

Awe & Heartbreak
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UUAC Sherborn

Reading

This morning's reading is from a talk given by Rabbi Sharon Brous.

“I want to share with you one of my favorite stories from my tradition, a Rabbinic story, a midrash, of an early encounter between Abraham and God.

Every superhero has an origin story. This is Abraham's: A parable is told of a traveler, en-route from one place to another when he sees a *birah doleket*—a palace consumed in flames. He stops and asks: How can it be that the palace burns with nobody taking care of it? Who is the caretaker responsible for this place? At that moment, the owner of the palace pokes his head out and responds: I am the owner of this place!

So too, the Midrash says, Abraham looked out and saw that the world was on fire, and he wondered: How can it be that the world burns without someone trying to save it? Who is the caretaker responsible for the world? At that moment, God responded: I am the owner of this place!

I love everything about this story. I love that, despite his busy life, this person looks up and sees that something is on fire. I love that he's a traveler—someone who is out of place, on the move, who has somewhere to go. Someone with plausible deniability: he could easily argue that this burning palace is not his problem. But he doesn't: he stops and asks. I love that he works on the moral assumption that someone must be responsible, demanding to know who it is. His question is what forces the owner to take responsibility, wills him out of disregard for his creation. And I love that the question is: “who is the caretaker,” and the answer is: “I am the owner...” meaning you, you who noticed that my house is on fire, you are now the caretaker.

This story, of course, is not only about Abraham. It's about anyone who sees herself as a spiritual descendant of Abraham. Those whose spiritual inheritance is to be awake. To see.

The first thing for us to know, in these breathless times, is that we must not be fazed or disheartened by these fires. There have always been palace fires; our most ancient spiritual calling is to see them. As people of faith, it's in our shared spiritual DNA. Wakefulness. Willful opposition. Restless agitation. The demand that we show up as pursuers of justice and righteousness, is as ancient as our most sacred texts. My Jewish tradition is centered around obedience to God and observance of *mitzvot*, commandments, and yet the central charge of our tradition is to stand in defiance of unjust power structures. Our heroes are those who stood up for the vulnerable, who risked everything, challenging both God and man to fight for what is just and right.

So let's go back to that burning palace. *Birah doleket*, the midrash tells us. There's a powerful ambiguity built into the Hebrew text that allows us to read it not as a palace burning down, but as a palace radiant with light. In that case, what does the story teach us? The traveler is on his way when he notices a magnificent palace—a work of art!—radiating beauty. It stops him in his tracks. “How can it be that such beauty exists in the world?” he asks. “Who's responsible for this place?” And just then, the owner appeared and says, “Thank you for noticing My creation. Come, let's work together to take care of it.”

Who then is Abraham? The one who stops in awe and wonder, who sees beauty, when others are too busy, too distracted to notice.

Sermon

Awe & Heartbreak

Rev. Heather Concannon

“I arise in the morning,” writes author E.B. White,
“torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world.
This makes it very hard to plan the day.”

This speaks to how I feel, most days.
But not today.

But this morning, I woke up
And my first thought was
“Today could be the day my godchild enters the world.”
She is due to be born tomorrow.
But we all know that things of nature
Life and death and snowstorms and hurricanes
Natural processes don't care if we have a schedule, or appointments
Nature runs on it's own time.
And my second thought, upon waking up, is
“How will I live into the charge and the honor of being asked to be this baby's godparent
How will I teach her, as we ask godparents to do in our own child dedications here at
UUAC,
How will I teach her about faith, about hope, about beauty, about God, about love,
In a world where such terrible things happen?

And then, my next thought, is:
I cannot wait to meet this baby
Who I already love so much.
And how is it possible
that we can lose people and love people
And our tattered, worn out hearts can expand to love again and love more?
To take on the risks of loving again and again
In this world that offers no assurances, no safety.

Worry and wonder, all woven together.

The Weepies, a musical group I've long loved,

Sing “You get what you take from it
so be amazed
And never stop, never stop, never stop
You gotta be brave

’Cause all this beauty
You might have to close your eyes
And slowly open wide”

“All this beauty,” they sing. “You’ve gotta be brave.”

Because I look around at our world
And the beauty seems like it is so precarious
So fragile.
You’ve gotta be brave to live in a world with this much beauty and this much heartbreak.

And today, on Earth Day
I think about how often
I find beauty, awe, wonder in our natural world.
As spring finally, finally starts pushing up green shoots
Giant trees, spectacular sunsets
The feeling of being in the middle of the woods,
Quiet and peaceful
The beauty is enough to make me wonder how this all is possible
And it brings me to a place of awe and deep reverence.

Yet it’s not far behind in my mind
This Earth Day,
Statistics about climate change
And the reality of droughts, hurricanes, heat waves, environmentally forced migrations, fossil
fuel reliance, famine, rising sea levels, ecological havoc...
I look at the beauty
And I think “how can we have done this?”
It is so heartbreaking, to see an earth so beautiful, and so broken all at once.

