

“In Pain and In Joy”

Rev. Barbara H. Gadon

First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE

May 2, 2010

I was sitting with a couple who were about to be married, talking about what they wanted to have in their wedding. The bride told me an amazing thing. She said that when she was a little girl, four years old, her father died. He knew what was coming, so he made a tape for her, with all of his wishes for her life. He told her about what he hoped for her career, her family, and her own character. After he died, her mother married a very nice man, who has been an excellent stepfather to her. They will walk her down the aisle. But she wanted something of her biological father in the wedding, too, and so she proposed having some of the tape transcribed, and read by one of her uncles in the wedding. I felt a chill when she said this. Her fiancé felt some trepidation. “Are you sure you want to?” he asked. He worried about her composure, (and perhaps his own) that it might be too intense, or too sad in the midst of the joy of the wedding. She reassured him that she would be fine. And by implication, that everyone else would be fine, too.

Pain comes with joy, and joy comes with pain. It’s the way life is. I remind the couples that I marry that this relationship will end some day, that one of them will die before the other. And that the more they loved each other, the more hurt that would bring. They have a choice, I say. They can pretend that it won’t happen, or distract themselves until it does – or they can be so brave that they love even in full knowledge of it. I say all this *in the ceremony*, and I know it catches people off guard. For a true wedding to take place, pain and joy have to come together. And fully accepted as such.

Pain comes with joy, joy comes with pain. People are sometimes amazed that they can laugh during a funeral. In preparing for the service, I will sit with families, encouraging them to tell the stories about the person who died. And sometimes they are rocking with laughter. The stories are shared at the service, and people do laugh – in a time and place they don’t expect to. We celebrated the life of Karel Toll’s brother, Dave, last Saturday. We heard stories about the science of mini-golf and the inerrancy of Roger Clemens as the world’s greatest pitcher. We heard about how gorgeous Dave was as a young man. Karel’s wife, Doris, said that she was engaged to Karel, and her mother looked at Dave, and said, “Are you sure you picked the right one?” She reassured us all that she did. People cried, too. Because they were just starting to know how much they would miss Dave.

Joy and woe are woven fine, said the poet William Blake. Both of them come with having a body. And if you are going to feel joy, you have to be willing to feel pain, too. “Spirituality,” Richard Rohr says, “is about what you do with your pain.” What do you do with it? The most tempting thing is to try to forget about it. And doing this can help people to survive pain. But it is not something that helps us grow. It is not something that helps us find meaning, or to deal with our fears.

We are encouraged in school and in our places of work not to express any kind of pain. “How are you?” “I’m fine.” Answer anything but this, and you are out of order. Pain in our

culture is considered a private matter – it’s somehow rude or bad manners to “impose” our troubles onto others. I thought we were moving away from this, that we were becoming less stoic as a society. On the recording of “Free to be You and Me” put out in the 1970s, you had Rosie Greer the football player singing, “It’s all right to cry” to all the little boys especially. But we’re still working on this one, it’s still hard for us. We reinforce it with each other, this reticence to show feeling.

Adolescents, says Friedrich Buechner, are people who are wrestling with this question. They are discovering the pain of life and trying to learn what to do with it. I was teaching a creative writing class at a community college a few years ago, and there was one young man in a small class of young women. He wrote a story about how difficult it was to break up with his girlfriend. Written third-person, and far from histrionic in its tone, I was surprised by the reaction of the women. They turned on him like wolves – teasing him, mocking him, “Ooh, poor baby, poor baby!” Making him wish he had taken that accounting class. I chewed them out, and things quieted down a little. To his credit, the young man stayed in the class and the rest of his stories still showed feeling – though perhaps feeling that was a little less close to home.

I wonder now if his telling about his hurt made the rest of the class fearful. We can be afraid to get close to someone’s pain; feelings are infectious, and we can be afraid that it will trip off our own pain in response. So we learn to protect ourselves. Imagine growing a tough rind or shell around you. So much so that we can forget there is anything but shell – or we are afraid of it “breaking” – even when we are by ourselves. Friedrich Buechner says, “The rule is not to let yourself feel pain any more than you can help, and not to trust anybody with the truth of how it hurts.”

A few weeks ago, we gathered after church in small groups to talk about spiritual maturity – what it means in our personal lives, and what it could mean in the life of our church. In my group, person after person told stories about remarkable people they knew – folks who went through unimaginably difficult times, and still remained human in the process. People who showed a good measure of grace. People who reached out to others, even when they themselves were hurting the most. Some of the spiritually mature people they brought up were sitting in the room, and it was a privilege to witness.

Growing up, at its deepest level, involves learning how to become such people. We are all trying to learn this; in this sense, we are still adolescents, no matter what our age, still learning. I believe it is our work as a church to help people grow up, which includes in good measure, learning what to do with our pain. The pain of our personal lives, and our pain for the pain of the world. We must keep working on becoming a place where people don’t bury their feelings, and don’t wall off from one another. Where we can actually grow from our pain and find the joy that co-exists with it.

Marcus Borg calls these “thin places” – places where it is clear that the spirit is present to us, anywhere our hearts are opened, and they are a means of grace. There are people who seem to have the gift of listening, of helping to create thin places, where we are able to feel. In spite of our cultural conditioning away from feeling. They can bear witness to our feelings and our experience. They feel naturally, they don’t push pain away – theirs or other people’s. Sometimes it’s because they have experienced something similar. They can sit with someone diagnosed with cancer, because they have known cancer, themselves. They have sat in the

doctor's office during a routine screening, and instead of having the technician come back smiling with the "all clear, you can go home", they hear that the doctor wants to talk to them. And the journey begins. They have walked that journey, and they want to walk it with someone else. And they know that the journey is tough, but that it also contains joy. Often that joy comes from people showing up and caring for them when they really need it.

