

Possibilities of Transformation ©
(On Wounds as a Way to Justice)

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
At The North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, April 30, 2017

“Wounds are the means through which we enter the hearts of other people. They are meant to teach us to become compassionate and wise.”- Carolyn Myss

“Healing River, send down your waters.”

*Some of us are in need of healing, some of us are in pain,
most of us face some challenges, and all of us, every one of us, is facing change.*

“We are not meant to stay wounded.”

“We are not meant to stay wounded,” writes Carolyn Myss-

“We are supposed to *move through* our tragedies and challenges

and to *help each other* move through the many painful episodes of our lives.

By remaining stuck in the power of our wounds, we block our own transformation.”

If only “transformation” was easy! If only it was easy to leave some wounds behind!

Change comes to us all. Transformation is less certain-
those times when something profound shifts for us,
and we realize we are no longer exactly who we were before.
It’s not usually something that happens suddenly, dramatically,
but over time—those profound shifts in our lives, our hearts, our spirits...
or in our church, our communities and our nation.

It seems to me that in this community, some things may be shifting right now.

*“We are supposed to help each other move
through the many painful episode of our lives.”*

Myss continues: “Wounds are the means through which we enter the hearts of other people.
They are meant to teach us to become compassionate and wise.”

I wonder what you think of when you hear those words.
If they bring to mind your own tragedies or challenges,
any painful episodes in your own lives.

If you are far enough out from them- what do you think--
did they teach you to become compassionate and wise?
Or maybe just compassionate—and skip the wise?
Or maybe you are still working on just the compassion piece-
compassion for others, for yourself.

Did pain harden your heart, or open you up to the hearts of others?
Did it open you up to your own vulnerability and that of others, open you up to love? This is
the question we ask over and over here at church.

Brene Brown writes, *“People want love to be like unicorns and rainbows.
But Jesus says love is hard, trouble and controversial.
I thought faith would say I will take away the pain and discomfort
but what it ended up saying is “I’ll sit with you in it.”
And I never thought that would be enough, but it’s perfect. Love weeps.”*

For those of you in pain or discomfort,
I pray you know that there are those, even here,
who will sit with you in your pain and discomfort, and that this may be a blessing.
For those of us who have moved through challenge or pain,
I pray that we might transform our experience, use our wounds, to benefit others.

Who might you benefit? Who might you sit with, be with, accompany?
It might be someone who you know, within or outside this community.
It might be a child, an adult, an elder. It might be a group of people.
This is a good part of what church is about:
asking for others to accompany us, through beauty, joy, change and pain,
and asking ourselves *who are we called to accompany today-*
as individuals, as a congregation?

On March 19th, just six weeks ago, I preached a sermon about Sanctuary- about the need of all humans for safe space, but also the specific needs of local immigrants for sanctuary- safety from deportation. I mentioned that there are 5 million US households with US citizen children where at least one parent is undocumented... 5 million families at risk of a sudden, forced separation. I asked whether or not we are called, at this time, to bring our commitment to providing refuge and safety into the streets.

Since that sermon, a lot has happened. About 30 of you showed up for a Listening Circle about being a Sanctuary Ally congregation that afternoon. After that feedback, and a two week waiting period for more, the Board decided that as of April 7th, we were ready to publicly announce our status as a *Sanctuary Ally*- offering support for those churches offering living space to undocumented immigrants in immediate danger of deportation.

This is good, because the Bedford UU congregation recently voted to offer Sanctuary, and they need spiritual and financial support.

The Board also put on the Annual Meeting Warrant a vote about signing the UUA Statement of Conscience as a congregation. If voted, we will join with 40% of UU congregations that have already done so.

The Merrimack Valley Cosecha movement has been planning a big celebration and march in Lawrence for tomorrow's national Day Without Immigrants.

Six days ago, 3 UU clergy along with 17 others were arrested in an act of civil disobedience, blocking the entrance to the Suffolk County House of Corrections.

The next day, this past Tuesday, Merrimack Valley clergy held a press conference to announce the formation of the Merrimack Valley Interfaith Sanctuary Network. A statement was signed by 16 clergy of their support for Sanctuary congregations. A lot has happened!

