

As Resilient as New Clay
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North Universalist Chapel Society

The strangest thought came to me on this morning
As I awake to greet the coming dawn
The sun was hardly peaking through the garden
It felt that with everything I was one
Then I wished that I could come back as a flower

—Stevie Wonder

The blues teaches otherwise. It's not nearly as optimistic, especially when it comes to heartache and heartbreak. The blues reminds us,
I'd rather be blind, crippled and crazy
And somewhere pushing up a daisy
Than to let you break my heart all over again

Stevie Wonder is blind...but he is not crippled and crazy. A great light shines in him. He's more resilient than most of us. He doesn't want us to lie beneath the ground and push up daisies. He wants us all to come back as the flowers.

I find this particular passage to be a good example of resilience. Unfortunately, I'm not feeling particularly resilient these days. In fact, I feel like the opposite of resilient. I feel as resilient as new clay. Rubber is resilient. It springs back into shape. Clay is quite the opposite. It retains the shape of what presses against it.

I like clay. It soothes me. Years ago, I considered becoming a potter. There was a good month back in the 1980s when I thought about turning away from ministry and music and really getting into clay. My friend, Martha, was helpful to me. She told me where I could take classes. She shared her experiences—wedging the clay to remove bubbles...because air can get trapped in the clay and affect the outcome of one's creation. So, you have to wedge the clay. You have to knead it like a heavy dough.

That's one of the very first steps in the process. You wedge the clay to prepare for the wheel. Then, you center it and you center yourself. At this point, with water and with temerity and a little skill, you open the clay with your index finger. Then, you throw the pot. You gently bring your clay creation into being. It's a beautiful process. It takes a while but it's really gorgeous to watch...if you're patient enough.

Once the pot comes into being, you cut it from the wheel with a wire and then you let it dry on its own for a while naturally. The, you glaze it and fire it in a kiln...at very high heat.

This clay is in a slow process of transformation. It is in a multi-phase process of hardening...of toughening up. In the beginning, of course, the clay is malleable. You work it best with the water. It softens but then, dries quickly as the water evaporates. After the clay is wedged and centered, opened and thrown into being, the drying/hardening process begins...slowly at first. Until the final phase, of course, when the clay goes into the kiln, when the clay dries and hardens quickly under fire.

It's a beautiful process but at no point along the way the clay ever truly "resilient." It's not a good model for us today. In this late-summer month of August, we've been exploring the theme of resilience. So, it may seem odd, even antithetical, to be talking about clay. Clay does not bounce back. It holds the shape that is impressed upon it. It's not resilient in any way. It is the opposite of resilient...which is how I feel right now. I feel like the opposite of resilient. I feel precisely as resilient as new clay.

As I endure the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune in life these days, I am not feeling particularly resilient. Not after hearing the news from Afghanistan and how desperate things are over there...how desperate we all are for what has happened since 9/11. I don't feel resilient after the long, hard year and change of COVID and then, the vaccine controversies...and now, the new variants (delta, lambda...). I am not feeling resilient. I'm feeling the slings and arrows. They've left quite an impression on me.

"Slings and arrows" is Shakespeare's poetry...from the most famous part of Hamlet, when the young prince muses,

To be, or not to be: that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them?

To take arms against the troubled sea... That sounds more like resilience to me. That sounds like bouncing back against adversity and taking it on. That sounds like something that we should be talking about as we explore our theme...because, you know, the worship team worked so hard. I hope not to disappoint them. Working together so honestly, so earnestly, in compassionate reflection... They put together the theme that we should be exploring this morning. Of the concept of resilience, they wrote this:

An uprooted plant can be set into a new soft bed of soil, watered and given sunshine. In time its wilted leaves may revive and grow new shoots past the broken stems, and bloom in its harried state. Those roots can hold and find nourishment in a new place. We fall down...we seek to get up. One can develop strength in the midst of challenge. We seek resources within ourselves, but it is often our strong and supportive relationships that help us find the good way forward.

My guiding image this morning is not an uprooted plant. It is the clay, the mud from which it rises.

