



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“What Is At Stake?”

© by Tom Camp, M.Div., M.S.

Homily delivered on March 5, 2017

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

The wound is the place where the Light enters you.--Jalaluddin Rumi

You are always here standing between me and the emptiness between me and myself.—

A young girl's poem written for high school yearbook

I want to unfold. Let no place in me hold itself closed, for where I am close, I am false.—

Ranier Maria Rilke

Homily:

The past few weeks have had some unseasonable warm weather, sending a message to our friends the plants to start spring sprouting and even blooming. I noticed a beautiful daffodil drooping, its stem bent like it had been stepped on – probably a deer or raccoon in my urban neighborhood. Nourishment was not getting through to the flower. I propped it up with some small sticks, hoping as the stem was straight nourishment could again flow to the flower. Guess what, the flower was vibrant and beautiful the next day. Listening carefully, and with a little creative imagination, I heard it say, “thank you.”

The theme your congregation has selected for March is “brokenness.” I understand this as your awareness that something essential is blocked or choked in our bodies and spirits, in our relationships, and in our body politic.

When we experience brokenness, the necessary nourishment for our wellbeing does not flow with ease, is restricted, and may even be blocked. “Broken” sounds permanent, final, like Humpty Dumpty, who all the King’s horses and all the King’s men could not put back together. But one of my 10 or so favorite coffee mugs, sustained a broken handle, and with some careful work I was able to glue it back. The crack and some glue was visible, and it finally broke again a few years later. I learned three things about brokenness: One, brokenness is not final, and that, I suggest, is a central tenant of our faith as spiritual communities. Two, brokenness often leaves scars, as African Americans know about slavery and prejudice, Jews know about the holocaust, and others know who’ve experienced traumas.

That brokenness is not final is evident in biology and psychology. Many cells are programmed to reproduce themselves, so that a human body begins with the uniting of two tiny cells that reproduce and specialize and eventually we are composed of over 10 trillion cells. Go ahead, count them.

A good many cells in our bodies are specialized to facilitate consciousness. It is our consciousness that lets us know we experience some brokenness in our lives. And it is also our consciousness that gives us the powerful gift of choice, so that we are both free to and responsible to choose to mend our brokenness. That is, “response – able” to mend our brokenness.

Here’s a difficulty with our response-ability. Our brain is structured and programmed to protect us from threats and dangers. It has saved our ancestors and us from falling over cliffs, drowning, being consumed by fires and carnivorous animals, being conquered by enemies, from catching diseases and being poisoned by toxins. And here is one of our central struggles in being response-able to mend our brokenness: since brokenness is disturbing and contains a threat to our wellbeing, to our values, and even to our physical safety, it thus engages this wonderful protection mechanism we have that narrows our awareness to the threat and concentrates our energy in defensive stances.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman helped us understand how our natural defensiveness works in systems. As a family therapist and an organizational consultant, he observed that as anxiety increases in any system – in our families, congregations, nations and world – four things tend to happen:

1. We herd into like-minded groups, quite sure that those in other-minded or even very different groups are opposing us, totally wrong, or even “bad”;
2. We find something or someone to blame for the source of our anxiety; because having a specific source of threat is less anxious than ambiguous or complex sources of threat. This leads to the third tendency:
3. We seek a quick-fix so we do not have to tolerate the anxiety for long; a quick fix that is inadequate or even seriously damaging: often a quick-fix is to disempower or get rid of those we see as threatening; and
4. In our roles as leaders (parents, clergy, politicians, teachers, executives, mentors, etc.) we fail to have the nerve to manage our own anxiety so we can lead us all out of the mess.

So, even though we may have response-ability to mend our brokenness, the natural unintentional human tendency is to increase the brokenness by herding, blaming, seeking quick-fixes, and to be ineffective leaders.

And here is the good news in human biology. Our brains have far more resources than the self-protective parts. Parts of our brain that further evolved during the Axial Age (beginning about 1000 years before Christ) enable us to observe our anxiety and fear, our tendencies to herd, blame and quick fix.

These functions of our brain enable us to self-regulate our anxiety and make thoughtful responses that are informed by wide experience and awareness of longer-term consequences – that is, make responses that are more likely to produce effective leadership and to mend our brokenness.

It was also during the Axial age that the major world religions developed.

I want to suggest that a major purpose of authentic religion is to connect us beyond our threat-perception to hope and possibility and courage; beyond our defensiveness to courageous love, and therefore to response-ability. Authentic religion does not leave us in our brokenness but resources and guides us in mending our brokenness.

So, if we put together our natural tendency as human beings to get defensive in the midst of anxiety and brokenness, with our capacity as awake conscious moral beings, we can be mindful of what is at stake in our present situation and make choices that safeguard and nurture what is at stake.

The first thing at stake is our concept of what it is to be a human being. In our anxious state we may feel helpless – like we cannot change our situation. We may see other people as stupid or evil. We may think of humans as inherently sinful. These are not adequate or truthful ideas about being a human being.

Rather,

- We are complex, conscious beings.
- We are dynamic life-energy manifesting in intelligent bodies.
- We can become aware of our deepest yearnings and our most profound hungers and ideals.
- We can make choices based in wide awareness of complex possibilities, grounded in our most cherished values.
- We can emerge out of our self-protective cocoons and into the journey of the hero, in Joseph Campbell's words, a journey that he says "will unlock and release again the flow of life into the body of the world."
- This is what it is to be human. If you are finished counting your ten trillion cells, pause and soak in these qualities of being human.

The second thing at stake is our experience of community. Our natural tendency is to herd into like-minded groups, suspicious of and blaming toward others. This is destructive of community. On the other hand, our spirit-based communities are manifestations of our common humanness and our collective consciousness as seekers of justice, health and well-being for all. A function of spirit-based communities is to transform us from isolated entities into beautifully unique parts of much larger systems – collective systems that increase our strength, resources and power in being response-able.

The third thing that is at stake is our concept of Divinity. What is the character of Ultimate Reality, of what we call God, of the Force? In our brokenness we either sense no force beyond our own helplessness. We may experience our cosmos as it is depicted in the beginning of Star Wars movies: the dark empire consumes everything, overpowers and overwhelms all possibilities.

I suggest

- that biological cells reaching out for nourishment and reproducing into specialization,
- that plants turning leaves toward the sunlight and extending roots into the ground for nourishment, and
- that the deep shared values of awake human beings,
- and even the wonders of modern physics

all point to some profoundly deep and yet transcendent force of life, a force that – regardless of what we name it or how we conceive of it – sustains and calls us beyond ourselves into community, curiosity, adventure, service and hope. A force whose essential quality is love.

It is our task as spiritual communities to nurture and grow these awarenesses and qualities of being human in communities in vital connection with Divinity. And especially so when some of the principalities and powers in the world are pulling in a different direction.

In Hindu philosophy, we are now in the time of Shiva, who, among other roles, is the god of destruction. Shiva's destruction leads to renewal, to new possibilities and to hope. Even in the most common experience of breathing, we exhale carbon dioxide in order to invite in fresh

oxygen. May the brokenness we now experience be the destruction that opens us to renew and deepen our sense of the tremendous experience of our humanness; may it strengthen our community; may this brokenness awaken faith in the transcendent forces that enliven, sustain and empower us in steadfast love and hope.

Amen.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. What is Ultimate Reality [God, Divinity, the Beloved, the Infinite] like in your experience? How have your concepts of Ultimate Reality evolved over your life?
2. Do you trust that human beings can change for the better? What is the source of your trust?
3. How and where have you experienced transformative community?
4. Do you focus more on the pain and danger of brokenness or on the hope and faith in healing our brokenness?