

Poem by Rebecca Parker

In the midst of a world  
marked by tragedy and beauty  
there must be those  
who bear witness  
against unnecessary destruction  
and who, with faith,  
stand and lead  
in freedom,  
with grace and power.

There must be those who  
speak honestly  
and do not avoid seeing  
what must be seen  
of sorrow  
and outrage  
or tenderness,  
and wonder.

There must be those whose  
grief troubles the water  
while their voices sing  
and speak  
refreshed worlds.

There must be those

whose exuberance  
rises with lovely energy  
that articulates  
earth's joys.

There must be those who  
are restless for  
respectful and loving  
companionship among human beings,  
whose presence invites people  
to be themselves without fear.

There must be those  
who gather  
with the congregation  
of remembrance  
and compassion,  
draw water from  
old wells,  
and walk the simple path  
of love for neighbor.

And,

There must be communities of people  
who seek to do justice  
love kindness  
and walk humbly with God,

who call on the strength of

soul-force

to heal,

transform,

and bless life.

There must be

religious witness

**Sermon: Nourish Your Soulfence** March 13, 2011

Last Thursday I went rock climbing with the junior high youth group, and as the youth climbed the uneven wall, stretching for the next handhold, I thought about reaching, and stretching. Doesn't March seem like a stretching month? We are so tired of Winter, and reaching. reaching for Spring, only to face another dusting of snow or a brisk morning. And watching the youth reach for one handhold after another, often unable to see where they are climbing to, reminding me of a time in my life when I was reaching, unable to see an end to my exertions.

When I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade the prettiest, most popular girl in the school took notice of me. Amy had perfect blonde hair and all the right clothes- Guess jeans, Espirit tops, and most importantly, the cheerleader uniform with captain embroidered across the chest. And for some reason, in the fall of eighth grade she decided that she hated me. I don't know why, I certainly never spoke to her. I had a frizzy bad perm and huge plastic glasses and whenever I opened my mouth awkward phrases tumbled out. I didn't say much to anyone at school.

Amy and I had algebra class together, a class I liked. But things went downhill when Amy was assigned to sit behind me. From the first day she harassed me, whispering "You are so ugly, you are a loser, you'll never have a boyfriend." The bullying progressed to even harsher remarks, accompanied by her pulling hard on my hair. Then she began punching me in the back of my shoulder blades, hard punches, partnered with threats. "You are worthless, and if you tell anyone I am doing this my boyfriend will beat you up." Soon I was avoiding shirts that would show the bruises she was leaving on my back, and trying so hard not to cry in class that several times Miss Mitchell asked me privately if things were okay at home. Things were fine at home, but every time sweet Miss Mitchell turned to write on the blackboard I felt Amy's sharp knuckles on my back and heard her insults hissing in my ears. School became nearly impossible- I couldn't concentrate in class and was a nervous wreck at home, knowing I would have to sit in algebra with Amy soon.

The only place I relaxed was at church, the First Baptist Church of Dayton. On Sunday mornings I woke up with an openness in my chest, with the heavy stone of dread lifted for the day. You see, even though I was at the very bottom of the social hierarchy at school, at church I was somebody. I was somebody even with my frizzy hair and plastic glasses.

I was a part of a congregation of about this size, and I knew everyone. The adults and kids at First Baptist really cared about each other, and about me. Adults who asked me how I was in a way that showed they really wanted to know. Adults who hugged me and told me to hang in there, even before I told them that I hadn't made the volleyball team or was struggling with algebra. And my best friends were at church- my youth group was my whole world. We loved each other so much, and didn't judge- no one cared or probably even noticed what I wore to youth group.

And so on Sundays I was free, so free I practically pranced in the big oak church doors, so free I was giddy at youth group. Church truly was my sanctuary, the place where I was loved so much, by so many people, that it made the rest of the week bearable.

Rebecca Parker, the poet we heard earlier, writes that

There must be those who  
are restless for  
respectful and loving  
companionship among human beings,  
whose presence invites people  
to be themselves without fear.

And at church, I was myself, without fear. The adults and youth at church were restless for respectful and loving companionship among human beings, and so they, we, created this world, this Sunday-morning world, where people gathered to be giddy and free.

The thing about sanctuaries, these calm places where we can refill our hope, where we can stock up on unconditional love, is that eventually they stop simply being places for us to rest. Eventually they become places that make us stronger, that make us more brave. Eventually these sanctuaries, these filling stations for the soul, push us to call on the strength of our soul force to heal, transform, and bless life. Even if the life that needs transforming is our own.

