

“To Be Healers”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

April 2, 2017

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.

Reading

“There is a Brokenness” by Rashani Réa

Sermon

There aren't many things that give me as much satisfaction as fixing something that is broken. At least once a week, my toddler calls out when some toy is seemingly in disrepair, and it is hugely satisfying to be able to re-attach the wheel of a car, or tape the ripped page of a book, and declare, “All fixed!”

I think this urge exists within all of us - to see something broken and to want to fix it. Or, to feel another's pain and to rush to soothe it. Or, to witness the suffering of another person and to want to make things better.

Our worship theme for the month of April is “healing,” and we explore the question of what it means to be a community of healing.

Now, healing certainly isn't the same thing as fixing. Fixing implies a kind of finality to the process of mending. And, it also usually implies a straightforward solution.

The healing that we so often need in our own lives can't usually be addressed with quick fixes.

Our experience of physical healing can teach us that healing is a process and once we begin the process, we don't always know what the outcome will be.

When Liam was about five months old, I began to develop pain in my left shoulder. Over the next few months that followed, the pain got worse and worse until my

shoulder was nearly immobile. It turns out I had had rotator cuff tendinitis that had turned into frozen shoulder. In the months that followed, I had to do a lot of physical therapy and slowly I began to regain my range of motion. Although now one could say that my shoulder is healed, it is definitely not the same as it used to be.

Our bodies often carry the marks of old wounds. Parts of us that have broken and mended, ailments which have come and gone. None of this goes away completely.

The same can be said of the pain and brokenness we feel within our hearts and our spirits as well.

Some of that brokenness comes from the loss of loved ones,
Some of it comes from the pain of rejection or exclusion,
Some of it comes from facing again and again injustice and oppressive systems of power,
Some of it comes from a deep loneliness.

We each carry around with us our own sources of pain, hurt, and woundedness.

The amazing thing is that even with all that pain that is part of us, healing is also possible.

Somehow in the midst of our sorrow, we can and we do find a way back to wholeness.

Some of this healing happens naturally over time without any real intention. And, often, healing emerges not in isolation but in loving relationship. We are able to be a source of healing for one another.

I believe that this ministry of healing is something each of us is called to in our own ways. It is at the heart of our gathered spiritual community.

The love, the welcome, the care we seek to extend to one another is in service of healing. Not as saviors for those people over there, but as people who are both wounded and whole at the same time, and who from that place of paradox, offer one another and the world a chance to heal.

In the Jewish tradition, the phrase “tikkun olam” encompasses this task, this ministry of healing or repairing the world.

One myth that explains the origins of “tikkun olam” comes from the mystical tradition of Judaism. It’s a story of how the world was created. The story goes that in the beginning, God’s presence filled the universe. And, when God decided to bring this world into being, God contracted God’s breath, and this created darkness. When God the Creator said, “Let there be light,” ten vessels came forth each filled with primordial light. But the vessels were too fragile to contain such a powerful, divine light. They shattered and sparks scattered everywhere. These sparks of light became hidden in all events and in all people.

And, as the myth goes, human beings were created to lift up these sparks of light, to make them visible, and to therefore, restore the innate wholeness of the world.¹

I think there is something incredibly powerful in this image. The light that we know is at our core - that sense of wholeness - exists yet it can feel scattered and hidden. Our work is to seek out and find that light. Healing the world means recognizing the brokenness in the world and within ourselves and bringing back together those broken and fragmented pieces.

To talk of “healing the world” may sound daunting, yet it is not any of ours to do alone.

This is a collective task, and we each have our role to play.

The doctor and writer, Rachel Naomi Remen, reflects on this story and the idea of “tikkun olam.” She says, “this is, of course, a collective task. It involves all people who have ever been born, all people presently alive, all people yet to be born. We are all healers of the world. And that story opens a sense of possibility. It’s not about healing the world by making a huge difference. It’s about healing the world that touches you, that’s around you.”²

¹ <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/how-the-ari-created-a-myth-and-transformed-judaism>

² On Being Interview with Rachel Naomi Remen, “Listening Generously,” July 29, 2010, <http://onbeing.org/programs/rachel-naomi-remen-listening-generously/>

And, she asks, “How would you live if you were exactly what is needed to heal the world?”

For me, this question is an invitation to recognize the possibility for healing in ordinary moments. Rather than “healing the world” being about going out and saving the planet all at once, or singlehandedly eradicating poverty, it is about being present to the moment and recognizing how your own gifts might be a blessing and a source of healing.

Sometimes it simply means being open to that hidden light being discovered even in unexpected circumstances.

The writer Mark Nepo shares this story, a parable really, of healing in his book, *As Far As the Heart Can See*.³ It is unclear whether this story comes from the author’s personal life or is fictitious, but, regardless of its origin, I think the truth of the story shines through.

As the story goes, one day a woman named Melina came home to find that her home had been ransacked. All of her belongings had been trampled and broken as the robber searched for those things that could be sold: her stereo, her television, and other valuables.

One item in particular was broken beyond repair, something that had sentimental value. It was a small wooden sculpture of a deer nibbling on some grass. Her grandmother, who had carried it through the Holocaust, had given it to her.

Melina came home just as the thief was leaving. They looked at each other for a few seconds before the young man ran off. Melina was questioned by the police and filled out all the papers she had to and then returned home to the rubble.

About three weeks later, they apprehended the suspect, and Melina had to go to the police precinct to pick him out of a lineup. Once she did that, they held him while she filed charges. As she was doing so, though, something came over her, and she

³ Mark Nepo, “The Burglar,” *As Far As the Heart Can See: Stories to Illuminate the Soul* (Health Communications, Inc., 2011).

felt the need to confront this man to be able to move on. The detective advised against it but she was determined to talk to him, so they let her speak to him with an officer in the room.

She sat down opposite him and began to look him in the eye. He was uncomfortable, but after a few minutes, he started to look back. Melina asked about his life. The man was unsure at first but then began to tell his story. He was an out-of-work electrician in his thirties, with a wife and a baby. He had a drinking problem, the rent was overdue, and their baby needed medicine. And he had a bad idea.

Then, she told him her story: about growing up in Chicago with her grandmother; about becoming a therapist; about her belief that we need the help of others to make it through. Finally, she spoke of his breaking into and destroying her home, and breaking the one treasure she had from her grandmother who was now gone. The thief broke down a little and began to tremble.

Melina says, "We were no longer victim and perpetrator. We were simply two ordinary people trying to make our way." He apologized. Melina finally stood up and said, "I accept your apology. I hope you find your way." With that, she left the room and told the detective that she had decided to drop the charges.

On her way home, she wondered if she had done the right thing. She hadn't planned any of it. Later, in explaining to a friend why she dropped the charges, she said she hoped that someday someone might give her a second chance.

Healing begins when we acknowledge the pain and the brokenness that we each carry. To participate in the healing of another doesn't mean making the brokenness - ours or theirs - go away.

As the poet writes, the unbroken comes out of the broken. The unshatterable blooms from the shatteredness. Our hearts are torn open even as we break into the place inside which is unbreakable and whole. The gift that we can offer is to remind one another that as hidden as it might seem, a light resides in all people and all places.

You don't have to have any special talents or powers. You don't have to be perfect or unscarred.

You simply have to show up with your own truth in the fullness of who you are, wounds and all, and leave space for your jagged edges to touch someone else's, and to allow the light to shine through those cracks.

So may it be.