

Hanging on by a Fig Leaf

Rev. Julie Forest

It is so good to finally be with you. The road, as the Beatles would say, was long and winding. And quite frankly, tectonic plates shifted, an earthquake happened, and the great plates of stability holding the UUCOD in a comforting and predictable way slipped. What had once been unimaginable became the new reality; the new normal. Shelves have been spilled and what had once been a level floor is now tilted. Everything is off balance. How can one prepare for the sudden death of the called minister? All the things left unsaid, all the questions that hung in the air with no answers or answers to be guessed at. The promises of ministry unfulfilled, when she left after such a short time.

So the congregation regroups, enters a search and hires an interim minister to come to the valley. I'm sure there was excitement, longing and hope. Those longings were left unfulfilled. Sorrow, pain, confusion, loss of trust, well, those are the feelings that I would have if this had happened to me. And I might also think, "My own life is stressful enough! I want, I need, my church to be a sanctuary and a beloved community. Especially now with all the turmoil our government and the world are in."

If this is the first time in your life that the plates upon which you live your life, the ground upon which you stand, that which you know to be true, suddenly shifts or becomes unrecognizable all I can

say is that you are lucky. Welcome, you are not alone. I have had my own share of earthquakes and my inner shelves have been tipped and my heart has been broken.

In February of 2013, I got a call from my sister. Our brother Dave was in the hospital. He hadn't been feeling well for a while, but kept plowing through his diminished physical capacity. He had been to the doctor a number of times, but they couldn't figure out what was wrong with him. Suddenly he's in the hospital and they realize his liver is almost non-functioning. He needs to be put on the organ recipient list. He meets all the criteria except having a family member nearby to care for him after the surgery. I fly out the next day to be with him and to meet the social worker and the doctors.

Things did not go the way I had hoped. I got there on Tuesday and spent every day with him. On Friday evening he was having trouble ordering his dinner, so I helped. When the salmon came, he couldn't hold his silverware, so I fed him small cut up pieces just like I did when he was a baby. Oh, my God, I am so glad that I got to do that for him and with him, because that night he lost consciousness. A new liver was not ready for him until the next Tuesday. By that point, my sister had flown in. We sat together in the surgery waiting room: he was in surgery all day. The new liver was transplanted, but he never regained consciousness. He died early Wednesday morning. They called at 4:00 am to say that he was not showing any brain function, so we went to the hospital and sat in the special family room with the Kleenex that you do not want to be in. They asked what we needed. Did we need clergy? I said, "I am clergy. Here is what we need!" I told them I needed to take my brother

outside and to pull the plug with his body embraced in the windy Seattle rain. I also said, “and don’t come back into this room until you make it happen!”

I don’t know how many policies and procedures were challenged that day, but soon, we wheeled my brother down the hall. Doctors, attending physicians and nurses formed in rows along the walls and watched us somberly wheel him through many corridors and down a freight elevator. We wheeled him outside into the brisk, foggy, rainy February Seattle morning. Huge evergreen trees swayed in witness as we gathered in a circle around his bed. I looked at this man I had been caring for his whole life and loving since before he was born. I held his hand and shared these words from Mary Oliver:

To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things.
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,

to let it go.

And I did: and we did.

How does life go on after such an earthquake? As Robert Walsh says in his poem *Fault Line**:

...unaware that just beneath
you is the unseen seam of great plates
that strain through time? And that your life,
already spilling over the brim, could be invaded,
sent off in a new direction, turned
aside by forces you were warned about
but not prepared for? ...

“Warned about but not prepared for.” What could have prepared me for this unexpected death of my little brother? He was a mountain climber: I mean the kind that puts all that equipment on and ropes himself with others and goes up to the cold, oxygen-lacking mountain tops. He even taught mountain climbing. He was nice, patient, a great uncle to my kid, super buff and only 47 years old.

And yes, as a minister I knew the risks of life. I knew that things could change in an instant. I knew it because I had read about it. I knew it because I have been at the bedsides of dying folks, congregants, folks I loved and honored. I knew it because I companioned other people when the shelves of their lives spilled. I once did a memorial service for a 14 year-old boy. Afterwards his

parents came up to me and wrapped their arms tightly around me, sobbing. They clung to me as if they were holding on for dear life and their two daughters joined them. I felt as if I was a mast on a ship and that I was anchoring this family that was being over run by the ocean of grief. But this time it was me being over run. It was me, my sister, my mom, my wife, my kid, tipping into that ocean of grief. (Robert Walsh continues)

...Shelves could be spilled out,
the level floor set at an angle in
some seconds' shaking. You would have to take
your losses, do whatever must be done
next.

How did I do whatever must be done? How do any of us? Because I am not alone, am I? I'm guessing that everyone in this room felt their shelves tip after Rev. Suzanne died so unexpectedly. So many things left unsaid, so many questions left unanswered. And then the next minster comes and is not able to stay; more plates shifting, more shelves tipping. Add to this mix the world we live in: our country is in a tumultuous state right now and many people are afraid. Okay, so we have tumult at church and in the country, but even all this tumult is not enough to prevent or block any further slings and arrows from piercing the rest of our lives. Life just keeps going regardless of our readiness or ability to handle it.

