

“Hope in the Dark”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
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Reading

“Credo” by Edwin Arlington Robinson

Sermon

I’m going to tell you a story, and it’s kind of a long one. There are some sad moments in it, but hang in there, I think you’ll find it worthwhile.

This is the story of B.J. Miller.¹ Miller was a sophomore at Princeton University in the fall of 1990. One night, he and a couple of friends did what college kids often do - they went out drinking. Around 4 a.m. they were hungry and started walking towards a convenience store for sandwiches. They were near a train station, and they decided it would be fun to climb up on top of a parked commuter train. Miller got to the top first and when he did, an electrical current arced out of a piece of equipment nearby and into the watch he was wearing on his wrist. 11,000 volts of electricity shot through his left arm and down his legs. When his friends reached him, there was smoke rising from his feet.

Miller was taken into the burn unit of a nearby hospital. Doctors amputated both of his legs just below the knee, and then determined they needed to take his arm as well just below the elbow. For many weeks, the hospital staff considered him close to death. Miller, who spent that time in a devastated haze, didn’t know that and only worried about who he would be when he made it through this life-changing ordeal.

¹ More of B.J. Miller’s story is shared in this article, “One Man’s Quest to Change the Way We Die,” by Jon Mooallem: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/03/magazine/one-mans-quest-to-change-the-way-we-die.html>. January 3, 2017.

Miller was in a sterile environment on the burn unit and so for a long time, no visitors were allowed in his hospital room. But, on the morning his arm was going to be amputated, a dozen friends and family members packed into the 10-foot corridor between the burn unit and the elevator, to catch a glimpse of him on his way to surgery. Miller remembers thinking, "They all dared to show up. They all dared to look at me." Their showing up, reassured him that he was in fact still lovable even if he couldn't see it. Miller also had the example of his mother, who, as a polio survivor, had used a wheelchair since he was a child and never seemed less capable or diminished. After the operation, when he rolled through again, he opened his eyes as he passed her and said: "Mom. Now you and me have more in common."

One day while lying in bed in his windowless and antiseptic room on the burn unit, he heard there was a blizzard outside but couldn't see it himself. A nurse smuggled him a snowball and let him hold it despite hospital regulations. Miller felt like he was in rapture holding that cold piece of snow in his hand. Reflecting on that moment in a talk given in 2015, he says, "In that moment, just being part of this planet in this universe mattered more to me than whether I lived or died. That little snowball packed all the inspiration I needed to both try to live and be OK if I did not."

Miller did survive and he returned to Princeton the next year. He had three prosthetic limbs and rode around campus in a golf cart with a rambunctious service dog named Vermont who was a little too misbehaved to provide any concrete service. Miller switched from his foreign relations track to studying art history, and it was through viewing slides of ancient sculptures that he began to gain a different perspective on his body as it now existed. The beautiful and monumental sculptures he and his classmates were viewing were all missing arms or noses or ears. Their brokenness and time's effects on the marble bodies were seen as part of their artfulness. Miller realized that medicine didn't see the body this way, and he decided that instead of seeing his injuries as something to get over, he would try to get into them, to see his life as its own novel challenge. Miller believed that his particular kind of suffering was just one variation on a theme we all deal with. "To be human is really hard," he says.

This positive attitude was mostly an aspiration. It took time for him to not feel repulsed by, what he calls, the "chopped meat" look of his skin at the end of his arm. But, he slowly became more confident and playful. He replaced the sock-like covering over the stump with an actual sock - first a plain sock and then more whimsical stripes and argyle patterns. Then, one day he simply forgot about the sock, and just like that, he says, "I was done with it. I was no longer ashamed of my arm." He also thought again

about the foam covers he had been wearing over his prosthetic legs. “Why not just take that stuff off and delight in what actually is?” he began to think. And, so he did.

