

October 28:

Living Revision, Rev. Linda Simmons

As some of you know, Gary and I were just on vacation for 10 days. We went to visit a friend, who is a retired minister, and who lives on a lake in Essex in an upside down house and she invites us to stay in the bottom of the house, replete with bedroom, kitchen and bath all overlooking beautiful gardens and a lake. We spend our time there reading, jogging on the gorgeous country road as the mist rises off the lake in the early morning, kayaking amongst the lily pads and chatting about where we have been since we were there last October.

In one of these 'chats' we got into some kind of tiff about something, about something I can't even remember any more, and we were off, set in our ways. We wouldn't talk to each other in the used clothes store in Rockport we popped into which was a real drag because there were so many cute things I wanted Gary's opinion about! This jacket was one of them. We went to lunch at the sweetest café right on the water in Rockport and munched away at our scrumptious, overflowing sandwiches without a word.

But we had promised that we would begin to list the trips we had taken since we met in 2002 and had brought a special journal for that purpose.

Well, as you may also know, I am a person of my word. If I promise to do something, it will be done one way or another and sooner rather than later.

So out came the journal and off we went, reconstructing trips we took: there was the bike trip to Grand Manan and staying in the yurt with the lightning storm dancing on the canvas about which we marveled open mouthed, there was the woman that we saw her flip her car in Arizona onto the side of an embankment and we stopped and I scrambled up to sit on a tree limb to stick my hand through the window and hold her hand as she hung upside down, her seat belt the only arm that kept her from flying through the windshield while Gary kept the traffic managed, watched to make sure there was no gas leaking, waited for the ambulance to come from miles of snaked road below, there was the ferry in Costa Rica where no one stayed in their seats and food and drink was passed in homemade wrappers to all of us, covering our chins and laps, there was India and Nepal and what we learned about knowing so little about love and acceptance. As we spoke, our arms uncrossed, we laughed about the time I fell into a ditch on my bike in Gran Manan and the brush covered me up and Gary came back on his bike and couldn't find me! Suddenly lunch was eaten and we were sharing an oatmeal cookie and our knees were touching...

Telling stories of our travels allowed us to revise the story we were in of how the other was a self centered, unlistening, uncaring...you know how we get into these story lines right? And when we can shift them by remembering what else is true besides that we are limited and annoying, like that we share a history, love, laughter, joy, meaning making that gives us both joy...we can see one another with tenderness again.

Nothing changed in Gary in this hour. He was still my ole' Gar. But everything changed. I noticed the light in his eyes, the way his laugh is so open and inviting, how generous he is with his caring. That was all true while I was thinking he was a beast while trying on really cute clothes! What changed was the story we were telling about one another, and that changed who was sitting beside us.

"Revision is the spiritual practice of transformation," writes Elizabeth Andrew in her book Living Revision, a Writer's Craft as Spiritual Practice.<sup>1</sup>

We all run so many stories about ourselves and one another it's amazing we can hear anything above the din! These stories that are evoked for all of us, all the time, are constant, important, self limiting and self creative.

We are bound by our stories and we treat them as if they are made up of facts and not perspectives. I am not saying that it was untrue that Gary and I were in Rockport at a used clothes store and he missed some really cute outfits, but everything else he and I experienced differently. The facts might be the hangers, but what gets put on them is where the bus ends up stopping.

Elizabeth Andrews says that revision, rewriting and retelling stories so that there is more room for us all "is a dynamic, relational work of creating and being created." Andrews then adds, "Isn't that also the work of love?"<sup>2</sup>

In this metaphor, I imagine love is the ability to offer others a page from the book of our stories and say, "Write your words and create a new story named us." Isn't that love, isn't that story-telling too? And doesn't all good story telling and love, to feel relevant, true, necessary- require revision to remain alive? It is what makes love, and story telling, so terrifying and so beautiful.

One more story from our trip that will illustrate this.

Gary and I also visit family when we are away. We visit both Gary's family and mine. Depending on which one of us is not biologically from the family we are visiting, the car ride home can sometimes go like, "Geesh, little Jeff is really obnoxious when he doesn't get what he wants." And the other from the family we just left will say something like, "Well, he was tired and upset about his mom being at work." And the other goes on, "That shouldn't have made him act out like that. There are more appropriate ways to express exhaustion."

