

That's How the Light Gets In July 25, 2010

So I've been away for a little while--a month and a lifetime, it seems, traveling, within this country, to other worlds: Minneapolis for General Assembly, the coast of Georgia for vacation, the Texas hill country to serve as a chaplain at the Southwest Unitarian Universalist Conference high school summer camp and, as I promised you before I left, my couch, beside which for two weeks grew and faded mountains of books as I gathered them and read, gathered them and read. It has been a good, reflective month for me--a time to look back on my ministry thus far here at Wildflower Church; a time to explore where I have stumbled, and even failed, and where I have excelled, or at least held steady; a time to ask myself how I might seek balance between the prophetic and the pastoral in my work; a time to wonder what will come our *collective* way as I begin my fourth year of ministry, and you all, with me beside you, continue in this journey of aspiring toward, living within, and expanding beloved community.

It is good to wonder about such things--to reflect upon our past and envision our future. It is good to be *here*, now, and to believe that I, as a person of faith, and we, as a people of faith, will continue to deepen and expand our spiritual lives together.

Not that it will always be easy. Challenges will come our way, as they have before, to nearly knock the breath right out of us. But we will catch our breath--breathe in, breathe out, breathe in again--because the spiritual life is the life of the breath, spirit coming from *spirare*, which *means* breath. And so it is our *calling* to breathe through both the struggles and the joys we meet, within community, and within ourselves. That is the *spiritual* way. Myself, I think back on the twenty-hour drive to Georgia I recently took with my friend and my three godchildren, ages seven, five, and two, and how I needed to breathe through loud sibling rivalry for the last of the Cheerios, or over which *Tom and Jerry* cartoon to watch on the DVD player. I think, on that same trip, of being pulled over by a police officer in Savannah, for being too close behind another car while stopped at a traffic light, and my need to breathe through his suggestion that I might be drunk. I think of my trip to General Assembly in Minneapolis and my need to breathe through heated debate at the Ministers' gathering, about whether or how to amend ministerial guidelines for healthy boundaries with members of our congregations. Most recently, and a little more joyfully, I think of breathing through the rapid climb with thirty teenagers up Enchanted Rock this past Friday, in a race to see the setting sun at the summit.

Everything seems to go a little better when I allow myself to breathe through whatever I am experiencing. Walls may go up, but they don't *stay*

up, nor does vulnerability spill out irretrievably from its own cup. We just breathe in the present moment and the feelings that come with it, and breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.

But as I said, it isn't always easy. Plenty of times, it feels safer to hold our breath against what is or might be, as if our unmoving lungs could create some kind of fortress against whatever's trying to get in, or out. When you were a child, did you ever play the game of holding your breath as you rode past cemeteries? It can be like that.

Speaking of cemeteries, though, and implicitly speaking therefore of the dead, another thing I did this past month was watch the movie *The Sixth Sense*, known for its famous line, delivered by the frightened, anxious, exhausted little protagonist, "I see dead people." I watched it, because I was ruminating on what I might say in this sermon, and I wanted to revisit this one scene that was, for me, the central message, as well as the turning point of the movie. (It's an old movie, so I'm not going to be overly cautious about spoiling it for you.) This young boy is indeed haunted by ghosts. Every day of his young life, he is surrounded by frightening apparitions which none but he can see. Finally, with the help of, yes, Bruce Willis, the boy realizes, amidst all his fear, what he must do. So one night, when the ghost of a young girl arrives in his bedroom, though he first runs frantically out into the living room to hide, he slowly, cautiously turns back

to his room, to the little tent made of blankets he had built to protect himself but in which the ghost now waits. In the dark, with just a flashlight, he reaches out, and lifts the fallen tent to reveal the dead girl staring up at him. She is scary looking. She is pale, sickly, with dark circles under her eyes. The boy, with all the courage he can muster, stuttering his words, says to the girl ghost, "Do you want to tell me something?"

In that moment, with that simple question, the boy's life begins to change; for, one by one, having been heard, the ghosts he meets are freed from their pain, and thus the boy is freed from his fear. He can, to put it simply, breathe again. It is the breath of courage, the breath of compassion, the breath of faith, the breath of life, replacing the ever-bracing fear that had, up until then, consumed his entire being.

Now, while I don't intend to explore the idea of literal, exterior ghosts this morning, I do want to ask you--ask us all--are there ghosts that live *within* any of us? Is there a presence within any of us, hidden deep down in the shadows, that we feel compelled to run from, to hold our breath against, for fear of what it might do to us? And if there is, and if we are holding our breath against that unknown, unheard ghost, what is that doing to our very spirit?

If we *are* separated from the very breath of life because of our fears, might we too find a way to conjure up the courage to ask of that frightening part of ourselves, “Do you want to tell me something?”

