

The Missing Peace
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Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Appleton, Wisconsin
fvuuf.org

February 13-14, 2016

First Reading – A Hidden Wholeness by Parker Palmer

Thomas Merton claimed that “there is in all things... a hidden wholeness.” But back in the human world—Merton’s words can sound like wishful thinking. Afraid that our inner light will be extinguished or our inner darkness exposed, we hide our true identities from each other. In the process, we become separated from our own souls. We end up living divided lives, so far removed from the truth we hold within that we cannot know the integrity that comes from being what you are... I pay a steep price for when I live a divided life – feeling fraudulent, anxious about being found out and depressed by the fact that I am denying my own selfhood. The people around me pay a price as well, for now they walk on ground made unstable by my dividedness. How can I affirm another’s identity when I deny my own? How can I trust another’s integrity when I defy my own? A fault line runs down the middle of my life and whenever it cracks open, divorcing my words and actions from the truth I hold within – things around me get shaky and start to fall apart...”

Sermon – Part I

Once every seven years or so, St.Valentine’s Day falls on a weekend, clergy have to decide whether to ignore the day or preach it in their sermons. St. Valentine was likely a real person, although much less is really known about him than all the folk tales would suggest. He gets credit for performing marriages for young men at a time when the Roman emperor thought single men made better soldiers, and he is supposed to have signed a note to a young lady he had a crush on “from your Valentine.” For Catholics and Episcopalians, his day is still a feast day in the liturgical calendar of the church, so it’s going to be mentioned somehow. But those of us out there on the liberal edge of religion don’t have that mandatory excuse. I’m pretty sure our monthly worship theme for February -“Desire” – was influenced by how Valentine’s Day falls this year on the second Sunday of the month.

So, while it’s tempting to want to make this day a celebration of relationships and love, I decided I wanted to go in a different direction, and consider the role that our desire for intimate relationships and partnerships plays in the larger spiritual challenge we face in our lives, the challenge of living a life that feels “whole,” and complete. I was inspired by Shel Silverstein’s spare little book, *The Missing Piece*, a story I’ve loved for decades and which many of you might know. It’s a story that begins by telling us that this odd little creature was “missing a piece... and it was not happy.” It’s been billed here today as a story for all ages, and it’s one of the best examples of what that really means – our adult ears hear the story a little differently now than we did when we were kids. The story proceeds by describing the creature’s journey in search of its

missing piece, and all the things it does and relationships it has along the way until, lo and behold, it finds the piece that fits perfectly!

Extrapolating this to what happens in our most intimate relationships, we all know what that desire to be fulfilled by a trusted and intimate relationship with another person feels like. There's a scene in a movie from the late nineties called *Jerry McGuire*, where a young Tom Cruise tells the woman he is pursuing "You complete me!" It's that same image in *The Missing Piece* story, and it's an image of marriage I have probably been guilty of bringing forward in dozens of wedding ceremonies. But is that what we really want in our deepest relationships?

The punch line in the story of *The Missing Piece* catches us by surprise. With the missing piece securely in place, the creature finds that everything has changed. It is no longer the same as it once was, and there is both comfort and confusion in that. Things that you used to love to do, and did well, you can't do the same way anymore, because the missing piece is in place. Sounds like a marriage to me!!

In the reading we heard from Parker Palmer, he warns us against living "divided lives, so far removed from the truth we hold within that we cannot know the integrity that comes from being what you are." I think that's what the character in *The Missing Piece* story is doing. Its desire to be completed obscures the wholeness that is already there. Because it thinks that having a missing piece is a deficit and a problem, it is missing another "peace," a far more important "peace," spelled P-E-A-C-E. Parker Palmer's questions are critical ones for us to ask today. "How can I affirm another's identity when I deny my own? How can I trust another's integrity when I defy my own?"

