

On the Brink of Everything: Resilience and Love
Sunday November 11, 2018
Rev. Linda

My aunt Mary is 91 years old next month. One of my mother's older sisters, they were born to Portuguese immigrants, my grandparents, who migrated from the Azores when they were both twelve and fourteen. My grandparents did not know each other before they met in Somerville, MA and later married and had eleven children.

Mary lived at home with her mom, my Nana, until she was 45 years old, long after her siblings had left, working at Stop N Shop in the meat department.

I still have the letters she sent me written with the fat, red grease marker they used to mark the meat packages with prices per pound.

My Nana, Mary's mother, was always older than her years after a life of hardship in the run-down neighborhoods of Portuguese immigrants in Somerville at that time. The family of 13 lived in a 2 bedroom apartment on the top of a 5 story walk up. Eventually Nana would come to be robbed consistently in her 80s by young men posing as paper delivery boys. But that was after Aunt Mary had moved out and married.

Mary met her husband at AA where she finally went to manage her drinking that had taken over her life, sitting looking out the window of that 5 story walk up, her mom and a bottle of gin her only companions.

Gary and I visit Mary when we are off island often. She lives now in a housing project apartment, still in Somerville. Her tiny one room, one bedroom industrial carpet covered apartment looks out at the dumpster for the residents of the complex.

Mary worries about my mom who owns her own lovely home in New Hampshire on 2 acres and lives alone.

Mary thinks she must be isolated, lonely, cut off from others. She has suggested to me that my mom would be so happy in her apartment complex. After all, there are game nights: Mahjong and bingo and others names that escape me. Mary goes down 2-3 times a week and plays. She cheats too, and loves it all.

The last time Gary and I were there several weeks ago, I told her that she was one of the most grateful people I had ever met and asked her how she did it. This same woman who answered "I don't eat anything green" when I asked her secret to a long life, could not tell me why she was grateful. I pressed her a little and she said,

"Well Linda, I wake up and I am still alive. I don't have much, but what do I need anyway? I like these clothes I have on, I like this apartment, I have friends and family I love. That's it."

What is the basis for hope, joy and resilience as we age?

Dr. Roberts Brooks, one of today's leading speakers and authors on the themes of resilience, motivation, school climate, a positive work environment, and family relationships gave a workshop called "The Power of Mindsets: A Personal Journey." In his workshop, he says that people have 4 different identified needs:

1. The need to belong. 2. the need to feel competent 3, the need to feel you have some freedom to make choices. 4. The need for purpose, knowing that we are making a difference in others' lives.

What fascinated me most about Brook's work was not this list that we have seen and heard renditions of, but how he suggests we fulfill these needs.

Brooks goes into describing a positive mindset, which is key to living with hope, resilience and joy and getting our needs met.

He writes that people with positive mindsets engage in many moments in which we they nurture others and themselves with kindness, caring or compassion. He said too that they are able to look at what is not working in their lives, and consider what they need to do to change, not what others need to change or how others caused the problem. Resilient people who have a capacity for joy-nurture empathy and connection to others, Brooks writes. Resilient people ask, "Would I want someone to say or do to me what I have said and done to this other person?" And most revelatory for me, they consider how often they have done or said something that allows others around them to experience hope and empathy.

I sat with this list for sometime. It kept nagging me. The list is not super surprising right? Be kind, be good, change when you need to, stop pointing fingers, be accountable. But the last one, that resilient people consider how often they have done or said something that allows others around them to experience hope and empathy, that one drove a whole circus through my mind, mixing ideas and meanings in new ways.

There's more to share about Mary. The man she met in AA and married (who died many years ago now) had 5 children, most of them struggling with addiction. They all adore Mary and she them and because she has been in the AA program for so many years, she softly advises them. They need this softness. There is great loss in her family. Several years ago, her grandson committed suicide. He was 17 years old.

Mary's resilience does not come from plenty or ease or lack of suffering. As she props her feet on a plastic trash can that she flips upside down for the purpose and asks me with her whole heart, "How are you honey?" and then really tries to untie all the unintended complexity of the answer I give, Mary knows something and has practiced it for many years, she forgives, sees the beauty in others and herself and offers acceptance.

