

Learn and Let Learn

**A Sermon by Rob Keithan
Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville, MD on
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Reading

“Ask Me” by William Stafford

Some time when the river is ice ask me
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
what I have done is my life. Others
have come in their slow way into
my thought, and some have tried to help
or to hurt: ask me what difference
their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look
at the silent river and wait. We know
the current is there, hidden; and there
are comings and goings from miles away
that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say.

Sermon

I chose this poem for two reasons. The first is to respond to the question in the early lines, “Ask me if what I have done is my life.” My answer is a resounding “No!”, because I think we are so much more than what has happened in the past. We are also present and future possibilities.

I also like the symbolism of the frozen river, given that it’s winter and incredibly cold right now. Notably, the poet recognizes that the present state of the river is not its permanent state: there are comings and goings from miles away. Currents below the surface. There is potential waiting to be set free. That’s basically what this sermon is about.

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As many of you know, my wife Mandy and I are involved with flying trapeze. We’re affiliated with a school called TSNY, or Trapeze School New York, which has locations in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC, near the Navy Yard. Mandy is an experienced full-time instructor and a serious

flyer—flyer being our lingo for anyone who is taking classes or training to perform. I also work there as an instructor on a very part-time basis and fly occasionally.

When hearing about this somewhat unusual activity, many people ask me variations of the questions “How did you get into that?” or “Why did you get into that?” This morning I’m going to talk about learning and teaching, and tell you some of our story.

Mandy took her first trapeze class about 4 years ago with a friend she was visiting in New York City. On one hand, it’s not surprising that she’d take a trapeze class, because she did some gymnastics as a kid and.... her parents were in the circus. They stopped long before Mandy was born, but it is true that her father worked as a clown and her mother rode elephants for a traveling show called the Mills Brothers Circus. However, it’s also true that Mandy is afraid of heights.

Her interest outweighed her fear, though, and she was thrilled when someone at the New York school told her that the company had a branch down here. Indeed, the school’s slogan of “Forget Fear. Worry About the Addiction.” turned out to be extremely true in Mandy’s case. She couldn’t get enough. At that point she was also ready for a career change, so we agreed that between jobs she could take 8 weeks to prioritize her flying and discern what she wanted to do next.

When she asked one of the senior instructors what she should focus on during that time, he asked about her goals. How serious was she about flying? Where did she want to go with it? Then something happened that neither of us saw coming: he asked if she wanted to train to teach. She was floored! And, in a relatively short time, sold. We agreed to make it work, and for the last three years she’s been a full-time flying trapeze instructor. It took a while to accept, but I’ve faced the truth. My wife had gone totally... circus.

For my part, when Mandy first started flying I was definitely interested in trying it out. I had always wanted to do gymnastics but never got around to it. However, at the time Mandy started taking trapeze classes I had just started seminary classes and was thus quite busy. Also, I think it’s good for couples to have some separate interests, so I tried to be supportive without getting too involved. I took a few classes and thoroughly enjoyed the experience, but kept my distance.

In 2008, we moved to Portland, OR, for my ministerial internship. When we returned, she picked right back up with the work and her flying, and the school moved from the inner harbor in Baltimore to the big parking lot near Gallery Place/Chinatown. It was at that point that my resistance to trapeze turned out to be futile. I took a few more classes and was hooked. It was kind of a coming out experience.

R: Mandy?

M: Yes Rob?

R: I have something that I need to tell you.

M: Oh, Ok. What is it?

R: I think I love trapeze.

I can't remember if she gloated or taunted or cheered at that point, but there was definitely some form of celebration.

For the rest of the story to make sense, I need to give you a clearer picture of what actually happens at a trapeze school.

Our branch, which is officially named TSNY Washington, DC, has an outdoor rig (rig being the actual flying apparatus) that's open 3 seasons and an indoor rig that's open year-round. Each rig consists of a net, a swinging trapeze bar for the flyer, a bar for the catcher, and a board from which the flyers take off. The board is 23 feet off the ground. Until reaching advanced levels, every flyer is wearing a safety belt and clipped into safety lines from the moment they start climbing the ladder to the board until they roll out of the net and have both feet planted firmly back on the ground.