Now, offering Sanctuary might be seen by some as a kind of civil disobedience. So I realized it was time to go back to our Unitarian authority on the matter, the Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau.

Thoreau was part of a Unitarian Transcendentalist circle, And after several failures became a writer. He is best known, as Wendy mentioned last week, for his writing on nature and his time at Walden Pond.

What is not so well known is that he and a friend once accidentally set a fire which burned 300 acres of Walden woods. (How many of you knew about that?)

Thoreau wrote not just about nature, but also about the use of conscience in the democratic process and the importance of reason – similar to our 5th UU principle and 5th UU source today.

In 1845, James Polk was elected President of the country. He was quite popular, admired for his gung-ho style by many. Thoreau did not like him.

Within a year, Polk had started the Mexican-American War over squabbles over the Texas border. Polk also defended slavery, and his administration had a policy of hunting down and returning runaway slaves to their Southern masters. Polk dismissed the arguments of abolitionists as *naïve and sentimental*.

Now, in those days, the prevailing view was that if a President won the majority vote, those who voted against him should be silent. The duty, it was said, of a good citizen was to respect the will of the majority. Thoreau had different ideas, and he wrote about them in a 1949 essay, called "*Resistance to Civil Government*", known now as *Civil Disobedience*.

In it, he asked what a citizen should do about an administration they wholeheartedly opposed. As a Unitarian, Thoreau valued independent thought,

the principle of reason and following one's own conscience.

But he also knew about failure and pain, deep grief and the loss of family members.

His beloved older brother died at as a young adult after a shaving cut got infected.

One day, Thoreau's life looked one way; the next it was completely changed.

I can't help but think that his own pain opened him up to the pain of others- to the extreme suffering of his fellow human beings trapped in slavery-

some living under constant threat of physical violence or death,

most separated unmercifully from their spouses and children.

For all his intellectual arguments, perhaps it was compassion that moved his passion.

Thoreau argued that a true patriot, a noble citizen, a real American was someone who followed their own conscience

and thought for themselves every day of an administration's life.

After all, he noted, "Most legislators, politicians, lawyers,

ministers and officeholders are as likely to serve the devil, without intending it, as God."

He wrote that a citizen must never "resign himself to the legislation" and put himself "at the serve of the unscrupulous man in power."

He asked, "*How does it become a man to behave*

toward this American government today?"

Then he, of course, answered his own question- like this:

"I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it."

Thoreau had himself been so opposed to Polk that he had refused to pay his poll taxes for 6 years, and in July of 1846,

on a trip into Concord to get his shoes repaired,

he was promptly arrested and thrown in the town jail.

An aunt paid his bill and he only stayed one night.

But he capitalized on the experience- he milked it for all its worth-

to argue in his essay that there was nothing undignified in going to jail for a just cause.

He wrote, "There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them,

who... sit down with their hands in their pockets,
and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing.”

He said, “All machines have their friction,
But when injustice is too great, you should let your life
be a counter-friction to stop the machine.”

So this is the advice of our dear Transcendentalist Thoreau:
when injustice is too great, let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine.

Six weeks ago, I talked about why local immigrant families are afraid-
that they’ve heard stories, like the one about the mom from Arizona,
or the dad and restaurant owner from Illinois.
Well, now we have our own stories to add to that sad collection- as some of you know well.

It was on March 31st that ICE agents showed up at the Federal U.S. Citizens
and Immigration Services Office on Mill Street in Lawrence,
and arrested five people- at least three of them
just as they completed interviews for their green cards.
All are under final orders for removal, and are to be held in custody pending removal.

One of those people was a resident of Andover, one from Lawrence,
and I don’t know about the rest.

Two of them had no criminal record at all. Three had traffic violations.

One of them was a woman in her late 30’s who owns a business
in the Metro West area, employs 12 people and pays taxes. Her visa had expired.
She is married to a U.S. citizen, has an 8 year old daughter
and 2 stepchildren who are all citizens.
She was arrested and sent to Suffolk County House of Corrections before her hearings.
She may be deported to Brazil, where she hasn’t been for 15 years.

Another person arrested was Leandro Arriaga.
Leandro and his wife Katherine were also there to continue his green card application.
They made it through their interview which concluded that their marriage is valid,

and the officials told him his application for a green card would advance.

