

The Gift of a Broken Heart
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Reading

“The Unaccompanied Mile” by Elizabeth Tarbox

When I see you with worry on your brow and shadows in your eyes, and I say to you “What’s up?” remind me gently that I was not there when you made that journey to the center of your soul. Tell me as kindly as you can that I am sleeping when night clutches at you and you are driven to a place in your heart which is ever night. Do not let me say “Don’t worry,” when worry is all you know and it feels as if worry is all you’ll ever know.

For none of us ever really walks in another’s shoes or knows the innermost rooms of a person’s heart. None of us truly knows the lonely places of another’s journey or the causes of the lines around another’s eyes. Therefore, let us be gentle with one another. Let us listen more than we speak and accept more than we judge. Let our open, outstretched hands reach and touch that we may walk along together for a little while in friendship and in trust.

Sermon

Writer Fran Grace (*in the winter 2018-19 issue of “Parabola”*) tells the story of lifelong civil rights activists Belvie Rooks and Dedan Gills, who in 2007, in mid-life, travelled to Ghana for their wedding ceremony. While there, as Fran Grace writes:

...they traveled to the Elmina slave dungeon, the origin site of their African ancestors’ enslavement. For over three centuries, African men women and children were kidnapped from their villages and families to be thrown into slave dungeons along Africa’s west coast. If they survived, they were pushed through the Door-of-No-Return onto the infamous slave ships for transport across the Atlantic Ocean. As Belvie and Dedan stood at the Door-of-No-Return, their pain was overwhelming; their tears overflowed.

They cried for all those who suffered and all those who died, all those torn from their families; they cried for their ancestors whose “names were erased from history.”

After awhile, though, “Dedan looked at Belvie and posed the critical question: What would healing look like?”

This question, such a profound one, a question that came from the depths of broken hearts, a question many would not even begin to consider... this question changed their lives.

The next day, with that question in her mind and heart, Belvie began hearing the words, “Plant a tree.” Belvie says:

At some point I recognized it as a line from one of Alice Walker’s poems, called “Torture.”

When they torture your mother, plant a tree.

When they torture your father, plant a tree.

The epiphany in that moment was the awareness that a poem that I’d always thought of as being about hopelessness was in fact a poem of hope. The very act of planting a tree, sowing a seed, showed that there was a commitment and a vision for the future.

Well, from that voice in Belvie’s heart, from that moment of epiphany, grew an answer to Dedan’s question about what healing would look like: “ceremonially planting trees in memory of all those unknown, unheralded and forgotten ancestors.”

So, since that day in 2007, in memory and hope (including hope, they soon added, in relation to climate change), has grown ceremonial tree plantings from Ghana to Senegal to Pulaski County, Tennessee, “the very county that gave birth to the Ku Klux Klan,” as well as other towns and villages across North America.

Belvie and Dedan eventually called their healing work “Growing a Global Heart,” and in an interview not long before his death in 2015, Dedan shared something he had once read, that if heart cells from two different people are placed in a petri dish, beating at different rates, “one of them will pause so that they can beat in synchronicity with one another.”

I don’t know if this is true, but what’s not to like about the metaphor, even if it is “only” a metaphor. As Dedan went on:

I think that’s what we yearn for – to be in synchronicity with other hearts. And that’s what “Growing a Global Heart is about.” To take pause from how you look at the world and try to beat in tandem with the other hearts around you.

Now, be sure to recall that all this grew from the most profound sorrow, hearts broken seemingly out of reach of any healing.

In other words all of this grew from what turned out to be the gift of broken hearts. Had Belvie and Dedan, even as committed as they had been for decades to social activism and civil rights, not experienced the sorrow and pain evoked at the Door-of-No-Return, they might never have asked the question about healing, and might not have created Growing a Global Heart... and I would not be sharing their story this morning.

Well, I’m not alone in saying, as you’ve often heard me say, that a broken heart is an open heart, or is if we allow it to be so: A heart open to healing, a heart open to others, a heart open to connecting and helping. All of which is the gift of a broken heart, all of which means that the best caregivers are often those with broken hearts.

