

A Crucible That Can Hold Us
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning. I went to Boston recently to pick up a friend at South Station. I went to Boston and I was early to meet the train, early by more than an hour. So, I took myself out to lunch. I went to an old favorite. I went to Kelly's Roast Beef in the Town of Revere, even though my stomach wasn't ready. And I had the fried clams. And they were so good...so good before the cost. Fried foods at 57...

Did you know the Town of Revere was founded as North Chelsea originally? It was founded back in the 1840s and later renamed after the famous American patriot from the Revolutionary War, Paul Revere. We have a connection with him. Paul Revere worked with metals—super-high heat and molten ore...poured in a crucible that was tough enough to hold the volatile and dangerous process, that process that yields the things we tend to need in life—the things we build with, the things we cook with... Paul Revere is the maker of the bell, the Revere bell, that rings right here at North Chapel. There are actually five of his bells in the Town of Woodstock.

I looked up this history wondering why they chose that particular name. I was spiritually curious...because to revere is to have a deep and abiding respect for something. I wondered if that's what had inspired them but it was not. It was Paul Revere. I think that's pretty cool.

Come with me on a journey, will you? It is a journey of what I will call good-soul ministry. Draw a deep breath in and let it's release re-teach your body how to relax. It isn't difficult but it tends to take a little courage. It tends to take more courage than you think.

Let me tell you where I was when I wrote this. I was at the ER at DHMC. I was at the ER—at the Emergency Room—at DHMC—at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. There are lots of different kinds of churches in the world as I see the world these days. I am reminded of a song by Peter Mayer about how frequently we can find the holy/

When I was a boy each week
On Sunday, we would go to church
Pay attention to the priest
And he would read the holy word
And consecrate the holy bread
And everyone would kneel and bow
Today the only difference is
That everything is holy now
Everything, everything, everything is holy now

I feel it like that these days...on this journey of good-soul ministry. In fact, I found myself crying in the pastoral care team meeting this week. Right in the middle of a

sentence, no lump in my throat, no warning, I just burst into tears. I might have freaked the team out a little. I don't know. I don't think so. They're pretty tough.

So, when I was sitting at the ER visiting with Peggy, that song occurred to me, it was because it seemed like the ER was like a sanctuary—too busy with too much light and too few crayons for the children, busy with beeping machines and flashy monitors...but it was holy. It was holy in the best sense of the word...the sense that has one objective—to keep us as healthy as possible.

It's a good kind of church. There are lots of different kinds...and I'm not talking about the common denominations, of which we are one along with the Lutherans and the Baptists and the Seventh Day Adventists and the Catholics and the Jews and the Muslims (Shiite and Sunni, Ahmadiyyan and Sufi... They are as varied as the other Abrahamic faiths). We are common, along with the Mennonites and the Anglicans and the Episcopalians and the Coptics and the Buddhists...and the Presbyterians...

You know, man, I still react because of that guy I met in Texas—Jim Hightower, the comedian. He's the one that told that weird-awkward joke in the hotel ballroom, the one about "Presbyterians" that made me nervous. He warned us first. I was afraid that he was going to be vulgar or offensive or racist...that something hostile send us all into a tizzy.

We've talked about this before. If you'll forgive me, let me remind you... So, Jim Hightower said, "You know, I've always felt funny about 'Presbyterians' and hope this won't upset you too much. I've just got to give you the low-down on what I know. I have just got to tell you that if you rearrange all of the letters in the word 'Presbyterians,' you end up with Britney Spears. And it's not just a laugh-line. It's true. You should try it yourself, if you don't believe me. It's weird.

Needless to say, we all erupted in laughter and relief. I will not soon forget that moment. We all felt connected with one another. That was sacred in a whole new way.

The point of all of this is that there are many different kinds of churches. There are many different houses of faith, many different temples for the soul, many different synagogues of the sacred, many different sanctums of the human spirit...

Marianne Williamson tells the story about working in a bar when she was young, before she became a healer, a spiritualist and a presidential candidate. She tells the story of a man who sat down before her, ordering drinks and telling his tale of woe to the woman who was serving him liquor. This man was complaining about his wife. Marianne counseled him. She offered him, not her passive sympathy but rather, her active wisdom...which, needless to say, did not go over well. The man objected and Marianne persisted until the man threatened to withhold her tip. At this point, she turned to him...with renewed kindness and said, "Oh! I think I understand now. You think this is a bar and I know that it's a church." There are different houses of faith in this wide world of ours...and the one I visited one of the houses yesterday when I went to the ER of DHMC in Lebanon.

