

Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

Order of Service

July 13, 2014

Fear Not These Dark Emotions

Rob Craig-Comin

GATHERING

Gathering Music – *Roald Wilson*

A time for quiet centering before the service

Welcome – *Gail Page*

CENTERING

Sounding of the Tingsha

Introit – *Roald Wilson*

Opening Words – *Rob Craig-Comin*

Our opening words today come from William Shulz

Come into this place of peace
And let its silence heal your spirit;
Come into this place of memory
and let its history war your soul;
Come into this place of prophesy and power
And let its vision change your heart.

*Opening Hymn # 1000 (Teal) “Morning has Come”

Lighting of the Chalice – *Gail Page*

Please join in our chalice lighting words,

In the light of truth,
The warmth of community
The Fire of Commitment,
We gather this day.
May the flame we now kindle
Be to us a symbol
Of the holiness we seek.

Call to Meditation – *Rob Craig-Comin*

Our call to meditation is # 1053 in the teal hymnal, “How Could Anyone Ever Tell You”. We will sing it twice. The first time through sing to someone you know who would benefit from the loving thoughts you are sending to them. The second time through, sing it to yourself.

GOING DEEPER

Sharing of Joys and Sorrows – *Gail Page*

This is the part of the service where we share our lives with each other, sharing each other's sorrows and celebrating each other's joys. During this time, we give each other the gift of being heard, the service of acknowledging and valuing each individual's paths in life.

If you have something you'd like to share this morning, a joy or a sorrow, a milestone or a concern, please raise your hand and _____ of the Pastoral Care Team, will bring the microphone to you. Tell us who you are, so we might know you better and, briefly, let us know what is in your heart.

Candle of Community – *Gail Page (Rob will light the candle)*

In addition to the joys and sorrows that have found voice today, we light this candle of community to honor those thoughts that have been left unspoken, and to remember those who have no one think of them with love and compassion today.

Musical Interlude – *Roald Wilson*

REFLECTING

Reading – *Gail Page*

Our first reading is excerpted from Learning to Walk in the Dark, by Barbara Taylor Brown.

"Come inside now, it's getting dark." This is my mother speaking, saying the same thing she said every night when she looked out the kitchen window and saw the sun going down. She loved us enough to let us play outside until the cicadas cranked up and the bats started swooping through the sky; then she loved us enough to call us inside so that nothing bad would happen to us in the dark.

The dangerousness of the dark was like the law of gravity. No one could say exactly how it worked, but everyone agreed on it. When night fell, children were gathered inside, front porch lights were switched on, curtains were drawn, and doors were locked. The inside of the house became a showcase of artificial light Even if you got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, small night-lights plugged into every baseboard outlet would guide you to your destination like an airplane making a landing after dark.

I never questioned the need for all this light, since the dangerousness of the dark was more apparent to me inside the house than out. After one [of my parents] had kissed me goodnight and turned off the light ... there was always a moment of bliss While my eyes adjusted to the light coming in from the window. Had I been an easy sleeper, I might have drifted off on that tide of contentment, but I have never been an easy sleeper. Once I could feel [my parents] protection dissipate once it became apparent [they] had turned their

attention to other things, then all the loose darkness in that room started to collect in the closet and under the bed, pulling itself together with magnetic malevolence that I could not keep my mind away from it.

Without benefit of maturity or therapy, I had no way of knowing that the darkness was as much inside me as it was outside me, or that I had any power to affect its hold on me. No one had ever taught me to talk back to the dark or even to breathe into it. The idea that it might be friendly was absurd. The only strategy I had ever been taught for dealing with my fear of the dark was to turn on the lights and yell for help.

Musical Interlude “The Storm That Wakes You in the Night”

– *Roald Wilson and Kitty Craig-Comin*

Reading – *Rob Craig-Comin*

Our second reading is excerpted from Healing Through the Dark Emotions, by Miriam Greenspan.

“Heal us, oh Lord, that we maybe healed, prays Tevye the milkman in Fiddler on the Roof. “In other words,” he adds, with his knack for humor in the face of misery, “God, send us the cure. The sickness we’ve already got.”

Like Tevye, we all suffer and search for the remedy. We turn to gods and men, doctors and priest, gurus and talk-show hosts. Searching for relief, recovery, redemption, oblivion – anything that will put an end to our emotional pain. We pay psychotherapists to cure it, take Prozac to mute it, seek counsel from religions that exhort us to rise above it, read inspirational books to overcome it, join recovery programs and self-help groups to cope with it, spends millions of dollars to escape it, use alcohol, drugs, food, work, possessions, sex, entertainment and all the techno-toys we can get to distract ourselves from it.

