

Embarrassment

April 10, 2011

The journey through seminary is a seemingly long and arduous one, taking an average of four years, and demanding a multitude of hoops through which a candidate for ministry must jump. There is first, of course, the application, and then the interview, and then the move, which was for me, from western Massachusetts to Chicago. Once settled in, there is, beyond all the course work, a psychological career assessment one must pass in the first term, and then a meeting with the regional subcommittee of the Unitarian Universalist Association's Ministerial Fellowship Committee. I took one unit of clinical pastoral education at a Chicago hospital the summer after my first year of studies. Then I went for year two of study, also applying for internships, which led me in my third year to interning at a Unitarian Universalist Church in California. Upon my fourth year, and my return to Chicago, the biggest hoop of all awaited me in December, and that was my meeting with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee.

Meeting with the MFC, as it is commonly known, is similar to, though not quite as big as, someone taking their PhD dissertation before an examination Board. For months I prepared, reading books, memorizing names, dates, and terms, and writing the sermon I would deliver to the

committee. As the date neared, another seminarian lent me her nice black suit, and soon I was flying off to Oakland for a 45-minute meeting that would determine my fate.

I arrived in Oakland the night before my 4:00 pm meeting, and spent the day in my hotel room studying, doing nervous, unimpressive calisthenics, and watching soccer on TV. Finally, in the early afternoon, I began to prepare to go. I showered, ironed my clothes, clipped my nails and my mole hairs, brushed and flossed my teeth, made sure my pants were zipped and my shirt and jacket were buttoned right, then headed out on the Bart train to the hotel where the meetings were happening. Friends greeted me there. We laughed, we paced. My time came. I was led into a small conference room, where I was introduced to the nine members of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee there to meet with me. Then I stood behind a little podium and delivered my sermon. It was strong, it was good. I could tell people liked it.

When it was done, I sat down triumphant, ready to be questioned. Someone, either myself or another person, made a comment, and I laughed. Through my nose. And as I laughed, out *from* my nose-- *shweeeeet!*--came snot. It shot out, then, reaching its breaking point-- *thwack!*--snapped back. For a nano second, I prayed no one had seen this.

But as one woman on the committee reached back looking for something, another said, "I've got it Carolyn," and handed me some tissues. Humbly, I received the tissues, wiped my nose, apologized, and we moved on.

I am grateful to say that I passed the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, with flying colors, in addition to the other previously mentioned flying things. But now, anytime someone tells me they are soon to be going before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, I am sure to give them one piece of advice: make sure you blow your nose.

This story is funny to me now. And it was even funny that night, after I had passed my meeting. But in that moment--in that very, very brief, all too slow moving moment, I was mortified. My sermon, both content and delivery, had been perfect. My outfit, though admittedly borrowed, was sharp. I had appeared on top of things. I was charming. But my humanness--my feet made of clay and my nose made of mucus--had decided to show up, too, and the nine people checking to see if I would make a good minister got to see a little bit more of me than they had bargained for.

In the end, though I probably subconsciously wipe my nose every time I see any of those nine people from that committee, I have to look at that moment as one reflecting my own humanity, my own messiness, my

own me-ness, and get over, or through, the embarrassment that shot through me as my insides shot out of me.

And wouldn't it be good if we could do that with all embarrassing moments? Move through them instead of letting them shrink us or truncate us or drive us to disappear or project our feelings onto others? And of course, it's not just the bodily fluids or functions that are embarrassing. It's how we act, the attitudes we have, the choices we make, the innermost *nonphysical* parts of who we are that we wish to conceal, but which keep leaking out. Perhaps the trick is not so much to stop up the leaks, but to allow ourselves to take a look at our own messiness every time there is a leak.