There are three staff jobs during each two-hour class. One staff person is on the board making sure that flyers take off safely. One staff person is operating the safety lines and calling instructions for the trick while the flyer is actually traveling through the air. Working the lines is a very animated process, as that staffer needs to move back and forth pulling in and letting out rope at the appropriate times.

During the first 90 minutes or so of class, flyers practice tricks or other elements of flying. For those who want to, and who can perform their tricks with the right timing, the last 30 minutes of class is reserved for catching. That's when the third staff person, the catcher, gets up in the second trapeze

and, while swinging upside down, attempts to reach out and grasp the flyers at the wrist. And here's an important piece of trapeze protocol that often proves to be one of the most difficult things for flyers to remember:

You do not catch the catcher. The catcher catches you. If a flyer's hands are moving—a condition we refer to as “grabby hands”—there will be no catch.

When a flyer has grabby hands—which is frequently—they simply end up in the net, as they would eventually anyway. Most flyers will have grabby hands at some point, which is not surprising. For most of us, if we're sailing through the air and we see something that could hold us up, we want to grab it. The intellectual knowledge that we are not supposed to catch the catcher is superseded by the primal desire to avoid falling.

Trust is enormously important in flying trapeze. Although the equipment is tremendously important, few if any new flyers seem to have concerns about trusting it. Instead, students tend not to trust the human parts of the process.

Some folks aren't sure about whether or not they can trust the instructors. They're not sure if the staff person working the board really does have a firm hold of their safety belt. They're not sure if it's truly safe to do what that staffer says is necessary in order to take off, which is to grab the riser ladder with your left hand, step your toes to the edge of the board, arch your back, and push your hips forward into the safety belt and so you're leaning slightly out over the net.

Most folks are OK with the next step, which is to reach out with your right hand and grab the trapeze bar the staffer is lifting to you. Then comes the final step in proper take-off position: you must let go of the riser ladder with your left hand and put it onto the bar as well.

At this point the staff person is fully braced behind you, holding on to your safety belt with their left hand and a metal riser ladder with the other. You are not going anywhere. In fact, when you let go with your left hand, your body position won't change at all because the staff person is holding you in place.

Of course, some people don't believe this. They don't trust it. And so they'll ask: Do you have me? Are you sure you have me? You're not going to drop me, right?

What flyers vocalize is a lack of trust for the staff people, but I think that's just the tip of the iceberg. What most people really don't trust is their own self. They don't trust their minds and their bodies. They don't trust their ability to learn.

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Theologically, we Unitarian Universalists come from a tradition that places an incredibly high value on learning. The desire to study the Bible from an academic and historical perspective, instead of purely a religious one, was one of the key developments which distinguished Unitarians from other Christians. Our forebears also adopted a very different approach to teaching religion, and it's still a critical part of how we operate today.

William Ellery Channing, the person most responsible for defining American Unitarianism, put it this way:

“The great end in religious instruction,” he said, “is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own; not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth”ⁱ

On one hand, we need to trust ourselves and our abilities to learn. On the other hand, sometimes there's just not going to be progress without some outside influence.

When Mandy first suggested that I should become a catcher, I immediately ruled it out as a ridiculous impossibility. I mean, flying every week or two was fun and all, but I was a faith-based lobbyist training for the ministry. Working at a flying trapeze school wasn't part of the plan. Each time she brought it up—which happened about six times—I shot it down immediately.

However. The idea was planted and would not go away. A few months later, I gave in.

R: "So, um, Mandy?"

M: "Yes?" she says. She can tell from the plaintive, somewhat sheepish tone of my voice that something interesting is coming.

R: "Do you really think I could become a catcher?"

"Yes," she says. "Absolutely." So I agree to give it a shot.

To get up to the catch trap, the second bar, one walks across the net and climbs a rope. That part was fine. But once I was up there, sitting in the catch trap, I was shockingly scared. Mandy wanted me to swing back and forth a bunch but all I could do was sit there with a death grip on the cables. After a few minutes I climbed back down the rope and wondered what on earth I had been thinking. But Mandy reassured me that I had done fine; that learning is a process that simply takes time. And so, once or twice a week for the next few months, I would climb up into the catch trap and do a little more. More often than not, one of my coaches would encourage me to do the next step before I thought I could handle it. And with no exceptions I can think of, they were always right.

