

Making Friends with your Ex

Sermon – Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist

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Reading 1

#568 Connections are Made Slowly by Marge Piercy

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.

You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.

More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.

Penetrate quietly as the earthworm that blows no trumpet.

Fight persistently as the creeper that brings down the tree.

Spread like the squash plant that overruns the garden.

Gnaw in the dark and use the sun to make sugar.

Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.

Live a life you can endure: make love that is loving.

Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in, a thicket and bramble wilderness to the outside but to us interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows and lairs.

Live as if you like yourself, and it may happen:

Reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in.

This is how we are going to live for a long time: not always,

For every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting, after the long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes.

Reading 2

“Our Third Principle” by Robert Hardies

Not long after divinity school, I stumbled upon the work of Unitarian theologian Bernard Loomer, an important figure in process theology, a movement that contends that the universe is always growing in size and complexity, and that as the universe grows, so does God and so must we. Loomer saw the increasing complexity of creation as a glorious blossoming that God was delighted to behold. Loomer would often ask people, “What is the size of your soul?” By which he meant, “What is your soul’s ability to grow and expand, to stretch when life throws more contradictions your way?” Size was always the defining concept in Loomer’s spirituality – which he describes in this way:

‘By S-I-Z-E I mean the capacity of a person’s soul, the range and depth of his love, his capacity for relationships. I mean the volume of life you can take into your being and still maintain your integrity and individuality, the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of your being without feeling defensive or insecure. I mean the strength of your spirit to encourage others to become freer in the development of their diversity and uniqueness. I mean the power to sustain more complex and enriching tensions.

Before Bernard Loomer, I used to think of spiritual growth as a process of growing closer to God in a vertical kind of way. I took the image from “Jack in the Beanstalk.” We’re here on the earth, God is up in heaven, and spiritual growth means growing like that beanstalk, higher and higher, ever closer to God. But in that model, we end up with our head in the clouds.

Loomer showed me that spiritual growth isn't about a vertical ascent to heaven but about growth in every dimension at once. It's spirituality in 3-D. Growth in spirit doesn't measure one's proximity to a God above, but rather the spaciousness of one's own soul – its volume, its capacity, its size. We need to grow souls that can encounter the other as a unique subject, not an object...We need souls that can take in the world in all its complexity and diversity, yet still maintain our integrity. And we need souls that can love and be in relationship with all of this complexity. We need a spiritual posture of embrace.

Sermon

In second grade, I began the important process of preparing for my First Communion.

It was a big deal in my religious and academic life, and I took it seriously. Along the way, I decided to set up a meeting with my priest - a little one-on-one, to discuss some things I had on my mind. As I told him when I called him, I had some questions. Like for example – and this was maybe the most important one of a pretty long list, *How do I become a famous saint?* Seriously, I had written it down.

In my 7 year old mind, faith and achievement were one and the same. Spirituality was a destination, and there were clear measures of success. Sainthood, for example. And as a precocious little second grader, I was determined to succeed.

Rather than “How big is your soul,” as Rev. Hardies would have us ask, I was sure the relevant spiritual question was something more like, “How close are you to the top?”¹

Many of us, even long past the second grade, think of faith development and spiritual maturity in this way – our westernized worldview considers most things uni-directional and linear. Spiritual growth is no exception. We tell stories this way, and imagine our lives this way. Introduction, Conflict, Climax, Resolution. Beginning, Middle, End.

Which means that, if at some point on our single straight path towards Enlightenment, we come to change our beliefs, or our sense of what is right or wrong, or when we feel a shift in our community, or use new tools to make meaning – we tend to understand these things as a kind of spiritual do-over.

When the path of spiritual development is only linear and one-way, a change in some core spiritual belief or affiliation can feel like starting over, switching paths, taking a new route to the top.

For much of my life, I have understood my own faith journey within this kind of linear, vertical ascent kind of model: First Roman Catholicism. Stop. Switch. Do-over. Then, secular

¹ “The Third Principle” by Robert Hardies, in *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship*, Ellen Brandenburg, ed. Boston, MA: Skinner House, 2007.

humanism. No, wait, stop. Do-over. Then, mystical poetic atheism. No, stop. Do-over. Then, Unitarian Universalism....When I found this faith, it felt to me, like each of the previous paths – like I was finally embarking on just the right path, making a fresh start, moving full speed ahead towards spiritual success.

It wasn't until seminary – what some might consider a mark of significant progress along the Unitarian Universalist path to the top – that I started to have the sense that all my spiritual paths were crumbling around me. That the image of spiritual growth as linear progress had not so much fostered my faith, as I it had my expertise in spiritual serial monogamy. And I was swimming in spiritual exes.

Let's recap. First I was a Catholic. Then we divorced. Then I was a rational and devout secular humanist. Then we divorced. Then I was a non-religious spiritual humanist finding God in the theatre. Then we divorced. Then I was a Unitarian Universalist on the track to ordination. Then...

You can see where this might be problematic.