The good-spirit journey to the Emergency Room yesterday was so beautiful. It was so lovely spending time with Peggy. She says hello, btw...from that house of faith to this one. This way, we can stay connected—soul to soul, through the night and into the break of day.

This mornin' outside I stood.
I saw a little red wing bird
Shining like a burning bush,
And singing like a scripture verse.
It made me want to bow my head.
I remember when church let out.
How things have changed since then.
Everything is holy now.
Everything, everything, everything is holy now

Even when... And especially when life tries to makes us believe otherwise. Something holds us together when things get hot, when times get rough. Something holds us in the crucible. What is that thing? ...that thing that makes us smile out from the inside? ...that thing that makes us fall down to our knees? ...that thing that also rises, against the odds and against the grain? It rises to call us, to summon us back into our center, into our fullness, into the beauty of our lives?

What is that sense of hope that leads us on and moves us forward? The great poet, William Shakespeare, got it wrong in a general sense. In Hamlet, he got it wrong when he said, "Frailty, thy name is woman." He was right particularly but wrong in general. Great strength and bringer of life and life-affirming love, thy name is woman. I'm sure that this is true more generally. True of every mother in every possible circumstance, true of every child that is born of her, true of Mother Earth and true of us. We are all her children even when...especially when life tries to makes us believe otherwise. May this spirit always find a way to rise.

Before becoming a minister, I was a college professor. I became a professor of music in 1998. I trained hard to achieve that title and I was terrified to assume it. I was terrified to stand in front of students and ask them to hear with better ears. I had no idea how I could make that happen. It has been the journey of a lifetime trying to figure out just how to do that, trying to learn this lesson for myself. All good teachers are humble students. All good teachers know, soul-level deep, that they were truly called to teach. That's why they do it. It's what drives them and makes them tick.

I remember do a lot of research on excellent teachers, anxious to learn the tricks of the trade. I purchased day-planners and post-it notes, calendars and cue cards. Solemnly, I walked the quite catacombs of Office Max. I thought I was ready and then, two things happened that proved me wrong—one, I read The Artist's Way and two, I watched a documentary film about teaching that blew my mind. In The Artist's Way, I read something about learning to trust myself, something about not preparing everything and planning everything down to the last detail...because you never know what's gonna happen in the moment. And in the documentary film about teaching, I came across this weirdo who I instantly loved.

On the first day of class, he prepared the room. He cleaned it up nice. He cleared the space of all distracting energies. Then, he arranged the chairs into a perfect circle. No privileged place. No place to hide.

Then, ten minutes before the class was scheduled to begin, in the center of his circle of chairs, he would lay himself down on the ground. He'd lay on his back, looking up at the ceiling. He would lay on his back and he would dream about the sky. Then, as if by magic, instead of teaching formulaically, he waited for his students to arrive and once they did, he invited them into his dream. More deeply, he invited them into their dreams by showing the courage to share of his own.

Were you to lay down on the earth, your back to the ground and your eyes to the sky, what dreams may come to spend some time in play...in this good morning...on this good Sunday? What dreams?

There is so much that divides us these days. We've been tearing ourselves apart for a good-long while...with casual unkindness, with guns, with war, with foolishness, with tragedy... What caldron, what crucible, what container is strong enough to hold us when times get rough? ...when we find ourselves in the spiritual emergency rooms of life, not knowing how we got there and not knowing what we need to heal? Do we have the tools we need? Do we know how to get them, if we don't? Do we know how to use them, if we do? Do we have the patience that we need to use them well? As Georgia O'Keefe once said,

No one sees a flower—really—it is so small and it takes time—an we haven't time—and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time.

Georgia O'Keefe painted flowers her whole life long. She took the time. Will we take the time? Will we take the time to become indivisible again? We were great when we were indivisible. How is it that we've forgotten about all of that?

Hosea Ballou is purported to have said, "We need not think alike to love alike." I'm not sure that he actually said that but he did say the following:

If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury; but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good. Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.

Amen.