Fairly late in his life, the Dutch Catholic priest, college professor, and writer Henri Nouwen was forced to do just that. Though he had had a successful career teaching at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard; though he had written prolifically and eloquently about the spiritual life, and though he was in demand around the country as a powerful and inspirational speaker, Nouwen suffered from a deep and ongoing loneliness that finally got the best of him when he became overly attached to a friendship in which the other person finally told him he needed to break away. Falling into deep depression, Nouwen retreated from the world for six months and, under the care of others, he began what he called a “secret journal” to ask himself and his loneliness, in essence, “Do you want to tell me something?”

The result of that writing, as private and vulnerable as it was for this famous writer, was the book, *The Inner Voice of Love: From Anguish to Freedom*, which we heard Maxine read from earlier. Nouwen writes to himself, to that part of him so filled with fear and sadness:

Whenever you feel lonely, you must try to find the source of this feeling. You are inclined either to run away from your loneliness or to

dwell in it. When you run away from it, your loneliness does not really diminish; you simply force it out of your mind temporarily. When you start dwelling on it, your feelings only become stronger, and you slip into depression.

[Nouwen continues,] The spiritual task is not to escape your loneliness, not to let yourself drown in it, but to find its source. This is not so easy to do, but when you can somehow identify the place from which these feelings emerge, they will lose some of their power over you. This identification is not an intellectual task; it is a task of the heart. With your heart you must search for that place without fear.

With your heart you must search for that place without fear. Remember, Nouwen is writing to himself. He is not, in this case, preaching to a congregation or teaching an over-filled classroom at an Ivy League school as he is used to doing. Alone, in seclusion, he is facing his own ghosts, striving to hear what they have to say, so that he might finally be free of his own fears, his over-dependence upon others, and of his own sense of diminished self worth. His is indeed on a journey from anguish to freedom, and toward the end of the book, and toward the end of his seclusion, he writes:

You can choose to remember this time as a failed attempt to be *completely* reborn, or you can also choose to remember it as the

precious time when God began new things in you that need to be brought to completion. Your future depends on how you decide to remember your past.

And it is indeed about re-membering, about bringing ourselves back to wholeness, whether we are remembering our past, or integrating those parts of ourselves never as yet fully acknowledged, because the idea of it had seemed all too overwhelming--in fact, at times, terrifying.

Unfortunately, unlike in the movie, it's not as simple as seeing actual ghosts, with their very visual, even graphic signs of woundedness, and helping *them* resolve *their* issues. It's a little more complicated, less clear, looking inside *ourselves*, and our history, our patterns, in order to encounter our wounds and thus to understand how best to begin healing them. Nouwen even warns himself, and subsequently his eventual readers, "The more you open yourself to being healed, the more you will discover how deep your wounds are." He says, "You will be very tempted to become discouraged, because under every wound you uncover you will find others. Your search for true healing will be a suffering search."

And yet, having been willing to engage in that suffering search, Nouwen concludes, "My heart, ever questioning my goodness, value, and worth, has become anchored in a deeper love and thus less dependent on

the praise and blame of those around me. It has also grown into a greater ability to give love without always expecting love in return.”

Can we, in our own lives, find a way for our own hearts to become “anchored in a deeper love” than we have ever known before? I believe that is the task of the spiritual life--to take a courageous breath and find the willingness to dive deep into the ocean of our woundedness to find its source, and to find in turn not only the source of our woundedness, but the source of love which is what waits to be revealed just underneath our wounds.

If such a spiritual task seems like too much, like there’s just too much armor to get through, remember the lines of Leonard Cohen, which we also heard Maxine read earlier:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

Henri Nouwen, in all his success, with all of his accomplishments, had hoped, had wanted, had *longed* to give a perfect offering to the world. But his very desire for good, for love, for connection, for *communion*, led to his breakdown, and it was only in that breaking down that he realized and accepted to the fullest extent his own brokenness--the crack in his own

being. And it was from that broken place in his being that the light of courage, compassion, faith, love, and forgiveness was finally able to get in. What had been his private pain, in some ways kept secret even from himself, became one of Nouwen's greatest gifts he ended up offering to the world, in his willingness to own and share his own woundedness, and thus to be transformed by it, and to encourage others to take their own journeys from anguish to freedom as well.

So, again, I wonder, in this congregation, in this room, in your life, in your very being, are there ghosts in the shadows, waiting to be heard? Is there some part of yourself to which you have not yet asked the question, "Do you want to tell me something?" I know, our lives are busy. We have jobs to go to, children and animals to take care of, bills to pay, groceries to buy, committee meetings to attend and, yes, a spiritual home of our own to still search for. But remember that while in that search, and always, our very bodies, too, must be our spiritual homes. Knowing that to be so, as Leonard Cohen has said, please, amidst all your busyness, forget your *perfect* offering. Perfection implies there is nothing more to improve, nothing more to explore, nothing more to grieve, befriend, take in, or let go. But the truth is, just as we must, until the day we die, take in and let go of the very breath of life over and over again, so must we breathe into our brokenness, breathe into our wounds. That's how the light gets in.

So may we let the light in, and so may we see, hear, welcome and be anchored in a love that is real, that is good, that is unconditional, that never has and never will die.

Amen

#347: Gather the Spirit