Relieved and joyous, Leandro and Katherine were directed to a waiting room.

But a few minutes later, Leandro was called back in, where Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents were waiting to arrest him. They asked if he wanted to say goodbye to his wife, and he said no- it would be unbearable for both of them. He was sent to the Bristol House of Corrections. and Katherine had to go home to parent their daughter alone. Their daughter is only three months old. Her name is Jade Arriaga Ramos.

This is not about abstract ideas. This is about a 3 month old named Jade, and her missing father. This is about real parents, real children, real families- and a callous bureaucracy that tears them apart.

Now, there are many reasons- religious and personal- why I feel called to say something again about all this.

There are the tenants of our faith, which speak of the worth and dignity of every person.

There is the example of Jesus and his welcome table, his fellowship with the marginalized.

There are the words of the ancient Hebrew prophets to stand with and remember the poor, or orphans, the widows— and to do justice, show mercy and walk humbly with God.

On top of that, congregations are often concerned with “family values”- with supporting the most basic units of society- individuals and families.

On the personal level, there is also the fact that I, too, come from immigrants—Germans and Swedes who came to this land in the late 1800’s- in 1861, 1872 and 1891. When they came, *immigration documents were not required* by US immigration officers.

It was only in 1918 that immigration documents were imposed as a new requirement.
So I know that my family's entry into legal citizenship
was in large part due to their ethnicity and their timing.

But perhaps the most profound personal reason
that urges me to stand up/accompany these strangers in some way
comes from my own wounds.

As a divorced person who co-parents her children,
I know the pain of being separated from them- for even short periods of time.
I can't imagine the pain of not seeing them indefinitely.
I can't imagine the pain of being torn from one's 8 year old or 3 month old daughter,
with no warning and little recourse.

I can't imagine the pain of those children and the spouses left behind,
knowing their loved one has been sent to another country-
quite possibly without connections,
where they might be preyed on- blackmailed and even killed-
by those who target people deported from the US
because it is assumed they have access to lots of money.
This has happened.

The ripping apart of families is cruel.
Even the immigration lawyers say these arrests are NOT NORMAL.
I cannot- without disgrace- be associated with them, as a citizen.
In my mind, these arrests are making war on women and children.;
They are abusive to children. They are nationally sanctioned child abuse.

I would repeat the words of Pope Francis,
who in a TED talk last week, called for a **"revolution of tenderness"**.
He asked us all to reflect on **"how wonderful would it be,**
while we discover faraway planets,
to rediscover the needs of the brothers and sisters orbiting around us."

We need a revolution of tenderness-
a revolution that holds at its center the reality
of a mother's and father's tenderness towards their newborn child.
We need a revolution of humanity and compassion-
that bridges the suburban/urban divide, that affirms our mutual humanity.
May we be part of that revolution, that change, that transformation.
May our wounds expand our hearts and our compassion.
May the spirit of life, of love, of God, use us, well.
Amen.

**With gratitude for the reporting of Paul Tennant (3/31, Eagle-Tribune); Shannon Dooling (3/30 and 4/2, WBUR); Milton Valencia (3/31 Boston Globe). Gratitude also to The School of Life YouTube video on Henry David Thoreau and The Thoreau Society webpage. Stories about arrests also reported by Kristine Phillips (4/6 Washington Post); Susan Dalkind (4/1 The Guardian); Keith Eddings (4/31 Eagle Tribune); and Gloria Christie (Bipartisan Report).*

Reading and Meditation, with words by Caroline Myss and Jan Richardson

“We are not meant to stay wounded.

We are supposed to move through our tragedies and challenges
and to help each other move through the many painful episodes of our lives.

By remaining stuck in the power of our wounds, we block our own transformation.

We overlook the greater gifts inherent in our wounds —

the strength to overcome them and the lessons that we are meant to receive through them.

Wounds are the means through which we enter the hearts of other people.

They are meant to teach us to become compassionate and wise.”

Blessing When the World is Ending – by Jan Richardson

This blessing will not fix you,

will not mend you, will not give you false comfort;

it will not talk to you about one door opening when another one closes.

It will simply sit itself beside you

among the shards

and gently turn your face toward the direction

from which the light will come,

gathering itself about you as the world begins again.