That's ultimately what happened with Jeannette Walls, author of *The Glass Castle*. Throughout her adult life, she tried to hide, from the world she'd made for herself, the very woman who had brought her *into* the world--her mother. The juxtaposition of the world Walls had created and the world of her mother was just too much for Walls, as is made so brilliantly clear in the very opening line of the book: "I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster." Now, with a line like that, how can a reader *not* keep reading? With this one scenario setting the stage, Walls, a

journalist and former gossip columnist for a major news network, takes on her own embarrassment, or, as her mother would see it, she takes on her *parents*, by writing about them. Remember when Walls meets with her mother after seeing her at the Dumpster, the conversation goes like this:

“Mom, I saw you picking through the trash in the East Village a few days ago.”

“Well, people in this country are too wasteful. It’s my way of recycling.... Why didn’t you say hello?”

“I was too ashamed, Mom. I hid.”

... “You see?” she said. “Right there. That’s exactly what I’m saying. You’re way too easily embarrassed. Your father and I are who we are. Accept it.”

“And what am I supposed to tell people about my parents?”

“Just tell the truth,” Mom said. “That’s simple enough.”

Just tell the truth. Simple enough. Simple or not, for just under 300 pages, Walls proceeds to tell the story of she and her siblings being raised in poverty by wandering, unstable parents. With a mother who believes she is too gifted an artist to work, and a father who, though brilliant, works mostly odd jobs and spends most of his money on alcohol, the family wanders across the west, and eventually to West Virginia, driving beat up old cars and living in broken down houses. At one point in Phoenix, Walls

recalls how the food had begun to dwindle when her father had lost yet another job. She writes, “One afternoon when [my brother] Brian and I had come home to an empty fridge, we went out to the alley behind the house looking for bottles to redeem. Down the alley was the delivery bay of a warehouse. A big green Dumpster stood in the parking lot. When no one was looking, Brian and I pushed open the lid, climbed up, and dived inside to search for bottles. I was afraid it might be full of yucky garbage,” Walls notes. “Instead we found an astonishing treasure: cardboard boxes filled with loose chocolates.... We pigged out on chocolates, and from then on, whenever Mom was too busy to make dinner or we were out of food, we’d go back to the Dumpster....”

This is just one of many scenes throughout the book in which the Walls children must resort to their own innovative means of survival, and it is just one memory among many that must have been sparked when Walls sees her mother picking through a Dumpster in New York City many years later. Walls sliding down the backseat of her taxi isn’t just embarrassment about some other person; it is embarrassment about a part of her own self, a part of her own history. That’s the sting. That’s the rush of blood to our cheeks and ears. What I see, what I experience in moments of embarrassment is a reflection of, in fact is a *part of me*.

But how willingly do we welcome those moments? Or at least, how easily do we--like a person in meditation watching thoughts go by like clouds--how easily do we allow ourselves to simply witness and let go, witness and let go of those things about ourselves, or our spouses, or our parents or children or friends, that embarrass us?

Such questions may not at first seem like questions to be asked from the pulpit, but think about our first and seventh principles--think about affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and about respecting the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. If embarrassment, whether about ourselves or about someone or something else, gets the best of us, and we don't see it through to how it's a teachable moment, what becomes of us? What becomes of our way of relating to others?

One theory about the origin of the word *embarrassment* is that it comes from the Portuguese word, *embaraçar*, which in turn comes from a combination of Latin and Portuguese words meaning "rope" or "noose." A rope or noose gives very graphic power to a word we also use when embarrassed, *mortified*. Both imply death. To be embarrassed, to be mortified, is like heading to the gallows. "I could have died!" we say.

But the catch is, we don't. We don't die when our credit card isn't accepted while we're on a date. We don't die when we discover we've walked all the way down the aisle at church with toilet paper stuck to our shoes. We don't even die when we wake up and remember flirting just a little too freely under the influence of just a little too much alcohol at a party the night before. We just *want* to die. Kind of.