If we are lucky enough to find deep and intimate relationships, in a marriage or in a friendship or with a family member, it changes us, and the change is not easy to anticipate. We hope it is a change mostly for the better. But the person you are when you are with someone you love is different than the person you are alone. Each of these has its own integrity, and offers us a path to finding inner peace. I want to suggest that the best intimate relationships are ones that don't look like the creature in *The Missing Piece*, where one subordinate piece completes the other. That's actually what Tom Cruise's character in *Jerry Maguire* looks like, and what he is looking for. He is self-absorbed enough that he looks for a relationship that will fit nicely into his life. He's not up for being changed. If I was to make a line drawing of what long term healthy intimate relationships look like, it would involve two circles revolving around each other. Both those circles would have dings and dents and missing pieces, for sure. But both of these circles would stand alone and be whole within themselves. They are not merged into one, but they represent something new in the world when they are together. When they are not together, they each can stand alone.

There is something very deep in what it means for us to be human in this picture of two separate and whole beings touching each other to bring something new into the world. In the early verses of the book of Genesis, we are given an image of God creating humanity before any other life, before the plants and animals. In process theology, there is a view of God as an evolving and not a static reality, and the beginning of God's evolution is in God's desire to bring human consciousness into the world, and to have a relationship with that consciousness. The

most poetic interpretations of this view of God suggest that God needed to make us to be complete. Whether you can accept that interpretation of God, or not, we all can recognize that our ancient Judeo-Christian creation story has humanity created in the beginning with free will and independence and choice, and these are the qualities that make humanity whole in and of ourselves, apart from God. The most beautiful artistic image of this wholeness, in my view, is Michaelangelo's Sistine chapel painting of God reaching out to touch Adam, depicted as two separate beings in powerful and longing relationship with their hands almost touching, but not quite. Are they one or are they two? Are they incomplete or are they whole?

Part of what it means to be able to move through the world in wholeness is to be able to be comfortable in your own skin, as comfortable with your solitude in the world, as you are comfortable in the company of those you love. In the second part of the sermon, let's talk more about what Parker Palmer calls the "hidden wholeness" in our lives, and how you need to find that in solitude before you can find it in interdependent and loving relationships with others. I've asked Marla to read a favorite poem of mine about solitude from the poet who has been my great companion during this year of transition, David Whyte:

Second Reading - Everything is Waiting for You by David Whyte

Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. As if life
were a progressive and cunning crime
with no witness to the tiny hidden
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding
out your solo voice. You must note
the way the soap dish enables you,
or the window latch grants you freedom.
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.
The stairs are your mentor of things
to come, the doors have always been there
to frighten you and to invite you,
and the tiny speaker in the phone
is your dream-ladder to divinity.
Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into
the conversation. The kettle is singing
even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots
have left their arrogant aloofness and
seen the good in you at last. All the birds
and creatures of the world are unutterably
themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

Sermon – Part II

There is peace in solitude, and as David Whyte reminds us, it is a great mistake to act out the drama of your solitude as if you were alone.

The theologian Paul Tillich has written: “Our language has wisely sensed the two sides of being alone. It has created the word loneliness to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word solitude to express the glory of being alone.” So loneliness and solitude are companions. They can co-exist within us depending on the circumstances we find ourselves in. It’s an astonishing thing to contemplate all the subjectivity that exists on this planet, almost as mind-boggling as trying to imagine and contain in your mind all the stars in the sky. We move through our lives having an experience of being contained within these every-changing ever aging bodies, like bottles bobbing along on an ocean of human experience that we can’t quite become part of, each of us holding on to the message of meaning that our lives represent. Ironically, it is this very subjectivity, that can feel so lonely and isolating, that is one of the most important things that we have in common with all the other human beings on this planet. Loneliness is a shared experience. We all know what it feels like. We hold our loneliness in common. Yet far too many of us will spend a lot of time believing that no one understands how our loneliness feels, that our experience is uniquely painful, and that our predicament in seeking an answer to our loneliness is insoluble.

