

The Dream of Paradise
Rev. Linda Simmons
January 13, 2019

Rev. Ana Levy-Lyons from the First Unitarian Congregational Society of Brookline tells a story in her sermon entitled, "Kingdom of Heaven" about a Rabbi she knows who visited a maximum-security prison to offer pastoral care to the inmates and teach a class about Judaism. He was working with a group of women serving life sentences. They were very engaged and curious throughout the class.

Toward the end one of the women asked what Judaism teaches about the afterlife. The Rabbi explained that there is no single answer to that question – that the ancient texts suggest many different concepts of the afterlife, including that there isn't one. The woman then asked what he personally believed. He said, "I don't really think there's an afterlife. I think when you die, that's just it."

Levy-Lyons writes, "Tears welled up in her eyes and then she started to sob and he realized what he had done. This woman was never again going to see life outside of these prison walls, never again going to see the ocean or make love or share a holiday with her family and he had just told her that this was it. That after this twilight existence in prison, she would someday simply cease to exist. The existential horror of that for someone in her shoes is hard to fathom.

"This idea, this faith, this hope that there is something more to life than where we happen to be is part of religious thought throughout the ages; the sense that we are not truly home where we are, but are longing for our true home in another place or time. It's a longing for love, for innocence lost, or for a place of total peace and harmony. It's a longing for who we might be if we lived outside of our own prison walls. Do you recognize this longing?"

I remember working at Brigham and Women's Hospital as a chaplain. One of the floors I was assigned to was the Stem Cell Transplant unit. I became very close to Beth, who was 24 years old and undergoing a stem cell transplant. She was struggling to eat again amidst chemo and radiation and the 20 pills she had to take every day to subdue her leukemia and accept the stem cell transplant she had just received. She needed to eat again to get strong enough to go on.

Her mother had died several months before she was diagnosed with cancer. She told me she was unworthy of love, of healing, of life and all the reasons why. I walked with her into that darkness with her it closed around me with a surety that was frightening. We all know this place, we all know this darkness, the cold stare of not worthy, of not good enough, of being outside of the arms of human and superhuman love.

There off rooms were sealed off where stem cell patients received a treatment that left them unable to fight off the simplest of germs. Conditioning is what they call bone marrow

preparation for a stem cell transplant. It involves a high-dose chemo and radiation therapy. It's the first step in the transplant process and typically takes a week or two. It's done to make room in the bone marrow for the transplanted stem cells.

I would be asked as a chaplain to bless these bags of blood containing new stem cells while were administered through an IV to the patients. The longing in a patients' eyes as this blood began to flow through their bodies was fierce. It became part of all of us, this rhythm of words and suffering, this breaking down of a self from all we know as what it is to be in a body and then the clawed fist struggle toward more life.

During this whole process, there was such a risk of infection that the only food for these patients was what was processed and sealed in plastic: no fruit, no veggies, no blueberry smoothies. Their rooms were vacuum sealed and everyone who entered had to be masked, gowned, gloved. They could not see as human smile, feel the warmth of skin on skin.

Beth, this beautiful young woman whom no one visited and who would not eat any of the food and grew weaker each day, would draw beautiful sketch after sketch of the sky and wind and ocean. My tears were absorbed by a mask that kept my breath from hers.

When I left the hospital for my bicycle ride home each day, 15 miles away in Boston city traffic, I weaved and raced and cursed in that jungle of metal and exhaust and breath, the Charles River gleaming in the sunset; I filled my lungs with our poisons and our beauty, the same world that could leave a motherless young woman to isolation, trapped in the cultural ideology that an omniscient god we are supposed to be born in the likeness of but can never seem to satisfy well enough to believe we are worthy of love, had abandoned her.

And I'd bike back in the next day and suit up and sit with Beth. While Beth uttered her grief and rage and sense of unworthiness, I would hold her hand in my dayglo blue plastic glove and listen and listen. And afterward, when she had spent her grief and longing, we would talk of other things, what she loved, missed, dreamed of. And somewhere in this all, I would say, why not take another bite of yogurt? Take another bite dear one, take another bite of a life that has room for you.