Sometimes, and this may be one of those times, we are just hanging on by a fig leaf.

When I think of hanging on by fig leaves, my mind turns to the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures. You might remember our ancient ancestors Adam and Eve, the apple and the snake. And you may have heard numerous “alternative facts” about what really happened. So Adam and Eve are in this beautiful garden. And they are naked, vulnerable, yet untroubled. Nothing bad ever happened. And God was bossy, “Have a great time but just don’t eat from this one tree.” I mean, come on! If you were told you could do anything you wanted, but just don’t eat from this one tree, what is the one desire in you that just keeps growing? So, after the snake awoke this curiosity (about the tree) in Eve, she wanted to eat the APPLE. God said “no”. Adam said “no”. Basically, she was warned! Then she was given an explanation. Sound familiar? Nevertheless, she persisted. LETS HAVE SOME FUN WITH THIS

One side say “EVE”. The other side say, “SHE WAS WARNED”

One side says “EVE” the other side says, “SHE WAS GIVEN AN EXPLANATION”

One side says “EVE” the other side says, “NEVERTHELESS SHE PERSISTED”

We are then to believe that the growth in consciousness and self-awareness that resulted from eating the apple was a punishment and that this “alternative fact” accounts for why we humans suffer. But being curious is NOT a sin. Growing one’s sense of consciousness and self-awareness is NOT a sin. And finally, suffering is NOT a sin. Suffering comes about because we are vulnerable, aware and

alive human beings. Some would say that suffering also comes about because of attachment. And yet, some attachment is good ,even healthy, because if you are not attached to anything you have “attachment deficit disorder” and you don’t care about anything.

When we care about our kids, when we care about our families and friends, when we care about our church, when we care about Earth, when we care about our country we are opening ourselves up to be vulnerable and to hurt. Not hurting and not caring is not the object of the game. The object of the game is to realize just how connected we are to everything and everyone around us.

Somehow, I survived the unexpected, untimely death of my brother Dave. I cried. I was laid low by waves of grief that were unpredictable and powerful. I let myself be comforted by friends, ministers and neighbors. Sometimes I wanted to hide and to pretend that I was fine and that everything was okay. But I found more healing when I allowed myself the space to be; and when I allowed myself to be comforted by those who were kind enough to hear my story and my grief struggles.

Part of the journey to wholeheartedness involves letting go of shame. Just as tempting as it is to pretend that we don’t hurt, it is also tempting to think that we deserve to suffer and, therefore, not only do we keep it secret, we feel worse. We feel ashamed of our hurt; ashamed of our struggles; ashamed of the ways we are not perfect. Shame is very destructive to our spiritual lives and to our sense of ease and well being.

The version of Adam and Eve hiding behind fig leaves when God comes strolling through the garden is a shaming story that we can let go of. It is okay to be curious. It is okay to enjoy our bodies. It is okay to care about each other. It is okay to make mistakes and begin again. It is okay to move from an unconscious, self-centered version of oblivion towards a life where our hearts are open, unafraid and unashamed. It is not only okay, it is imperative to living a wholehearted life.

The biggest obstacle that gets in the way of wholehearted, open living and loving is shame. It is the feeling that something is wrong with me. And because of that I must hide an important part of who I am. Unfortunately, when we hide important parts of who we are, we don't trust in the love, or even the like, that other people have for us. We tell ourselves, "If they only knew" and spend far too much energy worrying about it; it becomes like a "Catch 22". Fortunately, for us we are Universalists. We believe the core of our theology is that all of us are worthy of love. (Robert Walsh continues)

When the great plates slip
and the earth shivers and the flaw is seen
to lie in what you trusted most, look not
to more solidity, to weighty slabs
of concrete poured or strength of cantilevered
beam to save the fractured order. Trust

more the tensile strands of love that bend
and stretch to hold you in the web of life
that's often torn but always healing. There's
your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth,
your room, your precious life, they all proceed
from love, the ground on which we walk together.

So, you have had a great unraveling. I have had a great unraveling. I pray that we let go of shame and hiding and step into the web of compassion together. We know that pouring concrete slabs over the break won't work, but trust and compassion will. Trust and compassion will turn the gouge into a beautiful stem, kind of like what happened with the king's flawed diamond. I hope that much of my work with you will be to transform the crack in the diamond of UUCOD into a beautiful rose.

May it be so. Blessed Be. Amen.

Benediction

As we extinguish the light of our chalice may we do so knowing that the warmth of community continues to be with us. And as we leave this sanctuary, may the long time sun shine upon us, love surround us, and the love within us guide us safely on. © Julie Forest 2017 All rights reserved

* Robert R. Walsh, “Fault Line,” from *Noisy Stones: A Meditation Manual*, Skinner House Books, 1992.