

The Splinters We Carry

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz

All Souls Church Unitarian

Sunday, February 14, 2020

The inspiration for this title was born out of pain. Not a major pain, mind you, but a small, irritating pain that has probably happened to you, at some time or another. In my case, it was an irritation caused literally, by a splinter – a tiny fragment of wood that got under my skin. Every time that part of my finger touched something, I could feel it, but I couldn't see it. I took a magnifying glass to it – still nothing. I tried probing around with tweezers, but it was in too deep to try to pull out. So when faced with a splinter that's just under the skin – you're faced with a choice – do you leave it and live with the constant irritation? Do you try to dig it out and risk the possibility of infection? Or – do you write a sermon about it? You can tell which one I chose.

So first – Happy Valentine's Day! This Sunday happens to fall on Valentine's day – a day which for some feels commercialized and made up to sell roses, chocolates and cards. For people who are happily in relationship, they don't really need a special day to remind them of their partnership. For those who are unpartnered, it may kick up feelings of resentment at the message being conveyed on this day is that being coupled is the only and best approach to living; for those who have lost their beloveds to dementia or death, it's a poignant reminder of what's not there. So, given that - I chose NOT to lean closer into Valentine's day – except to acknowledge that to live and to experience love is to also experience wounds. Our wounds don't define us, but they do shape us. How we heal from wounds is something more real, and more relevant than sending valentines – and that's what I want to focus on this morning.

If you were here last Sunday, you'll recall that the theme for the month is Spiritual Friendship. You heard about the friendships that were forged by our 19th century Unitarian ancestors – and you met two friends whose friendship was born here at All Souls. What we didn't go into much depth last Sunday was to consider what happens when friendships fray – when they are broken – or when they end. There are no cards to send to say “hey, I'm sorry we're not friends anymore.” It's not like a divorce, which has a legal ending. Friendships can fray – and may or may not have an abrupt end. They represent a kind of ambiguous loss.

That's a phrase I just read about this week “ambiguous loss.” The article referred to the fact that many people are telling stories of friendship both in person and online that have come to and end because of the current political divides. I heard a story this week about a person who finally unfriended his family online because of the profound differences represented by the two political parties. Although this may not represent a permanent rupture in their relationship, it is indeed, a loss – a sadness – a grief – that is hard to name – and sometimes, even harder to come back from. It's a splinter that is under the skin, that we carry.

In a couple of weeks, we'll be approaching the one year anniversary of shutting down in person worship and meetings at the church. Your ministry team and staff are thinking of ways to acknowledge this milestone liturgically and ritually, perhaps in the Vespers service and on Sunday morning. What we haven't completely explored - that I'm hoping you and I and the ministry team and staff will do together – is how we will, going forward, deal with the trauma of not only this time in our shared lives, but of events that have occurred in the past.

Intellectually, we all know that this global pandemic presents one of the largest mental health challenges in the history of the world. Even if you have not lost a loved one to this pandemic, all of us have been touched by varying degrees of trauma. I used to be uncomfortable using that word to describe anything other than classic Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, also

known as PTSD symptoms, because I didn't want to assign wound status to a splinter. I can't say that my own life, particularly as a cisgender, white person has been framed by much personal trauma – yet. But I think it's safe to say that this pandemic has irritated, aggravated and exacerbated the wounds that many of us carry and are doing our level best to handle. So this service is about both the splinters we carry and the wounds they create – and the ways in which we – as members of a church community can and do heal from them.

What I am coming to understand in every more embodied ways are that trauma exists everywhere. Bessel Van Der Kolk, author of *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* writes: “One does not have to be a combat soldier or visit a refugee camp in Syria or the Congo to encounter trauma. Trauma happens to us, our friends, our families, and our neighbors...one in five Americans have been sexually molested as a child; one in four was beaten by a parent to the point of a mark being left on their body, one in three couples engage in physical violence. A quarter of us grew up with alcoholic relatives and one of eight witnessed their mother being beaten or hit.”¹

I want to acknowledge that I am not a specialist in trauma or trauma recovery. That is an entire field of work and a body of knowledge that I cannot and do not presume to be an expert in. But, as a minister in over six congregations, I have seen my share of trauma. Parishioners who die by suicide. A beloved church member murdered in her office at the Capital Gazette in Annapolis. The long, on-going heartbreak of Alzheimers; the heart-arresting shock of a sudden death. The re-lived memories of childhood trauma. What I've discovered is a truth that's powerfully detailed in both Van Der Kolks book, mentioned earlier and Resmaa Menakem's book “My Grandmother's Hands.” All of these traumas remain in the body. It's the splinters we carry that need to be healed.

What I do know is that healing, like grief is not a linear process. Sometimes it feels like two steps forward, one step back; one step forward, six steps back. Our Western European and white-supremist culture is more often focused on progress and moving forward – moving on – get over it – get past it. Find the splinter, dig it out and slap some peroxide and a band-aid and fuggitaboutit. But the body keeps the score – the body has a wisdom that is both intimately connected to our minds, and yet is somehow not always beholden to it. And there are some wounds that are not just our own but have been created by centuries of racism and white supremacy culture. That racialized trauma --so eloquently addressed in Menakem's book, *My Grandmother's Hands*, reminds us that we can't heal our minds until we get in touch with our bodies.