What becomes of us as a people when we leave the work of unconditional love and forgiveness and hope to god and an afterlife? What becomes of us when we believe all that is not perfect, whole, and easy to come by is the work of someone or something outside of humanity?

I have worked in many hospitals and I know the answer, most of us, when we drill down to the bare bones where terminal illness deposits us, we believe ourselves outside of redemption, of love.

Popular author, writer and lecturer Brene Brown, writes about the need for perfectionism to feel good enough for god, for love:

“Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving for excellence. Perfection is not about healthy achievement and growth. Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame. It’s a shield. Perfectionism is a twenty-ton shield that we lug around thinking it will protect us, when, in fact, it’s the thing that’s really preventing us from being seen and taking flight.

“Most perfectionists were raised being praised for achievement and performance (grades, manners, rule-following, people-pleasing, appearance, sports). Somewhere along the way, we adopt this dangerous and debilitating belief system: I am what I accomplish and how well I accomplish it. Please. Perform. Perfect. Prove.”

Brown advises: “Lay down the shield. Pick up your life.”

All of this is well said and unless you were brought up by wolves in a jungle untouched by humanity, you could not have escaped the religious and cultural ideology that leads to the longing for perfectionism. We pick it up everywhere!

Psychologist Carl Rogers wrote: “There is something I do before I start a session. I let myself know that I am enough. Not perfect. *Perfect would not be enough*. But that I am human, and that is enough. There is nothing this person can say or do or feel that I can’t feel in myself. I can be with him or her. I am enough.”

I love this phrase: Perfection would not be enough.

Harold Kushner writes in his book, How Good to we have to Be about children competing in the National Spelling Bee “where the best school-age spellers in the community come to compete, (and) the organizers have had to set up a “comfort room” where contestants can go to cry in private and vent their frustrations on a punching bag, to try to cope with the sense of shame and failure that come with having gotten one word wrong after spelling hundreds of words correctly.”

Striving to be loved by a god that loves perfection is literally killing us.

As singer Joan Osborne belts out:

What if God was one of us?

Just a slob like one of us

Just a stranger on the bus

Tryin' to make his way home?

What if we developed a concept, as the process theologians do, in which God is incomplete, is learning and growing through us, that we are part of the same fabric, the same interconnection. What if God were the call of love within all of our hearts, incomplete, flawed, fragile, as broken and as whole as we are?

And then what of paradise? What if the longing for human goodness, love, acceptance and community, is one that is left so unfulfilled that we create a place beyond life that will one day give us all we need?

So what would you say to the women serving a life sentence about an afterlife, one she needs to believe in to mute the sorrow of her imprisonment and grief? We could start with: you are loved, you are forgiven, you are good enough. I see you. Might her longing for heaven diminish if her life here and now could be filled with more acceptance and compassion or even forgiveness?

What we can all do, what we can do right now, is accept our humanity with enough grace to look into ourselves and know the light and dark, to know that things will fall apart and it's not because we're bad, it's because we're mortal and living in a world in which we lose sight of our human holiness, our ability to offer compassion and love.

What if we talked to the woman in prison about her holiness, her gifts, what she has that the world needs? Would the longing for heaven remain the same? Maybe the work is, in the words of one of our dharma statements, to "love where there is life and lead where change is needed." Maybe we are the arms and heart of god who is waiting on us to figure this out, to build a heaven on earth that includes suffering and darkness and worry but that is never without beauty, goodness, hope and hearts full of love.

Beth had a whole team of beautiful and skilled folk that I was a small part of. By the by, day after day, her team and I noticed she was getting stronger, eating more, allowing herself to feel.

Let's work for the day when earth and sky meet and the world we inhabit and the world we long for are one and the same. Let's call god down from the skies and roll up our sleeves and do the work this Unitarian faith calls us to, embody our holy humanity and love the hell out of the world.

Take another bite dear ones, take another bite of a life that has room for you.

Amen.