

**Unlikely Teachers**  
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**READINGS**

from *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, by Rachel Naomi Remen:

There is a Sufi story about a man who is so good that the angels ask God to give him the gift of miracles. God wisely tells them to ask him if that is what he would wish.

So the angels visit this good man and offer him first the gift of healing by hands, then the gift of conversion of souls, and lastly the gift of virtue. He refuses them all. They insist that he choose a gift or they will choose one for him. "Very well," he replies, "I ask that I may do a great deal of good without ever knowing it." The story ends this way:

The angels were perplexed. They took counsel and resolved upon the following plan: Every time the saint's shadow fell behind him it would have the power to cure disease, soothe pain, and comfort sorrow. As he walked, behind him his shadow made arid paths green, caused withered plants to bloom, gave clear water to dried-up brooks, fresh color to pale children, and joy to unhappy men and women. The saint simply went about his daily life diffusing virtue as the stars diffuse light and the flowers scent, without ever being aware of it. The people respecting his humility followed him silently, never speaking to him about his miracles. Soon they even forget his name and called him "the Holy Shadow."

....it is not only angels that carry divine messages of healing and guidance; any one of us may be used in this same way. We are messengers for each other. The difference between us and the folks with the wings is that we often carry these messages without knowing. Like the Holy Shadow.

from chapter 2 of Luke:

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed... And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem... to be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was that while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

## Sermon

“In the bleak midwinter... Christ a homeless stranger cradled in a manger on a bed of hay.”

Well, so the Gospels tell us, this the story that grew up around the teacher and prophet Jesus of Nazareth. And whether exactly true or not, we do know that nowhere is there a contrary narrative of Jesus’ birth into a class of nobility or riches.

In other words, Jesus was a most unlikely teacher as the world measures such things. No proverbial birth with a silver spoon in his mouth, no degree from Harvard Divinity School. Rather, he was, shall we say, of uncertain parentage, son of a carpenter; and even once he gained some renown in the region of Galilee, he was not so highly thought of in his own hometown of Nazareth.

Who could have guessed he would manifest a charismatic gift of healing that all accounts say was his? Who could have guessed that his teaching stories, his parables, would be able to awaken listeners to a new way of living, living here and now in something he called the Kingdom of Heaven – spread before us here and now had we eyes to see?

Who could have guessed that this child born of parents who apparently were living on the margins of society would as a young man gain a wide following of disciples and others during his life, not to mention inspiring the beginnings of a religious tradition that now numbers over two billion adherents?

Who could have guessed that, in spite of the failures within many Christian institutions and churches, this young man’s teaching and example would, centuries later, inspire the likes of an Indian leader named Gandhi and an American prophet named Martin?

Unlikely teacher indeed. Yet without doubt one of humanity’s great teachers.

Well, we’ve all had *likely* teachers in our lives – actual teachers or professors, mentors, our parents... but we’ve also had unlikely teachers, whether or not we’ve acknowledged them as such.

Here’s another, in most ways quite different, story of an unlikely teacher, one of my unlikely teachers.

Many of you knew Bill Bedard, the often homeless man who some of you befriended at one time or another, who our Deacons helped out on occasion, and who I had a role in helping over many years, until his death a few weeks ago.

Bill, in at least one way like Jesus, was also born into unlikely circumstances quite at the margins of society. Actually dealt a really tough hand, as we can rightly put it.

So far as I’ve been able to piece together, Bill’s parents were in many ways not at all well-off. In addition to not having much in the way of material resources, Bill’s father had severe mental illness, eventually living out his life in an institution, and his mother was unable on her own to take care of Bill and his siblings. This means that Bill was largely raised in various foster homes. Assessments I’ve seen in some paperwork Bill had suggest that as an adolescent he was creative and could be helpful around the house, but was also prone to violent incidents and petty thievery. He was described, in the language of the time, as mildly “retarded”.

Bill never had much of a chance really. Even so, he managed to create a life for himself, such as it was. He hurt people along the way, no question, spent some time in jail for his offenses, had a son who wanted nothing to do with him in later years, a daughter who found him, then disappeared.

Yet in spite of everything he faced, he carried on. Navigated the social service system, knew where and when free meals could be had at one or another church, followed the Red Sox avidly, somehow acquiring a collection of caps and jerseys – either with money he panhandled or through the generosity of one or another person who befriended him.