On this trip, because I was writing this sermon and we are trying harder, this is what we learned. When we can take responsibility for being part of both of our families, that they are integral and meaningful and story altering parts of our lives that belong to us and we to them, then we can run a different conversation, one that sounds like this:

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Jarrett Andrews Living Revision (Boston, Skinner House Books, 2018), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Andrews, 9.

“Geesh, Jeff seemed tired and upset about something tonight. Too bad he acted out and then had to be sent to his room. I wonder what was bothering him?” We can continue to script a story together that has room for each of us, in which we can risk vulnerability and compassion as members of a common community rather than using stories like weapons that keep some of us as insiders and some of us as outsiders; some of us as worthy of love and some of us as unworthy of love, some of us as better than others, keeping some from our deepest compassion, the kind of compassion that sees the need in someone before the bad behavior, sees the calling out for love inside the acting out.

Stories, the way we enter them, the way we tell them, the way we wield them, matter.

Trouble is, once we have a story, we don't want to change it. We work it out so well, know all the twists and turns, have made it our own. It is our best outfit. We have decided who are the villains and heroes, where the breakdowns and breakthroughs were, where the highs and lows are and where we stand in it all. We hang our identity on it.

And too often, where we stand is in the safe zone, in the zone where we don't have to risk anything, don't have to revise, don't have to change the way we wrote or saw or remembered or judged something but get to be in the story free zone, one that has no narrative, where no one else is judging us, the omniscient narrator that did not participate in the narration's creation. We pretend that we are not a character in someone else's story with just as many adjectives dangling off us as anyone else!

How can our stories come more in line with our values? How can we fall in love with the narrators within us? When we listen as we tell stories about others, we can learn so much about who we are. What do these stories we tell show us about what we value, fear, believe, love? When we listen to the stories we tell about others, we learn more about ourselves than anyone else.

What revisions are needed? Becoming authors intentionally and claiming our stories offers us the authority to deliberately participate in our lives, deliberately shape new outcomes and meaning and possibility.

Andrews writes, “The moon we create shines on other people.”<sup>3</sup> The stories we write build the diameters of the dance floors that we and other people choreograph lives across.

Every story, told at last, has the power to shape us and the world around us. When we can revise we can ask new questions and find new answers. We can touch original love within us; we can create; we can include and be included in community which is where accountability and vulnerability are practiced and made real.

Stories are protection, are scaffolding, are a wardrobe that we have become so comfortable occupying that we are afraid of donning new words, new descriptions, new stories that open up new conversations and realities and connections. It is like taking off all of our

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<sup>3</sup> Andrews, 73.

clothes in public. But beneath this outfit is one more, an outfit that clothes us with connections and possibilities and meaning making that we cannot imagine.

And when we can revise the way we talk about someone, or the way we are positioned in a story that does not support living our lives with open heartedness, or our very positions in our narratives as the one who is always good or right or disregarded or misunderstood or loved or unloved, then the road is remapped and the directions to what brings us joy and peace and courage are rewritten too and might just get us there in this lifetime.

Annie Dillard says that when she chops wood she aims for the cutting block not the wood and can achieve mastery this way. She says the cutting block is our common, beating heart.<sup>4</sup>

Chop through the wood of your story to our common beating heart. Try telling a new story for a day or two by making a small revision and see what happens. See if it allows you room to see yourself and others as capable of loving and being loved. See if it allows you to enter your life and community with something new to give and to learn.

Covenanted community, communities like these, are safe places to open a page of your story and consider a revision out loud. It is what we practice, offering a piece of our stories and waiting for another's to meet ours and then allowing the space between us to change us.

That is the holy work of community. That is the holy work of covenanted community.

I imagine love is the ability to offer others a page from the book of our stories and say, "Write your words and create a new story named us." Isn't that love, isn't that story-telling too? And doesn't all good story telling and love, to feel relevant, true, necessary- require revision to remain alive? It is what makes love, and storytelling, so terrifying and so beautiful.

May we hold our stories lightly and offer them with courage and room for another's story to pull up a chair beside ours as we turn a new page together. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Andrews, 119.