

A THEOLOGY OF VULNERABILITY

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

Religious practice and theological reflection are tools to aid us in our quest to understand what it means to be human.

When we ask questions such as, "Who am I?", "How do I live a meaning-filled life?" We are asking religious questions.

Theologies are systems of thought that help us address these questions. Some theologies give us God-focused answers. Some give us nature-focused answers. Some give us human-focused answers.

Some theologies posit sin and evil as the starting place for understanding what it means to be human.

Some theologies posit suffering as the starting place.

Some posit relationship to the divine as the starting place.

This morning I invite you to reflect with me on how human vulnerability might be a starting place for thinking about how we can live meaning-filled, compassionate lives.

This is my third sermon in the series on Spiritual Freedom. In my first, I suggested that we celebrate our free faith and take seriously the responsibility of our spiritual freedom. How do we search? What is the thread that leads us to understanding who we are? How do we practice theological and spiritual reflection together? I told the story of Mary and Martha and how Mary sat at the feet of the teacher...and that Jesus said, that was the better part.

Last week, I offered a reflection on Dr. Kings' question, "Where do we go from here". I suggested that we had more work to do as a congregation that wants to truly be anti-racist and multi-cultural. We can live our spiritual freedom fully only if we keep the faith and continue the work of inclusion in all its forms.

This morning I offer a theology of vulnerability as a way toward balancing the two most important aspects of religion; identity and freedom.

Last Sunday Dave, attended Sunday worship at All Souls Unitarian in NYC. My colleague Reverend Galen Guengerich had just returned from a trip to Israel with a group of clergy representing a wide religious spectrum. Among his many significant experiences, Galen was most moved by his meeting with Natan Sharansky. Sharansky is the Russian mathematician, chess player, and human rights activist who was refused permission to emigrate from the soviet union to Israel. In 1986, he was released after 9 years in a Siberian prison. During his time in prison, he said, he came to one of the most important realizations of his life.

Sharansky said, "There are two human passions: freedom and identity. The discovery of your identity he said, gives you the strength to fight both for your own freedom and the freedom of others."

Awakening to our identity and to our freedom – that is our spiritual task, the religious purpose of our life. Knowing our identity, fully acting on our freedom- that is what gives life meaning. We can make progress along these twin paths only if we open our eyes, our ears, our hearts...only through allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to all of the suffering and all of the joy of life.

Simply living, brings us again and again to a place of vulnerability...either through suffering or through love. None of us can avoid being wounded this life. All of us are given opportunities to open to love. But rarely do we meet our vulnerable moments as gift and opportunity. In fact, we are taught to avoid, dismiss, minimize and deny our vulnerable self.

When our knees ache or our allergies bring us low, or we receive a serious diagnosis. When our losses seem insurmountable. When our feelings are hurt and we become resentful or angry. When we make choices from selfishness or laziness or fear, or self-hate. When we cause hurt to another. When we close ourselves off to love. So many moments, so much vulnerability.

To allow a response from vulnerability...we must allow ourselves to feel deeply...we must cross a chasm of fear. Circumstance, life itself, brings us again and again to the opportunity to embrace our vulnerability.

It is in this embrace of pain and suffering and yes, of love ... that we come to know who we really are, what we humans are capable of, what really matters.

It's not so surprising that Natan Sharansky gained clarity and wisdom while in prison. Deitrich Bonhoffer, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr. , Aung San Suu Kyi, and many, many others tell a similar story.

In the darkest hour, a spark can grow into a light. When we are most thoroughly tested, we find out who we are...and who we belong to.

We are charged to never forget the Holocaust. Not only so that it might never happen again, but also because we learn what it means to be human from the lives of those who lived and died in those terrible years in Europe.

Etty Hillesum was 27 years old when she began her diary and her letters. She was Dutch and living in Amsterdam. It was 1942. She was Jewish. She was well educated. Her father a scholar, one brother an accomplished musician and the other a doctor.