When it comes to the dark emotions, we are all experienced sufferers: grief, despair, fear are our human birthright as much as joy, wonder, and love. There is no life without loss and therefore no life without grief. There is no life without vulnerability and therefore no life without fear. So long as we live in a world where terror, violence, environmental degradation, injustice, and scarcity exist, despair will find its unwelcome way into our hearts and souls.

These are our worst feelings, and they are part of every life. When I call them dark, I don’t mean that they are bad, unwholesome, or pathological. I mean that as a culture we have kept these emotions in the dark – shameful, secret, and unseen. As a result, we tend, for the most part, to shun them. But the emotions we reject and suppress can become dark in an altogether different sense: like rich, fertile soil from which unexpected flowers can bloom.

Anthem – “Fear Not This Night” (Jeremy Soule)

– *Julia Crowley, vocal and Roald Wilson, piano*

[Link to YouTube of “Fear Not This Night: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=za1OSyPchbg> – not Julia Crowley, but will let you hear the song]

Sermon – "Fear Not These Dark Emotions" – *Rob Craig-Comin*

I'm not typically one of those people who get wakened by storms, but I was when I was a kid. In my teenage bedroom, there were windows on three sides and, when there was a storm, especially of the thunder-and-lightening type, I felt like I was *in* the storm. These experiences were worsened by my relatively recent efforts to put behind me the fears of apocalypse that had been instilled in me by the strange inclination of my protestant parochial school to teach young children from The Book of Revelations. Through a process that I still struggle to understand to this day, I somehow managed, gradually, over years, to learned to quiet these fears, and eventually, to sleep through storms, even ones with lots of "boomers". My wife, Kitty, even after 33 years of marriage, is amazed that, at worst, I heard a storm during the night, but didn't really wake up. And I certainly wasn't awake for a while during and after the storm.

That doesn't mean I don't sometimes wake in the night and tremble with a fear that seems to arise from the very core of my being. Lots of times it is after a disturbing dream. The easier nights are the ones when I can successfully convince myself it was "only the dream". Then, my focus is on gradually letting go of the dream material until I can fall back asleep without reentering the dream. The harder nights are the ones when I realize that the dream was merely a reflection of fears which rise up from the some deep, dark place inside of me.

Like Barbara Brown Taylor, as a youth, especially during a storm, "I could not keep my mind away from it", the darkness. Unlike Barbara Brown Taylor, even "without benefit of maturity or therapy", I *knew* the darkness was inside me. Those strange teaching practices of my childhood parochial school told me I was full of sin, and, therefore, full of darkness. The Calvinistic slant of my family's religious teachings, convinced me that there was no hope of ever ridding myself of this darkness. So what could I do, other than resign myself to a life of despair?"

The first aspect of change in coping came from an ironic place, those strange teachings of my childhood parochial school. Their focus was on the external forms of darkness, so I sought an external cause for my despair. The problem, I decided in my young mind, wasn't that the darkness was inside of me. The problem was the darkness of those teachings that had terrorized a young, innocent child. So I declared those teachings to be "wrong", and in the process, I externalize the darkness to those teachings and teachers who had terrorized me. While I might still wrestle with a sense of dark, or bad, within me, I could readily shift the focus, if not the blame, through anger, to an external agent.

In the context of Barbara Brown Taylor's construction (and, by the way, a sound presentation of how I know the mind of a typical human works), I had returned to the state of not knowing that the darkness was inside of me. But, of course, you can never really go back.

The second aspect of change in coping was to fill up the dark with light. Fortunately, like Barbara Brown Taylor's mother, my mother tended to light the dark, right down to the nightlights in the hallways and

bathrooms. To this day, much to my wife's dismay, I tend to keep lights on, just on the chance that I will enter a space in the house. I've learned from her to cut back, but not eliminate, this practice. Thus I learned to address the physical aspect of darkness.

The metaphysical aspect of darkness was nicely taken care of by my good fortune of coming of age in the late 60's. This was the 'dawning of the age of aquarius', the dawning of a new age of enlightenment and peace. Much of our thinking and speaking then was about things that had to do with the light, not the dark. Even the dark of war could be addressed by the light of peace. And the dark of Watergate in the early 70's was to be addressed by shedding more light on the ways of Washington, of politics.

Religiously, and spiritually, I spent hours, probably the equivalent of days, listening to "Godspell". I became part of youth religious activities that were all about "the love of God". Later, as my faith in things religious faded, I put on "nightlights" in the hallways of my mind and waited until something came to bring light back into my spiritual self. I eventually found some light in Unitarian-Universalism

I came to a place of relative comfort. I came to places filled with light. Or at least that's what I told myself.

