

Sermon: Learning to Love. March 25, 2012

In my early twenties I loved to backpack in Red River Gorge, a beautiful section of Daniel Boone National Forrest in Kentucky. Red River Gorge is like a mini-Grand Canyon, but with more leafy trees and fewer people. We would hike into the Gorge on Friday afternoon, the narrow path just wide enough for us to walk in a line, and travel miles down down down past the red rust and sunny orange of the canyon walls. We pitched camp at the bottom, near the tall, super-natural looking rock arches, in the scruffy pines, the heat from the rocks leeching out all night, keeping us warm as we looked up into the pitch dark, stars shooting between black canyon walls.

When the sun woke us up it was time for muddy camping coffee, and then we hiked up up up, it seemed so much further than on the way down, up out of the canyon and back into the verdant trees, out of reds and oranges and back into the thousand shades of green you see in a forest.

Once, when we were hiking up, tired legs whining below our packs, it began to thunder. A sudden summer thunderstorm isn't uncommon in Kentucky, but it is concerning. Sometimes those storms turn violent, sometimes tornados spin out of the clouds, and while tornados tend to shy away from trees, all those high winds send thick branches tumbling down, sometimes on unsuspecting hikers. Sometimes those high winds found folks as they trekked along the narrow canyon path, causing a freefall down the canyon.

We started looking for a sheltered spot to wait out the storm, a wide enough place to sit under a rock overhang. Branches started to fall around us, small ones, but it was scary. As we rounded a bend we saw a shallow cave up ahead, and ran toward it. As we scooted into the dim space my fears of bats and bugs were overshadowed by relief as lightning struck a tree farther up the path.

We were safe, there, in that shallow cave, where we ended up staying all night, pitching our tent inside the echoy rock. I was struck then by how this space seemed the definition of safe. We were tucked away, protected from a storm that grew stronger and stronger just 6 feet away. The wind blew fiercely, tree limbs fell, lightning flashed, but we were protected by a million year old solid rock, and it sheltered us.

There are few places in life that feel this safe, few moments in which we are completely protected from the chaos that surrounds us. These shallow caves, these dry, cozy havens are precious and few. But think how you feel when you find one. Think of the gratitude, the relief at dropping your heavy pack and resting, so close to danger but you are safe- you can let go of your fear.

For some people these spaces are few and far between. And for our youth, our teenagers, these places can be almost impossible to find.

Kyle came to the youth group through a friend, Sally, a cool, punk girl with spiky hair and a big tattoo she got in Canada, where apparently you can get inked without ID. Sally was funny and creative- when she would talk. She mostly sulked

around and reminded me weekly that she only came because her parents made her. About halfway into the school year she stomped her booted feet into the room, followed by a lanky teenager, over six feet tall with his asymmetrical haircut sloping into his eyes. They crashed into an oversize arm chair, legs and arms tangled, gawky limbs pointing every direction.

Kyle didn't say much those first few weeks. He was there every week, but quiet. Slowly he shared that he was from a big, tightly knit family, lots of brothers and sisters. He was interested in learning more about his Asian heritage. He loved soccer. His family was from a conservative religious sect he wasn't crazy about, but they were cool with him coming to youth group with Sally.

In youth group that term we were talking about gender, the gender spectrum. How it was all more complicated than boys on the left and girls on the right, how there are people on all different points on that line, that gender doesn't necessarily have much to do with biological sex. The youth talked about people they knew, transgender friends, that kid at school who had two moms but one mom used to be a dude, at least, clothes wise.

Kyle would jump in periodically, saying "Wait, seriously? You know dudes who dress like women?" And without me saying a word one of the teenagers would jump in and remind him that dudes with biological dude parts were totally free to present as women, that gender is separate from sex. And Kyle would ask "But that is cool with you? You don't think that is weird?" And before I started talking about

Unitarian Universalist principles and how we all have inherent worth and dignity, or how diversity is what makes the web of all existence work, a youth said “Dude, what is cool is being who you are, who you know you are inside, who you want the world to know you are, without letting whether you have girl parts or boy parts dictate how you dress and what you say.”

Dude, sometimes they say it so much better than me! Thank goodness. Kyle’s eyes were big during these discussions, and sometimes he even seemed teary- he blamed it on allergies when it got bad, but it was clear something was changing for him. His physical appearance began to change, just a bit at a time, too. One week he had really shiny lip goo on, like Vaseline or something. The next week the goo seemed tinted, like...lip gloss maybe, too bubble-gum pink to be attributed to chapped lips, defiantly something from the make-up department.

