meeting has brought along his own son, an African American boy around Jordan Davis' age. And so Lucia McBath looks at the youth and tells him: "You exist. You matter. You have value. You have every right to wear your hoodie, to play your music as loud as you want. You have every right to be you. And no one should deter you from being you. You have to be you. And you can never be afraid of being you."⁶

Isn't that what makes us stronger? To be seen in our vulnerability and recognized as worthy, even beautiful? Maybe our first Unitarian Universalist principle is about just these moments. When we are especially vulnerable, for whatever reason, being reassured of our inherent worth and dignity might help us restore or at least cling to strength. I can't image Lucia McBath's strength of character, considering what she has been through, but somehow she is finding a way of making/honoring something beautiful from what's been broken.

I thought about this and her strength as I headed home from the last of our three memorial services. My head and heart were full of all the stories and tears and cards and hugs that I got to witness all last weekend. Suddenly, I understood that I had not yet made or honored something beautiful from the terrible brokenness of Jordan's murder. It would be the height of arrogance to compare my modest spiritual homework to his mother's capacity to survive her terrible grief and somehow manage to emerge as a leader. But here is what I created in honor of Jordan's youth, his life, his humanity, his vulnerability.

<Slide 35 (Jordan Davis altar)>

Closing Words by Mary Oliver

To live in this world you must be able to do three things:
to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

⁶ <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/02/i-am-still-called-by-the-god-i-serve-to-walk-this-out/284064/>