Miller eventually went to medical school where he studied palliative care, an approach to medicine rooted in similar ideas to the ones he was starting to form in response to his own body and healing. Miller is now in his mid-forties and recently directed the Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco helping people to live their final days with dignity and compassion. He now speaks and writes about end of life issues and has a personal mission to rethink and redesign how institutions support how we live and die.

“Parts of me died early on,” he said in a recent talk. “And that’s something, one way or another, we can all say. I got to redesign my life around this fact, and I tell you it has been a liberation to realize you can always find a shock of beauty or meaning in what life you have left.”

How do we hold onto hope in our darkest and most despairing times? What does hope in dark times look like? What does it feel like?

All around us, and even within us, are these stories of persistence and survival. Stories like B.J. Miller’s don’t necessarily feel hopeful in the worst of it, and in our own dark times we may feel as if the light of hope is just a faint glimmer.

What stands out to me in Miller’s story is that he had no illusions about how altered his life would be after that accident. And the things that kept him going weren’t reassurances from others or to himself that everything would be just fine. There was no denial of the pain of his situation, but there were those shocks of beauty and meaning, as he called them, in the life that remained for him to live.

This is another story, a shorter one, of beauty shocking its way into desperate circumstances.

It was May 27, 1992 in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The city had already been under siege by Serbian nationalists for a few weeks as the battle over the ethnically and religiously diverse city began to play out. That day a group of civilians - men, women, and children - were standing outside in line for bread hoping to take home some small piece of the dwindling food supply when a mortar shell fell from the sky. 22 people were killed and more than 100 injured.

The next day, the 36 year-old principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera Orchestra, Vedran Smajlovic, put on his tuxedo, picked up his cello and brought it to the crater in the street left by the deadly blast. Into that space of death and destruction as snipers fired around him, he played Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor in honor of the lives lost. He continued to do so for 22 days straight at the foot of the makeshift memorial site. Some of you here may recall reading about Smajlovic or even seeing him play during that time. His music helped to bring international attention to the devastating events unfolding in Sarajevo at the time. His gesture and the music he brought forth from his instrument suggested that there was something - something sorrowful and beautiful all at the same time - that could transcend the violent destruction that besieged that place and its people and perhaps the violence so often present in our human relations.

Again, this shock of beauty and meaning contained no assurance that everything would be just fine. Perhaps it simply served as a reminder that there was indeed something to keep living for - that in the life you have left, as transformed as it may be by loss, by heartache, by literal bombs, and by the unknown - that there is still the glimmer of beauty, meaning, and possibility.

Hope emerges in the recognition that all is not lost as bleak as things may seem.

One final story of hope this morning comes from the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah which begins in a few nights. The story of Hanukkah goes back thousands of years. The ancient Jewish people living in Israel had come under the rule of a Syrian king, King Antiochus, who did not want to rule a nation of many religions and cultures. He tried to force the Jewish people to abandon their religious practices and their worship of their God and to only worship Greek gods and follow Greek customs. There was a group of Jews that dedicated themselves to resisting. They were called the Maccabees. The Maccabees, led by Judah the Maccabee, fought to reclaim the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. And, though they were small in number in comparison to the king's army, they were able to drive them out and reclaim the temple. When they got there, they discovered what bad shape it was in. They removed the altars and statues to the Greek gods and cleaned every inch of the temple. Then, they led a rededication ceremony to reclaim the temple as their own.

As the story goes, they found that there was just enough oil to light the menorah, or the lamp, inside the temple for just one day. But, surprisingly, the oil lasted for eight days.

The celebration of Hanukkah begins this coming Tuesday night when the first candle of the menorah will be lit in synagogues and Jewish homes around the world.

Although the oil lasting for eight days could be seen as a miraculous event, I believe that the lesson of this ancient story is not that in times of darkness we should hold out hope for a miracle. Instead, our hope lies in doing what we can and what we must because there is no other way.

Hope is in the faithfulness of continuing on - of lighting the lamp, of playing the song, of letting one's scars be seen and finding purpose out of life's devastations.

Through this persistence and survival, we can find the light and we can be the light in the dark.

So may it be.