That week the youth organized themselves to go to the Transgender Day of Remembrance, a sad, powerful, important event that happens all over the world- Melbourne, Paris, Helsinki, Tel Aviv, so many places, including here in Boston. Transgender Day of Remembrance memorializes all the people who are killed because some people don’t agree that gender and sex aren’t necessarily linked together, and difference scares them, or makes them angry. Transgender Day of Awareness honors trans people who are killed by their families, or who tragically take their own lives. The world is a hard, maybe impossible place for so many people, for so many reasons, and this annual fall day reminds us to work toward a time when that isn’t true anymore.

So Kyle, Sally, and the other youth headed down to Government Center, where they laid on the ground with hundreds of other people, making a web of bodies, hand and hand, foot touching foot, remembering in solidarity, educating commuters, reminding me how lucky I am to know such terrific young people. We are all so blessed to know this generation of teenagers. And that next Sunday Kyle came to church in full makeup. My first instinct was to yell “Look how brave Kyle is! Group hug!

But thank goodness I held back, the teenagers handled it much better than me. Someone said “Omg, you have the longest eyelashes ever, so awesome.” The jockiest of the guys said “Looking good” and they did a low-key fist bump.

Remember our cave? The haven where I was safe from the raging storm? Kyle didn't fit anywhere else, not when he was truly who he wanted to be. His family was horrified by his makeup, forbid it. His mother said that he broke her heart, permanently. I think that nearly broke his heart. And he couldn't imagine going to school with make up on. Neither Kyle, nor any one of us, can afford to be naïve about how dangerous school bullying really is, how life threatening being different can be, even in liberal Massachusetts.

So in the scariest storm of his life, Kyle found a cave. Kyle found a place where, for at least a few hours a week, he could continue figuring out who he wants to be. Kyle found a safe place to wait out the storm, the storm that is being a teenager, the

storm that is living with parents who you love but who can't seem to love who you really are.

We do a lot for your youth, all of us- parents, youth group volunteers, New Orleans work trip chaperones, Coming of Age mentors, Our Whole Lives teachers, every person who buys soup or bagels or whatever the youth are selling as a fundraiser.

We nurture them and love them and accept them when they feel the least unacceptable. We love them so hard and so strong that anyone would understand Unitarian Universalist values just by seeing how embrace them as part of our church family.

And in return they do so much for us. So much. Unitarian Universalist youth have been instrumental in envisioning this years Justice General Assembly. Every year the Unitarian Universalist Association has gathered congregants from around the world for a general assembly, a time for members to vote on the business of the assembly. It sounds great, and it is essential to our congregational polity, to the way we make decisions in our denomination, but frankly, it can be at times...less than exciting. And that less than exciting-ness means that people don't want to use their vacation days and dollars to go to General Assembly. Attendance the past few years has been low. So a lot of youth and adults started to think about how to make General Assembly more interesting, to make it more vital, more relevant to who we are as a faith community.

What they came up with is Justice GA, a gathering this June in Phoenix, AZ. We will gather in Phoenix and partner with local organizations to learn about immigration reform, activism, and how to better work for justice back in our home congregations. We are going to take a hard look at why our churches draw so few people of color. We will dream about who we want to be and how we can get there. Instead of a business meeting, youth helped create a gathering that will change how we make justice and become more welcoming.

We are dedicated to creating safe places for our youth, caves where they are out of harm's way. Kyle told me that before he found the youth group there were times he felt like he didn't fit anywhere, like maybe he never would. Like there was something fundamentally wrong with him that would never be right. But together the congregation saw how just right he was, how extraordinary and sacred, and we sheltered him, gave him a safe place to grow, and loved him so hard and strong that he couldn't help but love himself. A love as great as this can change the world. A love as great as this almost can't help but change the world.

In response, our youth draw us out of our caves when we have avoided the storm too long. They help us reinvent who we are, as congregations and as a denomination, when we are too comfortable. They love us enough to insist that we improve, and to lead us in our growing.

Who wants to help you grow? Where are the caves in your life, where you have been safe too long? Are there people you know who need a place to wait out the storm? As

we sing our final hymn, think with me how we teach others to love, and how we allow the people in our lives to teach us.