I thought about choosing a different image but I was tired and in a mood. I didn't have the energy to take arms against the sea of troubles. I just wanted to walk

away. The sea can be troubled without me for a while. I can't always respond to its troubles, to its tidal urgency. I can't correct for the nature of the world, for the pull of moon on tides. That's not what resilience is anyway. Not really. Not all the time. Sometimes, resilience is getting ready to bounce back. New clay is about getting ready.

In seminary, they call this preaching against the text, turning things around to see what happens. Truly, I think that resilience is important. At the same time, I don't want to be dishonest. I don't want to stand before you with false enthusiasm. I want to discover the meaning of resilience in a brand, new way, in any unlikely way, in an uncommon way.

If we are lucky, we'll find an inverse usefulness of my metaphor. New clay is not resilient...and neither am I sometimes. I am not an eternal optimist. I don't always have energy enough to look on the bright side of things all of the time. I don't always spring back to life with vim and vigor. I regularly require substantial amounts of caffeine. I am often toppled over by life, wounded by it, enraged by it...defeated by it. I'm not always up for resilience... I'm not always game for "bouncing back."

The Bible says that you and I are fashioned out of clay. The Psalmists say that clay symbolizes what our lives are like before we're saved. In the Book of Bob Dylan (which I believe is in the Apocrypha), there is a song called Joey in which the following is written:

Larry was the oldest, Joey was next to last
They called Joe "Crazy," the baby they called "Kid Blast."
Some say they lived off gambling and runnin' numbers too
It always seemed they got caught between the mob and the men in blue

Joey, Joey
King of the streets, child of clay

The version of this song that I heard was recorded when Dylan was playing with the Grateful Dead. Beautiful.

And then, there is that story that appears in the Gospel of John...

As he walked along, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

Jesus said:

"As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud [which is translated as "clay" in the King James version and Jesus spread this "mud," this "clay" on the blind man's eyes,] saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam. Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

I can't help but wonder if the clay or the mud that was spread upon and then washed from the eyes of Stevie Wonder was the clay and the mud of music, of songs in the key of life as he might say. It seems fair and reasonable and real to suggest

that through his artistry, Stevie Wonder gives great gift to the world. Great light. Music is his light and, though our singing, is ours as well.

This is powerful clay. This is what he is. This is what we are. We are powerful clay. This has been true for quite some time. One story goes back to Star Island.

As you may know, I just got back from a 6-day conference on Star. For those who may not know, Star Island is a camp and conference center that is located ten miles of the coast of Portsmouth, NH. It's jointly owned and cared for by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ. For that last six days, I lead a workshop on storytelling.

Gabe was on island...and so was his sister, Julia. She was just visiting. She was not out there for the whole summer. Her brother was. He's been out there since mid-May.

I have been going out to Star Island ever since I was a kid. In fact, years before Gabe and Julia were born or even imagined, I led a workshop at Star on leadership...and Gabe and Julia's mother, Beth Ross, was in that workshop. I just saw her a few days ago.

In the workshop that I led back then, we read poetry together. We considered the lives of artists. We asked brave questions of ourselves...and we played with some powerful clay. I ran an exercise that I will never forget...well, who knows. I hope I don't forget it.

The workshop met in the Stone Village in the center of the island, in a place called Vaughn Cottage. The day before we did the exercise, I asked everyone to come in clothes that could get dirty and I asked that they bring a blindfold—one that was comfortable and could be wore for the duration of that day's workshop if need be. And they did...without question...which was good because I would not have answered if asked.

On the day of the exercise, they arrived and we sat on the floor, in a circle, as we always had. We began as soon as we were settled and quiet. "Please, get ready to put your blindfolds on. We will do so as soon as I explain the rules." Everyone got ready. I said, "This exercise happens in silence. There won't be any talking. I will play some music on occasion. You can ask for water when you need to by extending arm, opening your hand and cupping your fingers like this. I will come around as soon as possible and place water in the palm of your hand." I showed them how to ask for the water that would be required. It was an obvious analogy for asking for the help that they might need in life. It was something that we had covered earlier in the workshop. Then, I let them know that there would be no further instructions spoken to them although they made receive directions in other ways. "Now, it is time to put your blindfolds on." They did.