And what's more, it's not true. I have no more “divorced” my Catholicism or my secular humanism than I have been entirely born anew in Unitarian Universalism. Instead, these spiritual exes reside in me, these haunting beliefs and past traditions, they live in the dark and deep corners of my heart, of my soul, revealing themselves in often surprising and unintentional ways, especially in times of grief or confusion, when I go searching for a way forward, when I seek or provide counsel, when I attempt to assemble meaning out of life's small moments, there – as much as I may have at times wished it, my exes are *not* – as the old country song would have it - off residing in Texas, but are instead here, residing right here, with me.

But to allow myself to recognize them, let alone make friends with them...that has often felt a little....I'm going to say – crazy. Or at the very least, unnecessary.

A few summers ago, I was at Gay Pride in Denver. It was one of the first years where churches really started to show up, especially the Metropolitan Community Church – MCC – or what most Christians and most queers think of as the Gay Church. Well, that year at Gay Pride, the Gay Church was *everywhere*. And unlike the leather daddies or the dykes on bikes, here was one group that made me really *uncomfortable*.

I remember looking at their marchers with a kind of pity and fear and anger, all mixed together. Gay Christians? I remember thinking – *why do they even try?* Are they so self-hating and self-punishing that they must *worship* the very God that fuels fear and judgment against them? Why would anyone work so hard to make a place for themselves along a spiritual path that clearly leads only to the separation of good and evil and the saved and the damned...with GLBT folks like us sooner or later ending up in the latter category...? Really – *why?*

A few summers later, my bare feet hanging over a small basin, I knew why. My body knew why.

Led moments before to a back corner of the large cathedral by a new friend, a Catholic woman also in her second year of seminary, I had followed her, humble and trembling.

She had found me amongst the many worshippers travelling the space as a part of an ecumenical worship experience at the end of a weeklong retreat on congregational leadership. Echoing through the space were sweet and spontaneous bursts of worshipful chanting, sudden and mournful hymns, and haunting melodies – all unplanned, all breathed into being only by way of the mysterious combination of bodies that filled the room that evening. Who started singing? What were we singing? Who ended each song? No one and yet everyone knew.

In one corner, a progressive form of confession, in another, a candle for meditation along with Dr. Seuss's *Oh the Places You'll Go*;

in the center, worshipers walking the path of a labyrinth;

up on a balcony, tools for coloring mandalas and for making prayer beads.

And in every other corner of the large cathedral, so many other simultaneous opportunities for reflection, for worship, for transformation, for communion.

In every pew, the stunning variety of humanity seeking the holy.

My friend whispered, *Can I wash your feet?*

I paused - I had been avoiding that corner of the space – filled as it was with Jesus – Stations of the Cross, a large crucifix laid out on the floor, and then the chairs and the basins, and the water. Not my thing.

Can I wash your feet?

Yes.

She took me by the hand and led me to a chair where she took off my shoes, placed my feet in warm water, and gently wiped them clean.

As she worked, I felt in me a sense of everything coming together –

the many times I watched 12 women and men walk to the front of my Catholic church one day of each Holy Week, to shed their shoes and socks and have their feet washed,

the words from the gospel of John – “Lord, do you wash my feet?”,

the alienation I felt, knowing the Catholic church did not want me as me,

the ways the Church helped my parents justify the terrible things they said and did to me and my partner in those early years,

the ways I knew that my friend, here tenderly washing my feet, had remained loyal to the Church, feeling a call to priesthood, despite her sex and her progressive theology,

the humble acceptance from this devout Catholic woman to this queer Unitarian Universalist minister-to-be,

I felt it all.

And I knew I would not have understood nor experienced that foot-washing in the same way if not for my Catholicism, if not for the stories of Jesus that live deep in me. I would not have felt love as fully, nor seen the holy as truly, if not for my spiritual so-called ex residing right here, with me, in full view, laid bare, and beautiful.

After he rejects Jack-in-the-Beanstalk as an image for spiritual maturity, Rev. Hardies embraces instead the story of the *Grinch that Stole Christmas*. He says, “Perhaps you remember the moment near the end of Dr. Seuss’s beloved Christmas tale when the Grinch rides his sleigh up Mt. Crumpit...and just before jettisoning the gifts, he pauses to listen for the weeping of the Whos down in Who-ville. He hears them singing instead. At first the singing doesn’t make sense to the Grinch; it doesn’t compute. But he finally understands, and Dr. Seuss tells us that ‘the Grinch’s small heart grew three sizes that day.’”²

For a long time, I assumed that the only way to hold on to your spiritual exes would be in a posture of grief – like Mr. Grinch, I thought if I listened closely enough to the stories of those Gay Christians, I would eventually hear weeping. And sometimes there is. But also, there is singing. And finally, I think I am coming to understand why. And I know my heart is growing as a result.