When I was in 10th grade,
Our science class started a unit on epidemiology.
Our teacher started this unit, trying to get us interested in the subject
By reading us a chapter from the book “The Hot Zone”.
The chapter which contained the most gruesome descriptions of the effects of the Ebola
virus.
I won’t repeat them for you here.
Suffice to say, they were quite graphic
And I am not a generally squeamish person.
I grew up around a veterinary hospital
Where my mom worked
I would watch dogs get surgeries, sitting entranced on a stool in the corner,

Hearing dinner table conversations about medical matters that would not be considered acceptable in most households
Anyway. Something about this raw, graphic description of just how a virus can wreak havoc on the human body on a molecular and systemic level just really got to me.
In the middle of science class, I began feeling really faint,
Flushed, too hot, out of breath. I started feeling trapped, as I listened to the description of the effects that the Ebola virus has on the human body.
So I got up from my lab stool
and I threw up in front of my whole 10th grade class.

The one saving grace was that I made it into the trash can.

I got sent to the nurse's office.

By the time I got to the nurse's office I felt a bit calmer
Though still very much short of breath.
The school nurse astutely recognized it as a panic attack
And she suggested I step outside, walk around
In the fresh air
While I calmed down a bit.
As I slowly paced the sidewalk in front of my high school,
Taking slow, deep, full breaths,
I noticed the new shoots coming up
And sat down to examine their progress.
I remember the cool warm sun on my face
A day much like the day we had yesterday
And I tried to ground myself in the moment.
What we had read in science class was real
But it was not happening to me, right now.
The horrors of how nature, a virus, could take over a body
Were pushed out of my mind as I watched this nature grow right in front of me
Heard the first bird calls of spring
And I slowly got my breath back.
This earth: holding great beauty and great danger, both at once.

Rabbi Sharon Brous, who we heard in our reading today, writes,
“when we see something that’s that beautiful, we call it *breathtaking*.
But really, it’s breath-giving.
When the struggles of life constrict the heart,
it’s awe that stretches it back out,
making us more compassionate and more loving and more present.
Here’s how that works:
it’s when we think we’re alone in the world,
when we think that our struggle is not seen or not heard,
that we despair.
That’s when we suffer from *kotzer ruach*, a shortness of breath.
It’s really a shortness of spirit,
it’s a kind of anguish that the children of Israel had,

when Moses first appeared to them.
We can't hold it on our own.
But when we experience something awe-some,
whether that is the shared astonishment at the sight of an eclipse,
or whether that is the ecstasy of a perfect harmony,
or when we share a broader sense of purpose with a million people out on the street at a
mass protest,
that's when we get our breath *back*.
Awe and wonder."

It is fear that is breath-taking, and awe that is breath-giving.
And in this world where such beautiful and terrible things happen,
We all need to breathe, regularly.
Focus on the breath, we repeat as we meditate.
Deep breaths, we tell crying children.
Take a breather, we tell tired athletes.

As I wait for my godchild to draw her first breath,
I remember how in Hebrew the words for breath and spirit
are the same word: *ruach*.
That's what Rabbi Sharon Brous means
when she says that "*kotzer ruach*", a shortness of breath, is really a shortness of spirit.
Who here has ever felt like they have a shortness of spirit, in these times?

Living in this world that is so beautiful
and so dangerous is so, so hard.
It requires a lot of spirit and courage to savor a world we cannot entirely save, and to try to
save a world that we savor.

Rabbi Brous concludes her interpretation
of the story we heard in our reading of the burning palace by asking
"So, is the palace burning down, or is it radiant with light?"

Her answer is: "It's clearly both.
There's a lot of fire out there today.
But if all we see when we look at the world is danger,
we need to rediscover the beauty.
And if all we see is endless beauty,
we need to be reminded that there's a lot of brokenness out there
that needs fixing.
THIS is the reason the work of faith activists
matters so much today,
the reason the hour calls not only for resistance,
but for prophetic resistance.
Because to fight this fire,
we must remember to hold BOTH wonder and indignation.
Appreciation and agitation."

So is the world burning down, or is it radiant with light?
It's clearly both.
And either way, the answer is:
We are the caretakers
Called to attend to it.
We are called to live fully in our wonder and in our heartbreak
Whatever happens, breathe.
And when our breath is constricted,
We need to find whatever gives us our breath, our spirit, back.
Because, as Rabbi Brous says,
"The goal of the religious life
is not to escape the world as it is,
but to be awake to it:
its bruises, its fires, its brokenness.
And it's also to breathe hope, life, love and possibility
back into that broken world
once we've gotten a glimpse of the wondrous, the beautiful, the magnificent."

May we make the brave choice to love the world, the earth and its people, in all of its awe
and all of its heartbreak.
May find moments of awe that stretch our constricted hearts back out,
Giving us our breath, our spirit, back.
May we hold both wonder and indignation,
And may we see both the flames and the radiant light all around us.
May it be so, and amen.

Rabbi Brous writes, "religious escapism... is the now dominant trend of religion as a pacifier. A diversion. This is thoughts-and-prayers religion. As in "our thoughts and prayers are with the victims of the hurricane," while we sit on our hands, lock our doors and shame anyone who dares to bring up the increased ocean temperatures that so clearly contributed to the relentlessness of the storms. We're deeply saddened by the latest shooting/ hate crime/ Nazi march/ natural disaster, but let's not politicize a tragedy now!

"Religious escapist worship at the altar of the status quo... When Marx called religion the opium of the people, he was criticizing religion that quiets the oppressed masses. I wonder what he would think of religion that quiets the privileged masses? It turns out

there's more than one opioid addiction in this country; this one requires no needle or prescription, just a church or synagogue membership and a willingness to use religion as a drug to escape reality.”

“It's hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenge. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”