

Finding our Center

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

January 21, 2024

Reflection on the Theme by Brett Raunig

I must admit the theme this month didn't resonate with me. When I think about the term authority, I found my thoughts lost in the complexity of today's society. With conflict all around us, I found it difficult to focus my reflection on any one thing or story. A rush of ideas swirled around in my head, but I found it very hard not to spin into negative thoughts and saw only things I felt I had no control over.

With the hustle and bustle of the holiday, I realized I had not spent much time centering myself. I love connecting with family but I find the added solitude and darkness difficult once we hit the new year. I started to think about my career as a biologist but quickly found myself wondering if I was doing enough.

As some of you may know, I find clarity on my bicycle. Unfortunately, I haven't been riding much because of the snow, rain, and darkness. Ok, let's turn this around. Let's visualize the best bike ride ever. I realize when I'm on my bike I have complete Authority. I chose the path, the speed, and how long I'll ride. I started to think back to when I rode my bike from Spokane, Washington to Bitterroot Lake, Montana. Luckily I was in my 20s when I decided to take on the 244-mile ride.

The ride took me 4 days and on the last day I had to ride through snow and ice. It was an amazing accomplishment, and I rode through some truly amazing landscapes. Without the support of my friends and family, I doubt I would have been able to accomplish this task. This got me rethinking the topic of authority.

Each of us have the ability to take on truly amazing things and I'm sure all of you have stories about challenges you have faced. Here we have the opportunity and the authority to collectively work on making the world a better place. A place committed to exploring justice, love, learning, and hope.

Finding our Center© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

In the winter, just remember that far beneath the bitter snows, lies the seed that in the spring, with the sun's love, becomes the rose.

We've had a little blast of winter this last week – or the kind of winter that is typical in the northern climes and Midwest – the snow that fills imagery of winter holiday songs and stories. I grew up on the East side of the Cascades, so snow is “normal” for me, though we would often visit family on the west side during the holidays when I was growing up, and I remember the clouds and rain that typified winter in this area, and we've returned to this morning. It was quite an adjustment moving here most immediately from the Midwest, not understanding how serious and dangerous the weather can be when it isn't 30 below zero and 2 feet of snow. Just an inch of ice here can send the city into a complete panic and full stop. I was able to use my cleats this week, that I'd purchased years ago in Michigan after falling on ice and breaking a wrist.

So it is that the reading Wendy shared this morning came to mind. It's not as powerful an image in this part of the world generally, as full out blizzards aren't a part of the normal experience here, but I thought we could relate to it this morning, following the week of snow days the schools had and closures of everything from church to fast food restaurants. I was traveling this week, and on my travels, between rest areas, I'll often stop at a fast food place like McDonalds to pee and buy a coffee. On the drive between Astoria and Vancouver this week, they were closed tight – parking lots sheets of ice, and not a door open. I don't remember other times when I couldn't count on a McDonalds to be open for a quick bathroom break. Well, actually, traveling during the pandemic was like that....

I was reminded about a time my husband Stuart and I were stuck in Paw Paw, Michigan, in a snowstorm. Paw Paw is located on the snow belt between Chicago and Kalamazoo. We were traveling and couldn't go further as there was no visibility. Fortunately, there are hotels just at the exit to Paw Paw and we were able to get a room. We had to stay two nights before the storm cleared. Living in Michigan at the time, we had all the necessary winter gear with us, and so could walk to the restaurants nearby which were open. There was even a wine tasting room open down the street. The server was a little angry with her boss for making her come in on those snowy roads and so was handing out samples just a little more generously than she might otherwise have done. All in all, it wasn't a bad two days.

But back to Parker Palmer and the blizzard.... Over the years, I've been confused by his use of the word "soul." "Soul" isn't a concept I grew up with in 20th century Unitarian Universalism that focused on life in this world, life in the here and not hereafter. I like Palmer's definition, though – he calls it "that life-giving core of the human self, with its hunger for truth and justice, love and forgiveness", I nevertheless struggle with the word "soul" to describe that core. Probably because the concept of "soul" has been conceptually separated from the term "body" -they have become a binary in Western religious and philosophical thought, and I'm not so into those binaries anymore.

There are no binaries in our first person characters from our story for all ages – "like the sun, I'm here to shine! Like the tree, I'm here to grow. Like the mountains, I'm here to stand." These children speak with complete conviction and authority and wholeness – there is no wrestling of the soul separate from the body. They are all in. And that, in my experience, is what personal authority looks like. Brett's best bike ride ever – when he chooses the path, the speed, the length of time – the 244 mile trip he took from Spokane to Bitterroot Lake, Montana! He was all in.

Fully inhabiting our bodies, breathing deeply, moving intentionally and speaking from the core, is a start. Breathing is both an involuntary, unconscious physical act and can be the link to a conscious, voluntary way of being that can help us find our center and our own authority.

Those of us with "good enough" parenting and environments, grow up in a connected kind of way in which we start out as "all in" – and it isn't until later – often in adolescence - in our experience of those blizzards of physical and spiritual violence, economic injustice, and ecological ruin that we tend to lose our voice. Some are born into a lost environment and raised by lost caregivers and perhaps – I don't know – but perhaps don't have a time of being "all in" the way our story describes. Regardless, I'm not interested in the concept of a soul that is separate from the body. It is in the body that we find our connection.

So often we try to use our minds to think our way to wholeness, but if it is separated from our breath and our bodies, we don't find our way home. It is the core of the human self that I want to explore this morning, and how we find that center.