Sometimes caring comes from extending yourself into an experience that is outside of what you know. One of our caregivers lives at a retirement facility, and sometimes visits people in assisted living. When he first started, he didn't really get how to visit with someone who couldn't see or hear very well. Whose daily life was fairly limited, and so asking, "What have you been up to?" is not going to get much of a conversation going. She said, "Okay, imagine that you are Bill. You don't see very well, and you don't hear much. Your mind doesn't move as fast as it did when you were a young scientist at the experimental station. The world doesn't come in as sharp and clear as it once did. You move with people helping you. You have to find the wherewithal to get out of bed in the morning. What is your day like?" And our volunteer learned how to be with Bill, to enter his world. It sometimes meant just sitting with him. Learning to be faithful. And a bond formed, almost mysteriously.

You don't hear about this ministry much in our congregation. You might know it exists, but for other people, needy people, certainly not you. In order for pastoral care to be effective, it must be confidential. And so you don't hear from people who receive pastoral care. In our discussion of spiritual maturity after church a few weeks ago, Deborah Griffin spoke up about her experience. She has been on both the giving and the receiving end of care in our church, and their faithful presence in her life. She gave me permission to share it with you. She writes, "Pastoral care is a quiet and little-known committee which is the heart and soul of our church. It upholds privacy and ensures dignity. I personally experienced this when I was hospitalized. I not only had visits by the minister and Scott Ward, but I had a member of the Pastoral Care Committee contact me during my recovery. What is remarkable though is that she continued to call me for months beyond my recovery period to touch base with me. This is Pastoral Care. This is our community."

The Psalmist in our ancient reading this morning sang the praises to God, who is faithful to us, and there for us, no matter where we go, no matter how dark the darkness gets. "Where can I go from your spirit," the Psalmist asks. "Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol (or hell) you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast." Some people experience the divine this way, and find God in personal, mystical experiences, or feel a presence in nature that holds them fast. Others find it in the company of another human being. When we talk about the interconnected web of all existence, Unitarian Universalists claim that we are part of creating this spirit, this force of love in the world. We don't control it, we don't force it into being. But we are part of it. Without our cooperation, without our willingness to strengthen it, it comes apart. And without our willingness to open our hearts, we cut ourselves off from it, and it comes apart, too.

An individual body can feel pain, as well as a shared body. Our body as a nation is feeling the pain of the economic downturn. People are anxious about losing their jobs, or are feeling the pain of already having lost their jobs. Some of you have spoken to me about this, and to others on our staff. We hear about it at pledge time, when people who genuinely want to give,

or give more to the church, find that they cannot. We as a church body are feeling the pain of the economy. We want to be a kind of oasis, I think, a haven of uplift that is set apart from the world, and we just aren't. Many of you received notice this week from the board about cuts in our budget – substantial cuts. It's the fiscal reality of our times. I am part of the executive team, along with Rev. Josh and our business administrator, Marina Van Renssen, and we created this difficult budget, with the board's backing. Since this now includes some significant cuts in staff hours, it becomes very human and real. We are reminded that we are part of a world that is doing its own wrestling. When people wrestle over how their money will be spent – as we are now – it poses a challenge to everyone in our community. Not just in what decision we make, but how. How will we speak to one another? How will we listen? How will we stay connected to the body, even when it hurts? How will we stay connected, even when we don't personally feel affected and wish people would quit talking about it? The process isn't over. Next Sunday, there will be another chance to discuss this after church, and the week after that, we will have our annual meeting to vote. It's hard. And I am impressed with the heart people are showing, in sticking with it.

I'm not going to pretend that this isn't hard for me, too. I'm not going to stand up here and give you some kind of disembodied, trippy spiritual thing and pretend that this doesn't sometimes make me a crazy woman. Because it does. So I come back to the idea of pain and joy. I've always said that when I put out a sermon topic, and put the title on the LED sign on 202, the universe always gives me an opportunity to see if I really mean what I'm saying. A spiritual test-drive, if you will. And so in the midst of all this, I had to ask myself if there was joy, and if so, where was it?

I feel it in worship – and felt it especially last week. There were 19 new members being celebrated, 14 of whom were standing across the front of the sanctuary, some with their children. With your loud, vociferous applause, including a standing ovation, the joy was and is felt deep in the body. I have felt it in meetings with our Open Circles leaders, sharing experiences of connection in their groups. I have heard people's testimony to joy in working with our new Allies for Racial Justice team, and having the opportunity to pool their passions to help heal the world. I felt it on Friday night, as we had some of our church leaders come together and celebrate the accomplishments of this year. I could feel much joy in that room, too. And once during a difficult discussion about the budget, when I really had to look hard for the joy, it came, too. Someone walked over without a word and hugged me. At any moment of pain, where does the joy come from? In caring from another human being.

If we want to be a church, that is a body of human beings that helps heal a hurting world, we have to accept that we are part of it. And the more we can keep our hearts open, the more we can stay connected to each other, even when we disagree with each other, - the more we can grow from this. If we are able to stay human and connected, in being able to feel both the joy and the pain together, if we grow like this together, we will indeed have something special to offer the world beyond our walls.

Might I remind you that we are part of an old, strong, proud church. We are a big, old, gracious, generous tree with deep roots and gorgeous new branches and flowers – just visit the nursery sometime, and you'll see what I mean. We have celebrated joy and withstood storms for close to 150 years. And we will continue. Joy and pain are together with us now, as they always are, and I invite you to stand with me in both. Amen.