In short, I came to cope with darkness in all the ways typical of our culture. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, "...when [we] look around the world today, it seems clear that eliminating darkness is pretty high on the human agenda – not just physical darkness but also metaphysical darkness, which includes psychological, emotional, relational, and spiritual darkness."

Over many decades, I've become more comfortable with myself, and with the idea of darkness. Many years of therapy, both providing and receiving, have helped me to become less judgmental, and more compassionate towards myself. Through this evolution, I have become more open to the idea that, however uncomfortable I may still be with it, what is inside of me is not bad. And that I am not bad for having it inside of me.

Therapy has helped me come to this point. Therapy and some mindfulness practices have helped me spend more time in my own dark. Yet I have found a need to explore, more specifically, ways of, as Barbara Brown Taylor would say, Learning to Walk in the Dark.

Barbara Brown Taylor defines darkness as 'anything that scares me'. That's a pretty good definition. But we find more depth in meaning if we follow her references to those earliest recollections of darkness that were referenced in our reading.

When she was five years old and first experiencing existential awareness, her fears, like most children, came in the form of something real, something tangible. The darkness in her room, like the darkness in the rooms of most children, "began pulling itself together with magnetic malevolence..." And that malevolence formed into a monster, very real, and very terrible.

Like most children, she would "turned on the lights and yell for help." Her parents, like most parents, came to her aid. And like most parents, they tried to help. They checked the closet and under the bed. They tried

to reassure her with reality. “See, there’s no monster in the closet... or under the bed.” Like most parents, they’d again kiss her good night and turn out the light. And like most children, she felt the return of the monsters and she returned to cowering under the covers, until blessed sleep lead to her escape.

And here, Barbara raises the critical question. “What color were the eyes of her monster? She didn’t know because she couldn’t look her monster in the eyes.

The eyes.

The windows of the soul.

The place where true self is most evident.

The eyes are where we look when we *really* want to connect with someone, really want to know that person.

We can tell, without hesitation, the color of the eyes of our lover, or the color of the eyes of our children. But, most likely, we do not know the color of the eyes of our enemy, of our tormentor.

How beautifully, and accurately expressed. When we wake in the middle of the night, we are confronting that existential monster. And we struggle to look the monster in the eyes. And if we can’t look the monster in the eyes, how can we know it.

So how do we learn to look the monster in the eyes and know the color of its eyes, and, hopefully, it’s even deeper aspects?

Barbara Brown Taylor’s search for assistance generated little help. My own searches have generated little in the way of assistance as well.

As a philosopher/theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor, searched the religious and spiritual literature and found little help there. Only in Buddhism do we find assistance in our efforts to walk in the darkness. For whatever reasons, BBT doesn’t explore this much. I find the philosophical aspect helpful, but the practices a bit daunting. I refer you to the Buddhist Meditation Circle for more in this direction.

In the literature of philosophy we can, at least, find thinking and writing that supports the idea of darkness as a necessary, even essential, component of life, but not much that offers suggestions on how to walk in the darkness of ourselves.

Sadly to me, even much of the psychology bookshelves, literal and virtual, are not much help. They are all too full of self help literature, much of which can be reduced to a simple summary. It is almost all about seeking, finding or securing light. Enlightenment is yours, if you follow the “7 steps to...”, “the 3 practices of...”, “the 4 principles for”. There are some efforts within psychology, specifically psychotherapy, which address exploring the darkness within ourselves, but much of that literature, like philosophy, tends to focus on the necessity of the exploration, without getting into much, or at least not clear, detail about how to “walk the walk”.

Along the way, BBT also reviews the various responses to darkness that have been generated throughout the history of human experience, throughout our existential history. Basically she finds that the world has come up with three responses:

- banish it, like her mother;
- bring more light to the situation, as enlightenment proposes; or
- endure it, which may be the most common answer.

Enduring darkness is the answer in any philosophy or religion that is, ultimately, fatalistic in its view of life. Whenever a religion preaches about an afterlife as a part of its belief system, you'll find that, either implicitly or explicitly, it espouses to respond to all the hard things in life by enduring them until you can get to a better place. And most religious belief systems include a belief in a life after this one.

[As a card carrying U-U, I feel the duty to express here a disclaimer that I am not criticizing any religions, simply describing what I see to be at their core.]

Like BBT, I am increasingly finding these answers insufficient to knowing the color of the eyes of my monsters. Like BBT, I find that attempts to banish darkness don't ever make it, truly, fully, go away. Like BBT, I find that efforts to increase the amount of light through enlightenment still doesn't help me look into the eyes of monsters, let alone to know the eye color of my monsters. And, like BBT, while I find that enduring has its place in the process; while I find enduring may help me survive; I find that enduring does not help me thrive. Increasingly, I find that enduring does not feel like living. More and more it can feel too much like a slow, lingering death.