Our spirits do not grow in a straight line, but more in the pattern of what playwright Suzan-Lori Parks calls “Rep and Rev,” or Repetition and Revision. Influenced by jazz and the use of a similar musical refrain in repetition, with slight revisions each time, Rep and Rev tells a “drama of accumulation.”³ The story is not one of traveling “from A to B [or beginning, middle, end], but rather, for example, from A to A to A to A to A to B to A.”⁴

When we grow our souls, we do so not by starting anew with each discovery or change of heart, but rather we repeat and revise previous experiences, honoring the past and always knowing

² Hardies, *Ibid.*

³ Parks, Suzan-Lori. *The America Play and Other Works*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994.

⁴ *Ibid.*

ourselves as in the process of becoming. We need not see ourselves as spiritually scattered, always attempting a new course, as we are not ascending vertically toward a single destination, but rather we grow ourselves, our *souls*, just as Rev. Hardies says, in 3-D.

As a movement, we have been quick to consider our new spiritual discoveries as making irrelevant the beliefs or practices of the past. We are a faith of the future, not a faith confined by tradition. So that, for example, by the time Unitarians embraced a humanist-centered religious path in the 1930s, they – and history since – saw it as a break from the past centuries of Unitarian and Universalist Christianity – a discovery entirely rational and scientifically sound – a new start on a new path towards spiritual “success.”

But our humanist impulses were not only built on visions of the future, but also on our repetition and revision of our long and winding spiritual past. Imagine what the Humanist Manifesto might have said if its writers focused not so much on stating something boldly new, but rather worked to actively reconstruct and reinterpret our religious inheritance of prioritizing human relationships and this-worldly justice. Perhaps the treatise might have managed to inhabit or engage what Humanist William Schultz later acknowledged they had missed – what he describes as the “interior haunts of the unconscious, of guilt, passion, and pain.”⁵ Instead, they staked their claim in the realm of the new and so missed the opportunity to grow their souls in 3D – and therefore each of ours as inheritors of their part of our shared covenant.

They missed the opportunity to make friends with their ex.

Now, I know that for straight folks, making friends with an ex is not typical. Instead, you usually make a clean break, trying to never see that ex-girlfriend or ex-boyfriend, ex-wife or ex-husband again – and certainly avoid intimacy with your past partner and instead seek new relationships – a fresh start.

So for those of you stuck in that spiritually limiting paradigm...I invite you to take a page from the lesbian playbook – at least where spirituality is concerned - where we don’t know anything *but* lifetime relationships and intimate communities made up of ex- and future-girlfriends, sisters and partners, moms and mates. As any lesbian or bisexual woman will tell you, it’s probably a little messier this way, but it often feels more honest, more full, more whole. Our intimacies are the embodiment of Rep and Rev – we don’t just make friends with our ex, we find ways to continue to make a life with them.

So: What is the size of your soul?

We can only answer this question when we dig deep into the wells of our past, when we let the waters of our collective and individual spiritual histories flow freely and fully to quench the thirst of our everyday lives, when we see ourselves not as on a straight-line path towards

⁵ <http://www.uuworld.org/2003/06/feature3.html>

spiritual success, but in the always messy, sometimes painful but reliably complicated three-dimensional experience of loving this beautiful and broken world.

Unitarian Universalism should feel like a faith where everything is on the table. Where nothing is out of bounds or off limits. A faith big enough for everyone, with depths beyond what any one of us can discover alone. But this just doesn't work when we must tiptoe in our conversations so as to not bring up someone's ex. Rather than a big faith capable of great depths, we end up with a polite community that feels less like a church and more a perpetual family reunion. Which I don't know about you, but doesn't sound all that soul-enriching to me...

What is the size of our soul? What do we hope it to be or become?

We can only engage these questions in our congregations when we create adequate space for silence, for contradiction, for forgiveness. When we listen humbly to those places where expect weeping, and instead find song.

We can only actively grow souls here, when we do as Marge Piercy describes: "keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in, reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in."⁶

We must be gardeners to one another and to ourselves, we must tend to the soil of the past, plant the inherited seeds, reap again a new harvest for today.

If there is injury in our spiritual past, we must help one another heal it. If there is judgment, we must help each other reframe, and forgive. If there is a sense of nothingness or lack, we must help one another make meaning and matter and understanding. If there is nostalgia, we must help one another make it anew for today.

Most of all, if we really want to follow our Third Principle, we must stop asserting that Unitarian Universalism means you have finally given up all that *foolishness* of religion, and instead reclaim a posture of mystery and humility, and all the ways all of us remain always and mostly, in the dark.

We must remember to love *all* attempts at seeking the holy, *all* attempts at naming life's beauty, *all* practices that pursue justice and healing.

May we do this work of healing, do this work of hope and reclamation. May we make ourselves and this world more whole. May we live out the calling of our third principle, encouraging one another to spiritual growth, let us go and grow our souls.

⁶ From *Singing the Living Tradition*, #568, "Connections are Made Slowly" by Marge Piercy.

Amen.⁷

⁷ I want to acknowledge and honor with this sermon, ministerial student and should-be priest, Susan Haarman, and all of the 2008 Ministry Fellows and all of the good people associated with the Fund for Theological Education.