So Palmer talks about the rope tied to the back door of the farmhouse and run out to the barn, so that farmers could find their way home in a blizzard. It is the rope that saves us in that metaphor, what we're tied to, the way we find home or balance or center, our core. One way to understand that rope is the breath which ties us to our bodies. The breath which brings us home to our bodies then connects us to others.

I planned to preach this service after having talked about Rosa Parks last week, but the ice had other plans. So, I'll be addressing the authority of Rosa Parks next week, but the part of her story that is relevant to this week is how connected she was to others in the nonviolent movement for civil rights and how much preparation she had for her moment in the spotlight, for her arrest – which was both planned and spontaneous. She was ready, but didn't know when exactly she'd be asked to move to make room for a white person to sit down – but she had planned and prepared for that moment. With those two things – her connections to others and her preparation – she used the fullness of her authority – the fullness of her being with the certainty that she was enough and she was needed – to make history.

It is key that the rope get tied to the barn before the blizzard prevents you from doing so. It is key that the farmers prepare for the storm, and that the connection gets made, the tie is strong. How do we create those connections and prepare for the moment the phone rings with a mission?

Perhaps I've given away the punchline already, but it is all about our bodies. We are wired for connection, for it is through those connections that we are cared for as bodies when most vulnerable. I'm not sure we hunger for truth and justice, but our bodies do give us cues of hunger, and hormones like oxytocin affect bonding and trust, relationships and care – the combination of which we might call love.

The truth is that most of us live in bodies which have been abused and assaulted, perhaps not directly, but surely by a culture that has valued some bodies over other bodies, and turned bodies into commodities for trade and sex and work. We've inherited injuries from our ancestors whose bodies were assaulted and wounded.

"The body is where we live," writes Resmaa Menakem. "It's where we fear, hope, and react. It's where we constrict and relax. And what the body most cares about are safety and survival. When something happens to the body that is too much, too fast, or too soon, it overwhelms the body and can create trauma."

I'm quoting from his 2017 book, *My Grandmother's Hand's: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies*. He goes on to write:

"Contrary to what many people believe, trauma is not primarily an emotional response. Trauma always happens in the body. It is a spontaneous protective mechanism used by the body to stop or thwart further (or future) potential damage."

"Trauma is not a flaw or a weakness. It is a highly effective tool of safety and survival. Trauma is also not an event. Trauma is the body's protective response to an event – or a series of events –

that it perceives as potentially dangerous. This perception may be accurate, inaccurate, or entirely imaginary.”

One thing Parker Palmer and Resmaa Menakem have in common is a belief that we can heal from past traumas and that it is in healing that we gain authority and strength and wisdom. And to go back to that word in the reading I found confusing, *soul* - it works for me when Menakem connects it to the vagus nerve. I'll quote again – because he says it better –

“New advances in psychobiology reveal that our deepest emotions – love, fear, anger, dread, grief, sorrow, disgust, and hope – involve the activation of our bodily structures. These structures – a complex system of nerves – connect the brainstem, pharynx, heart, lungs, stomach, gut, and spine. Neuroscientists call this system the wandering nerve or our vagus nerve.”

He says that a more apt name for the vagus nerve is “soul nerve” – isn't that interesting? When he connects the soul to the body and bodily functions, then it makes sense to me. Using Menakem's definition, I can begin to grasp Palmer's claim that the “soul's order can never be destroyed.”

I certainly hope they're right. I can understand Brett's hesitation with this month's theme of authority, because there are different kinds of authority - we can confuse the personal authority of Rosa Parks or the confident “enough-ness” of a young person, with those who abuse their authority and authoritarianism. In fact, with so much experience of the abuse of authority, it is hard to claim it at all, because they are related. The authority which is our theme is about empowerment and mastery and self-control: Brett's 4 day and 244 mile bike ride. Whereas the “authoritarian” rejects the self-determination of others demanding obedience to their central power – and I think with the 2024 presidential election cycle in full-swing, I needn't name names of those who brag about being authoritarian. Deborah Willoughby in a November sermon connected those politics to the authoritarian family systems.

These authorities are related because, of course, we come into the world dependent upon the mastery of another- the skill of a caregiver to read our needs. And we rely on others to learn new things – learn from them, and in appropriate stages of development, might trust their authority over our own. It is a lifetime of learning and maturation that we come into our own power, and when we're scared or uncertain, traumatized or wounded, we might just want someone to take over and save us – being in charge of our own destiny feels like too much work! Which explains both the situation we are in worldwide, with the rise of authoritarianism, and the path forward which is taking responsibility for our own actions and our healing.

And let me take a moment to bring God into the equation. God could be helpful if, like Parker Palmer, you believe that God is the Source – within you there is light, the same light as the Source, the connection to that life-giving core of the human self with its hunger for truth and justice, love and forgiveness. But, if the idea of God is used to assert complete power over and an omnipotent certainty which disregards difference, then it is harmful and dangerous.

Our existence is such a mystery. How breathing and our bodies work is amazing.

In the beginning

There was light

*Infinite and expansive
Flowing out from an unseen center.*

In the beginning
There was breath
Infinite and expansive
Flowing out from an unseen center.

The blizzard swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others. Some of us are lost in the storm and some are using the blizzard as cover while cynically exploiting its chaos for private gain.

But we can still tie that rope to the barn to make our way. We can breathe and find our center. We can find our way home. Home to our authority and self-determination, home to our healing. For it is by our own authority, we change the world. We find that authority by healing the wounds we inherited, the ones we created, and the ones we inflicted. We do it by preparing for the storm and connecting once the storm has hit. The body is where we live, and living from the center of our own bodies, from the authority of our own truth, from the depths of our own love, we heal and change the world. Just as long as we have breath, we must answer “yes” to life and healing and wholeness.