Ballou believed that heaven is the place that holds us all but what crucible holds us, not in the sweet hereafter, but in the here and now? What happens when we fight? What holds us together when we disagree? ...when we don't see eye-to-eye? Should we privately judge one another...or shall we publicly take the time it takes to reconnect—by seeing the error in our ways, by gently holding fast to truth, by respectfully agreeing to disagree—not as a shill, as a fake or as a phony feigning humility where none exist but agreeing in grace and deepest compassion for ourselves and one another. Can the crucible of time deliver this? I'd like to say that time itself will hold us. I like the poetry of that but I don't believe it's true. I only know is that it's worth taking the time, taking the time to figure it out...with a sense of hope.

Gloria Steinem took the time. She gave a three-hour interview. She found the patience and she took the time. I was relieved to hear he say these words: "Hope is form of planning." It was during that laborious 3-hour interview that I was talking about. "Hope is a form of planning," she said. This idea gives people like me a cause to celebrate, especially coming from her. How many people (how many men) told

Gloria Steinem the she was impractical, that she was a dreamer, that want she wanted to see in the world was simply impossible? I wonder how quickly she developed a set of strategies to defend herself? How can we develop such a set of defensive strategies? ...not self-defensive strategies but those that best protect the fragile dream we call North Chapel? ...strategies that can hold us together?

In a manner of speaking, Brené Brown the spiritual daughter of Gloria Steinem. Brené (like so many of us) is Gloria's living inheritance. She is one of Steinem's leading beneficiaries in public life and there are hundreds or there are hundreds of thousands of these.

Gloria Steinem says that, "Feminism is memory." Perhaps, time is the crucible that can hold us. Steinem reminds us of a time that preceded this one when things were not this way. Boastful men did not always sit atop great fortunes making laws and proclamations. Women resisted. Women and men resisted. Churches resisted. What powers supported them—supported these women, these men, these people, these churches. What power allowed for them to dream

In 1873, a woman named Louisa May Alcott decided that she wanted to be a writer. She wrote about heavenly dreams and she wrote about earthbound utopia and in 1868, she a book called Little Women. What a dreamer she was! What a vision she had and shared with the world! Louisa May Alcott. I wonder if the crucible that protected her is related to the crucible that protects us? We are part of the same tradition. The Unitarian church that nurtured her in Brooklyn, CT in the 19th century is spiritually connected to the Unitarian Universalist church that nurtures us in Woodstock, VT in the 21st century. I wonder if it was something in our tradition of faith that encouraged her to dream. I

Last year, we explored the Seven Principles as adopted at the General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio in 1984. These are the Principles that appear in the hymnal, Singing the Living Tradition. In its first few pages, it reads:

WE, THE MEMBER CONGREGATIONS OF THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION, COVENANT TO AFFIRM AND PROMOTE:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all,
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

In short,

1. Worth and dignity
2. Justice, equity, and compassion
3. Acceptance and growth
4. Truth and meaning

5. Conscience and democracy
6. Peace, liberty, and justice and
7. Kudos for the interdependent web

I started going to in 1972. The Seen Principles, as we receive them today, did not yet exist...not as we receive them today. They did exist less formally, within the hearts and souls of individuals. In 1954, the year of the Brown v. Board of Education decision in the U.S. Supreme Court, Rev. Harold R. Dean write a Credo, an intentional statement of his beliefs. He wrote,

I believe in the creative power at work in the Universe,
in the mystery of life,
in the divine in every person,
in the possibility of a better world,
in the lasting effects of all my actions,
in the redemptive power of love,
in the increase of knowledge through the use of reason,
in the respect for my own thoughts,
in honoring those who have fought for new ideas
and in the reverence for all that is true and good and beautiful.

A reverence for all that is true and good and beautiful. I understand this to be the essence of our faith. It strips away all that which takes us apart from one another and it magnifies what strives to keep us whole. I understand this to be the crucible that can hold us, more so than time. For time is short and time is fleeting. And there are hard times. And there are good times. Time flies when we're having fun. And time runs out and time is up...and time just keeps on slipping, slipping, slipping into the future. Time's funny that way.

Reverence is different. Maybe reverence is the vessel, the tough-enough crucible that can hold us, the tender-enough touch that keeps us whole. To revere is to have deep and abiding respect for something. I wondered if that's what inspires us. What a beautiful gift to give the world today. I pray we'll try.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.