Audibly, I tore off as many sheets of newsprint as there were participants in the class. I laid the pieces of newsprint on the floor before each student and guided their hands so they could visualize the placement of the newsprint in front of them. Then, audibly once and again, I delivered a softball-size portion of clay to every person in the workshop. They began to handle with the clay immediately, some smiling and other not, each quickly realizing that extending their arms, opening

their hands and cupping their fingers would enable them to better mold the clay that they had received.

We sat there molding clay for about 35 or 40 minutes. It felt much longer because no one knew what was happening. We just made stuff in each other's company—bowls, cubes, balls, cylinders at first...then these things developed into more complicated objects.

I began to take a stronger lead. I became more instructional. I gave clear, warning signs. I let them know that the creative period was coming to a close. When it did, I asked them to place the clay directly before them and, gently, to remove their blindfolds, taking care to look only at what they had created, non-judgmentally. They did.

Then, we had a parade. I asked them to follow me in a line and in silence from the Stone Village in the center of the island over the path that leads by the Chapel and down to the lawn in front of the hotel. The hotel has a long porch in front of it and a long line of rocking chairs running along it. People sit there, taking in the view. We would be plainly in their sights.

On the front lawn, before the eyes of many, we sat in a circle once again. The circle was more broad this time—a longer diameter, a higher circumference. We had a lot more room this time. We could spread out. We could fan out a lot more. This time, the instructions were different. We would go in turns. When it was our turn to be the shower of our new clay works of art, the instructions were to stand and then, to walk around the inside of the circle, showing our creation with care to everyone else in the workshop. Everyone but the shower was to carefully study the clay, imagining how we might take its shape—its form—with our bodies.

Once the shower had gone all of the way around the circle, we were to place our clay in the place where we were sitting, walk into the middle of the circle and embody the clay creation that we had made. This way, everyone could see how the shaper of the clay saw what they had made. Following this and with the shower still in the center of the circle, everyone else assumed the shape of what we'd seen. This way, the shaper of the clay, the creator of the piece, could see themselves reflected through the medium of the clay itself.

The second to last step was placing the clay creation on my old, cable sweater—this old, cable sweater, actually. Our clay had to be touching at least one other piece of clay or the sweater. Once everyone had done this, we could move to the final step. In the same order in which we placed clay on my old sweater, going around the circle for the last time, we embodied our own piece of clay and became one living, breathing sculpture...right there on the front lawn. I was laying beneath the whole thing, embodying my sweater.

I can't explain to how or why but being that clay sculpture that day—embodying what we had shaped and brought into being—was one of the most joyful and joy-filled experiences of my life. It was rejuvenating. It was exhilarating. It was like the joy of life sprung right up from the earth in full bloom. Rachel had made a tree. Mark broke his clay into hundreds of pieces. In that moment (and still now, looking back), we all felt so connected. We all belonged. It was like what Stevie Wonder said,

The strangest thought came to me on this morning

As I awake to greet the coming dawn
The sun was hardly peaking through the garden
It felt that with everything I was one

We were the Earth. The Earth was us. We were all so deeply connected at that point...and, even more importantly, we were unafraid.

In the Book of Bob Dylan, there are many passages about being deeply connected and unafraid. The one that comes to mind right now is the one about the bomb shelters, the ones that we constructed wherein to escape the effect of nuclear war. Dylan wrote,

Let me drink from the waters where the mountain streams flood
Let the smell of wildflowers flow free through my blood
Let me sleep in your meadows with the green grassy leaves
Let me walk down the [road] with my brother in peace
Let me die in my footsteps
Before I go down under the ground

He didn't want to retreat in to the ground for imagined safety. He was more brave than that. He wanted to face life squarely. He wanted to look fear right in the face without flinching. The clay of the earth—from which we've been crafted, as some believe—this clay is not protective of life in the poetry. It's generative of life.

Hozier, another poet, write,

When my time comes around
Lay me gently in the cold, dark earth
No grave could hold my body down...

The clay of the earth is generative of life. Genuinely (profoundly, even), the clay of this good earth is resilient. In its own way, it brings us back to life.

So, when we are broken and tired and weary of the world and all that is heavy, remember to be the light, to be the flower. Let's let the clay return us to the world of the living, carefully sharing our bloom and our blossom with one another.

May it be so. Blessed be, Ashe and Amen.