What is so confusing and confounding about the way trauma shows up in our lives is that it too, is not linear. It's more like the experience of microaggressions that black, brown, Indigenous, Asian-Pacific Islander and other persons of color experience on a regular basis. In the chapter, *Assaulting the Black Heart*, Manakem describes the death by a thousand microaggressions, small, but persistent and pervasive. When they happen over and over again, he says, they create a toxic hazy trauma. “Hazy trauma is trauma that can't be traced back to a single specific event - unhealed trauma acts like a rock thrown into a pond, it causes ripples that move outward, affecting many other bodies over time. After months or years, unhealed trauma can appear to become part of someone's personality. Over even longer periods of time, as it is passed on and gets compounded through other bodies in a household, it can become the family norm. And if it gets transmitted and compounded through multiple families and generations, it can start to look like culture.”²

As an Interim Minister, I'm trained to observe and describe the culture into which I enter, because just like a therapist can ask questions about your family system that you can't see, so does an interim, as a trained outsider, to ask questions about the “family system.” Family systems is a theory that has also been applied to churches, born of the realization that all of us come from

families which form us. Those family systems then, are – for better or worse – the norms which shape the voluntary associations in which we participate. They create the culture of an institution – and in our case – a church. So, when a church has been, for example, steeped in secrecy, or conflict-avoidance, that creates a culture. If a minister has been involved in sexual misconduct and the system has conspired to deny, diminish or conceal that truth – it affects the church’s culture. If a church has patterns and habits of under or over-functioning – it shapes the church’s culture. If a church has suffered several serious traumas, it may not be evident in the daily operations of the church, but it’s still there, like the splinter under the skin. What do we do with it, is the bigger question? Can you pull it out? Should you dig deeper? Or leave it alone?

It’s no secret that All Souls has survived several significant traumas to the church body. While I’m sure there were issues with ministers prior to Rev. Dan Aldridge’s ministry, his short tenure and departure created a rupture in the body of the church. Many came back – some didn’t. For some, that wound is like my splinter – an irritation when rubbed against, but not felt on a regular basis.

The second trauma involved the departure of your former Associate Minister, The Rev. Susan Newman Moore. She was hired with so much hope and enthusiasm and her pastoral ministry to particularly our black and brown members of the congregation was deeply appreciated. Her sermons, while some thought of as unorthodox in their presentation, delighted some and annoyed others. When it became apparent that Rev. Newman Moore’s ministry was no longer viable for All Souls, sides were taken, and trust was frayed. Large public gatherings were held in the spirit of openness and transparency; with the hope that healing could happen. From this outsider’s perspective, many church leaders were involved in an earnest attempt to heal from that wound. Countless hours spent in conversation, in circles, in denominational resources, in reports. For some, this wound is still close to the skin – for others, they never knew it existed. For some, this revealed a virus that no one wants to believe exists in beloved community – but honestly, that virus is bigger than all of us. The virus of racism – of white supremacy culture – is not the only thing to blame for what happened, but it’s part of it. This virus affects everything in one way or another. As is the case with all trauma, there is no one singular, story that can be told which will reveal the Truth with a capital T. What IS true is that healing is messy and non-linear. It takes time and intention – and sometimes it means building up the body’s strength so that it heals itself.

I never found that splinter. It was too deep and to dig for it would only do more damage than good. So, I had to live with the irritation for a while, trusting that a healthy body will do its miraculous work. My job was to keep my body strong and healthy; so that the body’s job could eventually dissolve the splinter. One day I woke up and I didn’t feel it anymore. I have a memory of it, but it no longer hurts. It’s healed.

After the anthem, you’ll hear from Macani Toungara, one of the co-chairs of the Committee on Right Relations. They have submitted a proposal for funding that involves engaging the congregation in a process of Transformative also called Healing Justice. Healing justice moves beyond conflict between individuals to include an understanding of how systemic injustice and oppression contribute to or shape conflict. This process would involve facilitated conversations, provide new tools to address underlying sources of conflict with the intention of transforming how we learn from conflict. So, it’s not just about healing from this one wound or previous ones; it’s both a personal and systemic attempt to strengthen the body of the church. Come healing of the body, come healing of the mind, we’ll hear the Jubilee Singers echo the words of Leonard Cohen. No one is naïve enough to believe that going through such a process will cure us of conflict; that we – as a church body – will never find we’ve got a splinter under our skin. But - it will help us figure out the best way to deal with it. Right now, this is an internal process, but I can see that it will have implications on how we – as a church community – also heal relationships with communities of color outside these walls – which includes not only

our black and brown communities, but our Asian-Pacific Islander, our queer and trans communities, our partners in activism and more. It's going to take some time. Healing happens – but not on schedule.

As I imagine a world that is no longer shaped by patriarchy and white supremacy, I often refer to the visionary work of adrienne marie brown. For Brown, grief work and justice work are part of the same process. She reminds us that grief is the growing up of the heart that bursts boundaries like an old skin or a finished life; that your grief is a worthwhile use of your time; that the ones you grieve may be grieving you; that the sacred comes from the limitations and that you are excellent at loving. I've been with you but seven months, but anyone can see the truth in that...oh...you are excellent at loving. Let's go love some more. May it be so.