One particularly love-filled Sunday, I realized that I had to stand up to Amy McGather. I realized enough was enough. My soul force was fed up with the insults and the bruises, and I had to do

something. With no actual plan in mind I stomped into algebra on Monday morning knowing that today was the last day of my torment. I slid into my seat in front of Amy and class began as usual, with jabs in the back and sharp hair pulls and slicing insults. When the teacher's back was turned I spun around to face Amy, and, in voice much calmer than I felt, I said "Enough. That's enough Amy. No more."

Amy's eyes were huge, as big as dinner plates, sitting above her wide O of a mouth. Okay, she squeaked out. Okay.

Amy never bothered me again, never so much as made eye contact with me again. Now that I am an adult I wonder about her, about who was telling her that she was worthless, and ugly, and stupid- because bullies don't come from the ether, her life must have been much darker than I could have imagined. But for me, that day I discovered the power of Soulfence, brewing inside me all along, stirred to action by the love of my congregation.

This power, this ability to stand up to hardships great and small, this is the wonder of Soulfence. And it doesn't just apply to youth- we all have big and small rock walls to climb in our lives. I see the power of Soulfence in our congregation, this very congregation- I see us fill up on Soulfence every Sunday morning, so we can face our days, so we can face our problems great and small. We gather here Sunday mornings exhausted by our lives, exhausted from caring so much and being able to do so little. We leave built up, refreshed, and emboldened.

Why? What is it about this place, this sanctuary, that makes us stronger? What is emboldening our Soulfence?

Unitarian Universalist minister Wayne Arnason address this in a brief benediction:

Take courage friends.

The way is often hard, the path is

Never clear,

And the stakes are very high.

Take courage.

For deep down, there is another truth:

You are not alone.

You are not alone. The way is hard and the path is rarely clear, but you are not alone. When we gather on Sunday mornings for worship, or on Tuesdays for covenant group or Thursdays for

choir, we are reminded that we are not alone. First, we are surrounded by the people that love us, our sacred friends, our fellow spiritual travelers. We take courage because we are not alone- our lives are filled with others seeking, searching, trying to find a new way. And in this searching, this seeking together, we find the divine, the ineffable, that which is bigger than our individual selves and impossible to define. As you heard earlier in the Sharon Welch reading,

In solidarity with others, in work for justice, we remain human. Our vision is ever-growing. Our strategies for change have partial successes, and require continual critique and revision. Yet this work, though partial in its depth and scope, is divine.

Our solidarity is divine. Our gathering together is divine.

This month our theme is nourish. Last week Linda talked about how this congregation nourishes her, and today Judy did. We nourish each other when we gather together in community, we nourish that Soulforce so that we can manage the Amys in our lives: the difficult bosses, the illnesses, the family troubles. Our lives here together make it possible to live our lives out there, outside of this sanctuary, in braver way.

Rock climbing with the junior high youth reminded me of the challenges of growing up, challenges we all faced and continue to face. But the thing about our rock climbing trip is that we never climbed alone. The entire time I was climbing, muscles pounding, sweat dripping, arms and legs stretching- the entire time I was in a harness. I was safely strapped into a contraption that connected me to a guide below, who would use the harness to hold me up if I had to let go. When my arms just couldn't do it anymore and I swung away from the wall, I didn't plummet down to the floor. No, I leaned into my harness so the guide could hold me until I could haul myself up again.

The road is long, and the path isn't clear, but we are not alone. We are guides for each other. We hold each other, until we regain the strength to continue our climb.

My congregation growing up nurtured my Soulforce with kindness, and as I grow in ministry I am fortunate to be in relationship with all of you, people who hold my harness when otherwise I would plummet. Can you feel this congregation holding you? Nourishing you? How can we hold each other until we are ready to climb again, so that not even one of us falls?

May we remember our sacred task in keeping this community a place of kindness, of support and compassion.

In a moment we will rise and sing hymn 354, but first I want to point out the words to the chorus: "We believe in life, and in the strength of love, and we have found a need to be together." It is the strength of love that holds us together in spiritual community, and it is this

love that nurtures our Soulforce so that we can go into the world to face challenges great and small. As our poet Rebecca Parker writes:

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who seek to do justice

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May we all heal, transform, and bless life. Please rise as we sing hymn 354, "We Laugh, We Cry."