This is where it helps to have solitude as a companion with your loneliness. Solitude looks like Loneliness’ twin, but these two inhabit our lives differently. Loneliness is an unwelcome guest that moves in whenever it wants. Solitude waits to be invited. Loneliness keeps chattering away while you’re trying to do other things to distract yourself --- make a meal, watch TV, volunteer, go out with your spouse, play with the kids. Loneliness doesn’t care whether you’re married or a parent or single or divorced or widowed. Loneliness doesn’t discriminate and will horn in on anybody. Solitude is a little more shy, and isn’t sure if busy people really want to spend any time together with Solitude, but waits nevertheless.

Loneliness won’t stop talking. Solitude, on the other hand, is there when you’re not busy, and quietly asks, “What shall we do now? Maybe nothing for a while...or maybe something you’ve always wanted to do... or something you can only imagine doing.” Solitude waits for you to say something, and if you don’t, that’s OK.

Loneliness gets really angry sometimes and tries to make you feel bad about yourself. Solitude just leaves if you don’t pay any attention, and sits in the next room, until you’re ready. Sometimes people think that Solitude is a warrior who you can enlist to defeat loneliness, but that’s not what Solitude is there to do. What Solitude is there to do is to introduce you to yourself, to the hidden wholeness that you have. I think one of the hardest things to do in a long term relationship, in a marriage, or a long friendship where you rely on each other, is not to be afraid of your beloved’s solitude, and not to mistake it for the isolation of loneliness. It’s very easy to become lonely in a marriage, and many people do. It helps to appreciate that marriages don’t necessarily solve or banish loneliness, but if the marriage can leave room for solitude, the chances are that loneliness will only be doing an occasional overnighter and not become a long term guest.

The wholeness that we are has many enemies that create a divided life. It's easy to describe so many of the possible ways we can choose to live a divided life:

- We can refuse to invest ourselves in our work, diminishing its quality and distancing ourselves from those it is meant to serve
- We can make our living at jobs that violate our basic values, even when survival does not absolutely demand it
- We can remain in settings or relationships that steadily kill off our spirit
- We can harbor secrets to achieve personal gain at the expense of other people
- We can hide our beliefs from those who disagree with us to avoid conflict, challenge, and change
- We can conceal our true identities for fear of being criticized, shunned, or attacked

Each one of these circumstances are created by decisions that we make. They all create division and distance between the self you are now and the self you wish to become. The fragmented life may be endemic, but to become whole – to become of one “piece” and to be at peace is also a choice. Being whole is a self-evident good, Palmer tells us, and yet time after time we choose against wholeness by slipping into these familiar patterns of evasion – denial, anger, greed. We often point to the mad-dash, frantic pace of life as the reason why we feel that our lives are in pieces, yet the truth of the matter is – we can make different choices. We can confront our own denial, anger or greed and examine them closely and ask ourselves, “what would a whole life look like? What’s the missing piece of my life that will bring me peace?”

It's heretical on Valentine's Day to suggest that intimate relationships may not be the place to look for wholeness, I know. In what I've said today, I've had no intention of discouraging or disparaging the courage that's involved in taking the risk of committed relationships, or their indispensable value in our lives. Even the ones that don't turn out the way you hoped can often be relationships that you would not make disappear from the story of your life if you could. But even those relationships that turn out exactly the way you hoped for, that fulfill your every need and your every dream, will end in loss anyway, because that's the way of the world and one of you, more than likely, has to go first. So if that's the nature of the life we share, taking the risk and creating the time and making the effort to get acquainted with Solitude is going to be worthwhile. You chance being misunderstood by a possessive partner or a clinging friend, but that's something you can work through, and wholeness that comes from becoming intimate with yourself makes all the other difficult choices that you have to make to sustain that wholeness over a life time much easier.

The missing piece may turn out to be the stranger who was yourself, that you finally get to know, and in one more poem that brings these reflections to a close, Derek Walcott does a lovely job of describing what this looks like, what it means to be your own Valentine. This is called “Love after Love”:

The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome,
and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you
all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

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