As an early primer on the subject of learning how to know the color of your monsters' eyes, BBT wrote her book as a kind of memoir: here's how I am "learning to walk in the dark". That alone has proven helpful to me in my own learning about more fully exploring darkness. Better still, during her journey, BBT encounters, and shares with us insights gained from, one of the few pieces of literature that actually tries to offer some guidance on how to explore darkness, at least the emotional side of darkness. The author, Miriam Greenspan, proposes that we might experience Healing Through the Dark Emotions.

As Miriam Greenspan reminds us, Carl Yung said, "[one] does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light but by making the dark conscious." Her book is an effort to talk about how we might actually bring darkness into consciousness.

As we heard in the excerpt earlier, the emotions we tend to keep in the dark might be "dark in an altogether different sense". She suggest we see these so-called dark emotions "like rich, fertile soil from which unexpected flowers can bloom.

What a different way to view the feelings that we tend to shun. Would we shun them if we knew that, by fully experiencing them, we would experience, in the end, some unexpected, unanticipated bonus? Would we shun these things we consider liabilities if, we knew them to be benefits?

So how do we receive these benefits?

To paraphrase Ms. Greenspan, the only out is through. She proposes that we learn to let ourselves fully, deeply, experience the emotions; experience how and where, in our bodies, the emotions are occurring; experience what thoughts are accompanying them in our minds. As we experience these aspects of our dark emotions, we will come to understand what these emotions have to tell us, what these emotions can reveal to us. To comprehend how they might even transform us. She offers the hope that through this transformation we will become more deeply connect to the world, and to life.

To put this into terms consistent with BBT, she is, of course, proposing to learn the eye color of our monsters. Unlike BBT, I think Ms. Greenspan is proposing that we not see them as monsters, but as friends. Challenging friends, but friends none-the-less. Friends that we need to embrace, not do battle.

In the context of dark emotions as friends, I think of Ms. Greenspan's suggestion that we need to learn "to surrender to our dark emotions". Her version of surrender is not about "giving up or giving in" but is about committing to experiencing our dark emotions "without attachment to the outcome". I find resonance with surrender in the context of loving relationships. We often get into difficulty in our relationships because we are attached to the outcome: we want a certain result, or don't want what we think will be the inevitable result, or we want our partner to want the same result we want. So we try and shape the experience to get to where we want to be, not where we will wind up if we trust the process.

Reading Miriam Greenspan, I found myself returning, again and again, to her reference to dark emotions as dark, fertile soil. When I was able to view them through that lens, then what I was preparing to do was more like farming than monster taming. I was imagining hard work, actually very hard work, with long hours, and much sweat. But I was no longer imagining a task for which I needed to gird my loins and put on armor.

So the next time I wake in the middle of the night, maybe I'll try tilling some soil, rather than trying to banish, or shed light, or endure. Maybe I'll try and see myself embracing a friend, rather than doing battle with a monster. Blessed Be! Amen!

Musical Response – *Roald Wilson*

GIVING OF GIFTS AND MUSIC

Call for Offertory – *Gail Page*

Now is the time to not fear the dark of your wallets or purses.

In a more serious vain, the work of our church as a beacon of hope and liberal faith requires the efforts of many people. And it requires financial support. Members generally make an annual pledge of support, but we still hold an offertory each week to remind us of the value of all contributions.

If this is your first or second time with us, please let the plate pass you by, and consider your presence with us as your gift today.

Offerings for the support of our church's work will now be gratefully received.

Offertory – “You’ll Never Walk Alone” (Rogers and Hammerstein)
– *Julia Crowley, vocal and Roald Wilson*

SENDING FORTH – *Gail Page*

Announcements and Welcome of Guests and Visitors

Closing Hymn – #1008 (Teal) “When Our Heart is in a Holy Place”

Extinguishing the Chalice – *Gail Page (Rob will extinguish the candle)*

Please join in our chalice extinguishing words, which are found in your Order of Service,
We extinguish this flame,
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts.

Closing Words – *Rob Craig-Comin*

Fear not this, or any night.
Fear not the emotions that may or may not reside in dark places.
If, in the middle of the night, you awake to a monster,
try and see it as a friend.
If, in the middle of the night, you awake expecting to do battle,
Try and imagine dark, fertile soil,
sprouting fragrant, beautiful flowers.
Go in peace, knowing you are good,
And knowing you are loved.

Postlude – *Roald Wilson*