Etty was interested in psychology, she met and talked with Jung, she read widely, she grew increasingly spiritual in her thought, she fell in love, and she was compassionate- committing the final months of her life to helping others. When Jews from Amsterdam were transported by the Nazis to a camp called Westerbork, she, as a member of the Jewish Council in Amsterdam, traveled with them to ease the transition. She nursed the sick in Westerbork, until she, her parents and one of her brothers were put on a train to Auschwitz where she was killed on November 30, 1943.

As a thoughtful and religious person strongly connected to her family and friends, Etty searched deeply within herself to understand what it meant to be human. She followed the thread of her own experience...going deep inside herself in her quest to find meaning. Refusing to hide in denial or pretense, She wrote, "we need to strip down to the deepest honesty."

And by touching this place of deep honest vulnerability within herself, she found the courage to help others. She wrote letters of encouragement to so many. She found ways to distribute food and other necessities to those with nothing. Somehow, she was able to meet each day with a smile for those who suffered.

She wrote; freedom is inexhaustible. The mind is inexhaustible. Beauty is inexhaustible. Love is inexhaustible. Recognizing the vulnerability of all those held in captivity, she called herself "the thinking heart of the barracks."

Living in circumstances of extremity, without the power to save herself or those she loved, she saw life as something larger and more eternal than her own small life. She wrote:

"I always return to Rilke. Is his life not testimony that life is finely balanced? Evidence that, in peaceful times and under favorable circumstances, sensitive artists may search for the purest and most fitting expression of their deepest insights so that, during more turbulent and debilitating times, others can turn to them for support and a ready response to their bewildered questions?

A response they are unable to formulate for themselves, since all their energies are taken up in looking about the bare necessities? Sadly, in difficult times we tend to shrug off the spiritual heritage of artists from an "easier" age, with "what use is that sort of thing to us now?"

It is an understandable but shortsighted reaction. And utterly impoverishing. We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds."

Thus, her very vulnerability brought Etty to a place of deep humanity. "We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds."

There are a universe of stories and lives that make this very point. We find our identity as human beings in our most vulnerable moments. Be they moments of love or of suffering. And in these moments we are truly free.

Ask Gandhi, ask Mandela, ask Jesus, ask Mother Teresa. Or turn to someone here in this congregation and ask them. When were you most vulnerable? When did life force great woundedness upon you or those you love? And what did you learn while you walked there among the wounded? Did you not become as balm?

It is not only suffering and loss that makes us vulnerable. Sometimes we are made vulnerable by love. In fact, love is more powerful and potentially wounding. And in these moments confronted with love, we learn what it means to be human.

What is more difficult than accepting love? Don't we guard against opening to love? Don't we keep escape routes open...one foot out the door? Don't we spend great energies in avoidance?

Don't love's wounds take years, a lifetime, to heal?

There is a significant difference between suffering and love. For suffering cannot be avoided. But love is a choice. Opening to love is a choice.

And we tend to be miserly about how much love we are willing to let in. What are we afraid of?

That we are unworthy of love?

That we will be hurt by love?

That we will be found to be unworthy of love?

All religions address these two vulnerabilities...suffering and love. The thinking heart of Unitarian Universalism teaches us to stay. To stay in this life, to confront reality, to love without ceasing, to be a balm to those in need.

Unitarian Universalism assures us that we are worthy- that we are beloved.

Poet, Sharon Olds has a poem...too complex to read entirely...but these excerpts...hold a truth regarding vulnerability. It's called The Wedding Vow.

"We stood holding each other by the hand, yet I also stood as if alone, for a moment, just before the vow took.

I felt as if I had come to claim a promise...and at the same time that I had come...congenitally unworthy, to beg.

And then it was time to speak- he was offering me, no matter what, his life.

That is all I had to do, that evening, to accept the gift I had longed for- to say I had accepted it, as if being asked if I breathe. Do I take?

I do. I take as he takes- we have been practicing this.

Do you bear this pleasure? I do.”

To be vulnerable is to bear the suffering and the pleasure. To follow the thread of your own experience and remain open. To love is to bear the humility of being human- both imperfect and beloved.

This is what a theology of vulnerability asks of us. To bear the humility of being human – both imperfect and beloved.

And here is religious community is a good place to practice.

Amen/Blessed Be