Brooks wrote that resilient people consider how often they have done or said something that allows others around them to experience hope and empathy, but Mary does not consider any of this. This discussion alone would exhaust her. My 4 foot 11 Portuguese Auntie would just slap me on the back and say, "Oh dollia, you think too much. You should play more games and eat more food."

In summary, Dr. Robert Brooks lists the mindset of resilient folk. I am not sure if he called my Auntie first but he should have. Resilient folk:

1. Believe others can be of support and help
2. Feel they can solve problems and make decisions
3. And that they can contribute to making a positive difference
4. Know that mistakes are experiences from which to learn rather than feel humiliated.
5. Are able to define their strengths and look at their weaknesses with clarity and accountability
6. Possess self discipline and self control
7. Possess a sense of humor and can be playful

I really liked the first one, believing others can be of support and help. That can be a tough one for us strong willed and minded Unitarians as can the last one, to laugh and play.

What I learned through Dr. Brooks and Dr. Auntie is this- most of us want to be resilient and joyful and hopeful. And as we reach for this resilience- this capacity to be flexible, to recover, to go on well-we forget that one of the keys, the most important key is not contained in establishing more nourishing breaks for ourselves. It is based on offering empathy, seeing others as good and capable and present, and giving of ourselves in ways that not only make us feel like we did a good turn for others, but in ways that break us open, that change us, that allow the light in.

I have learned as a minister and a chaplain on island, that I cannot always take the time I need to go to yoga, to meditate, to withdraw and read some fiction. Through some reflection, I recognized that when I was visiting others, that I would walk away feeling more present, more connected, more grace-filled. One visit with Grace on any day and I come away knowing that to be in the present with one another is a gift rarely experienced.

There is a form of meditation that I rarely have the courage to do called Tonglen. Pema Chodron, an American Tibetan Buddhist. ordained nun, talks about Tonglen practice in depth.

In this meditation, we breathe in all the suffering of the world, and then our loved ones' suffering and then the suffering of those we struggle to feel empathy toward, even when we are hurting and need love to rain down on us, we take this suffering of others into our brave, love-filled hearts, and we transform the darkness with the power of our love and breathe it back out as the golden light of peace. Not only do we give something good to the world, we remember our value in it. We can take in pain and give it back as peace. Is there any greater power?

I think of this meditation like a halfway house. The addiction I believe most of us suffer from is the belief that only by caring for self as self, as separate, can we become well. We consider that we need more time away, off duty, on retreat, vacationing, vacating our daily lives.

This is all true. Our health requires of us that we turn off and tune out from time to time and too many of us do not. No question. But we do not take equal time to consider that to be whole we need to believe we have enough love and goodness and wisdom and competence and beauty in us- no matter what age we are- to do or say something that allows others around us to experience hope and empathy.

Eating lunch with Auntie, Gary and I with our meals from Whole Foods, the flowers we just brought on the TV stand in a vase I gave her last Christmas, Auntie with her sandwich meat and white bread with Helman's, our food on our laps in the living room, because the tiny eat in kitchen could not seat 3, the dumpster throwing angular shadows on the scatter rug less apartment floor, (she tripped on a scatter rug and broke some ribs so gave them all away to neighbors), Auntie laughs and laughs about how she knew she had to stop driving when she hit the bumper of another car in front of her and her false teeth flew out of her mouth and bounced off the windshield.

We are on the brink of everything, no matter what age we are. There is so much we have to give that is worthy, that is good, that others are aching to receive from us. People ask me all the time, "Linda, what can I do in the face of all that is wrong with this world?"

I think we can consider every day as often as we can "How often have I done or said something that allows others around me to experience hope and empathy?" It is a radical act in these times that model narcissism as the quickest way to success, as the quickest way to heaven.

Heaven is right here between you and I. It always has been. May we unfold its tender mercies by considering our lives in relationship to others, by more radically understanding that no matter who we are and where we are and how young or old or how blessed with material security, we have a wealth of golden light, founded on empathy and compassion, that lives within us and can turn the black smoke of suffering into the light of love to give back to the bruised world.

On our way out of Auntie's housing authority high rise, walking down the long hall, we always turn around and there she always is, grey hair and glasses and a smile so wide, arm raised high in a good bye, yelling down the hall, "Take care of each other."

Take care of each other. May the quest to fulfill your needs bring you to the experience of the great power within you of empathy, and so offer enough purpose, joy and connection to keep our arms raised in the blessing of others as they go on their way.

Amen.