With the years he faced increasing physical challenges, related in large measure to mostly untreated diabetes. For the last eight years or so he was a single leg amputee, but still got around, first on a regular wheelchair, then on a scooter we managed to get for him, then another when he drove that one into the ground. And with all this, he made it down to Red Sox spring training just a few years ago!

Now, over the course of his life Bill learned that sometimes he could get what he wanted with anger and threats. To put it mildly, this made him a challenge to deal with. So he was often his own worst enemy in this regard; even so, he did have a good heart; for many years for example he volunteered at the Walk for Hunger, and in his good moments had kind words for those who helped him.

But he was indeed often a challenge to try to help, as the others who attended the memorial we had for Bill this past Tuesday also attested.

Well, you might be wondering, what sort of unlikely teacher could Bill have possibly been?

Well, here's a little of what I learned – and some of the others at his service had similar messages:

First. I thought I was already a pretty patient person. But over and over Bill tested the boundaries of that patience. So, while not giving in to any unrealistic demands, I know that I grew in patience over my years helping Bill.

Which in part I was able to do in relation to the second quality I learned or strengthened from my time with Bill: humility.

After all, how could I complain about Bill's importuning or even his cursing, when I live in comfort he could only imagine, comfort that mostly has to do purely with the proverbial luck of the draw. Bill was dealt a bad hand, and I was dealt a good one, through no virtue of mine.

Further, how would I have managed in the life circumstances Bill found himself in? Would I have had the grit, the determination, the savvy to navigate life as Bill managed to do, however dramatically imperfectly?

For he did make a life, and while the harm he caused others is not for me to forgive, he loved his family such as it was, kept track as best he could of the whereabouts of his brother and aunts and uncles and even his estranged children. He did have a good heart, as anyone who took the time and had the patience would eventually see.

He was, after all – this most unlikely and I'm pretty sure unintentional – teacher... he was as much a child of God as any of the rest of us. I am humbled as I keep that in mind and heart. Having learned from this unlikely teacher.

Briefly a third unlikely teacher, the sort we have all experienced – and this is our being taught by circumstances or situations we would not have asked for, but which, once they arrive, we can if we choose learn from.

My most recent example of such an unlikely teacher is this broken elbow – in the larger scheme of things a small matter, an irritation that will pass as it heals; but for these weeks occasionally painful and frequently an inconvenience. The lessons? Again, to begin with, patience and humility.

A reminder, to put it in Buddhist terms, that as human beings we are all subject to aging, to falling ill – and it turns out just to falling! And also a reminder that we can't get

through life, certainly not life's challenges, alone – in this case I am grateful to be part of an interdependent web of family, medical professionals, and you. We are, after all, all in this thing called life together, sometimes helper, sometimes helped... and humbled by this (literally brought down to earth!) in the best way. Good lessons to learn or re-learn, whatever it takes.

Finally, then, how about us?

We might each think that we are pretty unlikely teachers or healers. What do we know after all? We are not Jesus or Buddha; and most of us are not expert orthopedic surgeons or professors at Harvard or M.I.T.

But here's the thing: We are no more unlikely than anyone else. You heard the reading from Rachel Naomi Remen, the story of the Holy Shadow, and then her reflection that though we may not have the wings of angels, we too often carry healing or helping messages often without knowing it.

Indeed, the messages we carry with our words and deeds are far more important than any accumulation of wealth or position or prestige. In other words, we are often teaching one thing or another whether we think we are teaching or not.

This means we would do well to be as conscious as we can about what messages we are carrying – so that we might be a little more likely, with patience and humility, to be spreading this season and always, peace, hope, joy, and love – rather than... well you know what I mean.

Well then, may we take lessons where we find them, blessings they are, whether from sources likely or unlikely.

And may we spread with lavish hand those lessons and blessings – again, this season and always.

Not least of course the helping and healing message of love: at the heart of Jesus' teaching, and that I observed in all those who made the effort to help Bill, including the many health care professionals, social workers, aides, who treated Bill with the same attentive care and compassion as they would treat the governor or a Red Sox star; and that I've experienced throughout my little elbow escapade – from, as I've said, family, friends, and those health care professionals. So many blessings

And you see, Bill was in some ways no more alone than I – for none of us are, however much we might sometimes feel we are.

Wishing you all blessings of this season of Hanukkah, Solstice, Christmas...

Amen.

So may it be.