Really, more, I think we want to find the rewind button. Make it all go away. But being that there is no rewind button, we have a few options. We can decide to go away ourselves, to never to go near the scene of the crime again, and thus believe in the power of out of sight, out of mind. We can find a way to make everything everyone else's fault, in hopes of turning people's attention away from you to the "real" culprit--the credit card company, the bathroom attendant, the fellow flirts. Such strategies for pushing away our embarrassment are practiced regularly by politicians, athletes, religious leaders, celebrities, and so on, so why don't we follow suit?

Well, because if we really believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and if we really believe in the interdependent nature of all life, we just don't have a lot of room to push down or away the less acceptable parts of who we are. We really *can't* just try to slough those

parts of ourselves onto others, because we are all part of one web of life, and what I do to you, I do to myself.

So, knowing this to be true, we can take the opportunity to stop, take a look, own up to this being a part of who we are, and to do our best to make peace with it. That's kind of the revolutionary message and power of the children's book *Everyone Poops*, isn't it? Or, as the singer-songwriter Van Morrison sings, "It just is."

The "just is"-ness of life is something I have to face a lot in my yoga practice. I try to go to yoga several times a week, and sometimes I go to special workshops. For instance, a couple of Fridays ago I went to a two-hour workshop led by a nationally known teacher. When she asked how many people in the class were yoga teachers themselves, over half the people there raised their hands. "Oh my God!" I think. "I shouldn't be here. I'm in way over my head! I'm not going to be able to keep up. I'm going to die!" And then I hear the teacher's voice gently finding its way back in to where my ears, and my mind, can hear. "So just breathe," she says. "Just be in this wonderful present moment." And I start paying attention to my breath, and how tight my jaw wants to be and how nervous my whole body feels, how made of clay, very muddy clay, my feet feel, and I keep breathing, and I keep listening, and gradually, I find I am no longer so

embarrassed to be who I am--one person, of inherent worth and dignity, among many. No more, no less.

In fact, maybe that's what embarrassment is really about. It's not about being mortified and subsequently seeking a rock to climb under. It's not a cue for us to exit. It's an announcement. With cheeks blushing and skin tingling and ears hot, we announce to the world: Here I am! Not just the pretty parts, not just the smart parts, not just the most presentable parts. All the parts. The unclean, misguided, off kilter, thought-I'd-swept-that-under-the-rug parts. Here I am.

And the world, given a chance, responds. Maybe there's judgment. Maybe there is disdain. Maybe there's embarrassment on the part of others. Or maybe there is understanding. Maybe there is forgiveness. Maybe there is compassion. Maybe there is even a shared laugh.

And to the world we, in turn, giving ourselves the chance, respond in kind. Through the hotness of our ears, we listen. We lift our downward turning eyes, turn our cheek toward, rather than away. We give thanks for this opportunity to see ourselves and our actions and our attitudes and our mistakes for what they are.

How we each and all choose to move through our respective and collective fallibilities, our respective and collective *humanity*, is up to us. As

people of faith--as people who seek to live lives not based on fear but on possibility--we are called to choose faith consciously and continuously. Whether the journey we take is one through seminary or through childhood or motherhood or fatherhood, or through falling in love or going through divorce, or through aging or, while in love with our new lives, one night spotting our aging parent rummaging through a Dumpster, we are called to remember the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and that what happens to you, happens to me.

Embarrassment may sometimes feel like a noose around our neck. But let us do our best to remove that noose, untie it, and use the rope instead as a lifeline. Embarrassment calls us back to our humanity, reminds us that yes, we are, after all, only human. So, feet of clay, noses of mucus and all the rest, let us not be embarrassed to remember that in this all too human journey we share, we need and are a part of one another.

Amen

Closing Words

Beloved people of this congregation--
As you go out into the world today
May you not be afraid to take every part of you.
Yes, there may be those parts of ourselves we wish to let go
But we cannot let go
Until we realize how tightly
We are holding on or holding down.
So go
With or without embarrassment--
But go in peace
In forgiveness
In acceptance
And most of all
Go in love.