For Belvie and Dedan, whatever they also did in their personal lives, the caregiving that grew from their broken hearts at the Door-of-No-Return seems on the

face of it, as you've heard, to be global in scale. But it also was personal – one tree planting in one community at a time, healing and inspiring maybe just one person, or one circle of people, at a time.

For caring and caregiving always begins with the personal, doesn't it? And we are often the best caregivers in relation to the sorrow and suffering of others that is similar to sorrow and suffering we have known.

Being a companion to my mother through her years with Alzheimer's Disease leading to her passing six years ago, experiencing the challenges and the sorrows of the progressive losses of this brutal disease, has I think enabled me to bring more understanding and to be more helpful to others on similar journeys. My broken heart becoming the gift of a heart more open to others living through much the same sorrows.

You each know something much like this through your own experiences: whether with cancer or depression or other serious illness, or with one or another form of addiction, or with grief, or with various other life challenges – loss of a job, a broken or abusive relationship... name your challenge or hardship.

For whatever has broken our heart also opens our heart to others, to the gift of deeper understanding and sympathy, enabling us to be better caregivers along the way of this, the life we share.

Today there are many broken hearts in Pittsburgh, following the Tree of Life Synagogue shootings. Our hearts too are broken.

Gift? Unbidden of course (as all wish this had never happened, wish that such things never happened), the gift is in the coming together we've been seeing, not only in Pittsburgh but across the country including here on the South Shore, the coming together among all faiths, across usual divisions and differences, community bonds strengthened rather than weakened or broken.

Yes, the gift of a broken heart always unbidden. But a gift nevertheless.

This morning's service is of course our annual Remembrance Service. So it is the reality and challenge of death and loss, in whatever way it comes to our dear one, which we set before ourselves. Death, the reality which comes to us all; sorrow, the grief that, with time and age come to us all, yet, if we allow it, opens our hearts more fully to life and living.

As one of you passed along to me this week, "death teaches us the importance of love and relationship." This is a gift that may not be easy to see or accept in the midst of the deepest throes of grief, but it is a gift nevertheless.

Even contemplating our own death, though it might break our heart in a different way, can be a gift, can be an opening to a life of deeper sympathy and gratitude. In this spirit, funeral director and poet Thomas Lynch composed a sonnet titled, ironically, "Refusing at Fifty-two to Write Sonnets":

It came to him that he could nearly count
How many Octobers he had left to him
In increments of ten or, say, eleven
Thus: sixty-three, seventy-four, eighty-five.

He couldn't see himself at ninety-six –
Humanity's advances notwithstanding
In health care, self-help, or New Age regimens –
What with his habits and family history,
The end he thought is nearer than you think.

The future, thus confined to its contingencies,
The present moment opens like a gift:
The balding month, the grey week, the blue morning,
The hour's routine, the minute's passing glance –
All seem like godsend now. And what to make of this?
At the end the word that comes to him is Thanks.

Thanks.

Not always easy to come by, this gratitude even with full awareness of life's suffering, including our own mortality. But one way or another all the religious traditions teach gratitude, gratitude with eyes and hearts wide open to the realities of life and death. For Buddhists compassion arises from fully integrating the reality of suffering into our understanding of life. Christians contemplate the suffering of Jesus on the cross as a way of opening hearts to our suffering sisters and brothers – and to our own.

Activist and writer Bryan Stevenson, with a thought that applies equally well to our personal and political lives, notes that we can choose to “embrace our humanness” which includes “embracing our broken natures” or we can deny it, and in so doing put aside compassion, denying “our own humanity.

Well, I choose humanity, broken hearts and all. I choose to seek to synchronize my beating heart with immigrants at the border, children dying in Yemen, with women who have been abused, with my LGBTQ sisters and brothers, with my sisters and brothers of all colors and backgrounds and religions... with our sisters and brothers in Pittsburgh... with you, whatever is breaking your heart these days.

There is, of course, no need to ask for a broken heart. Life will break our hearts one way or another, one time or another. So, to put the “choice” another way: We can choose whether or not to accept that broken-heartedness, soon or late, is part of life, and then whether or not to accept our broken heart as a gift, a gift that opens our hearts, opens us to deeper relationship, more enduring compassion, more love.

We may not know at first precisely the nature of this gift, but we can have faith that the gift will become gifts we can pass along, with thanks, to one another – gifts of healing.

So may it be