Eventually, I was doing everything well enough that it was time for me to try catching someone. That first someone, of course, was Mandy. She would be doing the safest trick, which is the one every new flyer learns: a knee hang. My job was simply to keep doing everything that I had been doing, except that this time I would also reach out and catch the person, my wife, who would be swinging from the other trapeze bar.

When the time came, Mandy's hands were exactly where everyone told me they would be. All I had to do was reach out and grab them. Which I did.

Once again, my coaches were right. I didn't think I could do it; I didn't think I was ready. But I was and they knew it.

When I look back on the experience, one of the things that sticks out most is how consistently the next step in learning went from seeming utterly impossible to seeming possible, to seeming probable, and then actually happening. When I couldn't even swing back and forth, the thought of actually catching someone was nonsense. Now I'm actually paid to catch people. I still find it shocking.

Anyway, I've developed a way of thinking about this process of learning that I'd like to share with you. I call it the horizon model, although I need to add the disclaimer that I know very little about educational theory so please take this only for what it is: my own personal musing.

Picture yourself standing in the middle of a gigantic field, looking off in some direction at the point where earth and sky meet. The horizon. That's where you want to go.

Immediately in front of you, you can clearly see where your next steps will take you. It may not be easy or quick, but you can see the way forward. You can see what you're about to learn and it feels possible.

The closer your gaze gets to the horizon, though, the harder it is to see where you're going. You can imagine learning some of it but it's fuzzy at best.

As for what lies beyond the horizon, you can't really imagine learning it because you haven't seen it. It is beyond your vision. Other people can tell you what's there; they can reassure you that you can handle it; but ultimately it's not going to make sense until you have walked forward enough that what used to be over the horizon comes into view. The more you learn, the closer it gets, the more you can picture yourself learning it or doing it. The landscape continuously changes as you move forward, learning.

One of the most important lessons I've learned from flying trapeze, in part from my own experience, but even more so by watching students, is that human beings have an incredible capacity for learning and growing. Yes, I've seen some first-time flyers who were too scared to actually take a swing. It happens. But I've seen exponentially more first-timers who, despite being visibly and often quite audibly scared, work through their fears and do something that they had never imagined doing a year or a month or even a minute earlier: they swing through the air on a flying trapeze. I've seen people on the board with tears streaming down their face who still find enough trust in the staff and themselves to go for it; to let go of the ladder, grab the bar, and take a swing.

However, the willingness and commitment of the learner is only one part of the story. The other part is recognizing the role of teaching; of mentoring.

Thinking back to my own story, there's no way that I ever would have even tried catching, much less succeeded, if it not been for other people supporting me and pushing me. Thanks to Mandy and Lizzie, my two primary coaches, and a whole host of other supportive people, I did actually become a catcher. Which means that, among other things, I'm satisfying my lifelong desire to do gymnastics. I am so grateful; so grateful that others directed me towards an opportunity that I could not see even though it was right in front of my face. Even though I'd seen Mandy go from student to teacher, I never imagined it as a possibility for myself. And it seriously took several months and about 6 suggestions for her words to reach me.

And so I wonder: how many other experiences like that are out there for me, for you, for us? What amazing possibilities are right in front of our faces that we cannot see? What have you always wanted to learn, or to do?

I also wonder how many opportunities we're missing; you and I, to be mentors. To support someone else in their learning. To see in them something that they may or may not be able to see in themselves. Sometimes all it takes is a simple question: hey, have you ever thought about trying this? Have you ever thought about painting or being a coach or singing in the choir or whatever. Give it a shot, I think you'd be great.

Sometimes mentoring is about dramatic life changes. Most of the time, though, it's just helping people imagine what might be waiting for them over the horizon.

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Our lives are more—so much more—than just past deeds. Our lives are also present decisions and future possibilities. And though we can see some of what's in front of us, we cannot know for sure what's going to come into view. All we can do is keep moving forward. And, hopefully, help others to do the same.

May it be so.

ⁱ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the_great_end_in_religious_instruction-is_not_to/332406.html