

“Here’s to the Misfits”

“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Be not afraid.

Because this is what we are about:

We hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.

We plant seeds that will one day grow.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

We cannot do everything,

But we can do something.

So forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That is how the light gets in.”

The cafeteria was large and beige and boxy.

Built in the 60’s, not exactly an era of architectural awe,

The designers were inspired less by aesthetics and more by efficiency,

So the material of choice was cinderblocks, sanded smooth and painted
Mellow yellow.

In the center were the food stations – sandwich bread and lunch meat

And big vats of peanut butter on the left,

And entrees in the center – chicken tetrazzini and eggplant parmesan,

Friday night fried fish nights for the Catholic kids, and taco assembly stations

For the lapsed Catholics among us and everyone else,

And ladies with paper shower caps serving us from heart-sized serving spoons,

And on the right the cereal cart – lucky charms and honey combs and alphabets,

And some wheat flakes and granola for the crunchy crowd,

Because after all this was a liberal arts college,
And what is a liberal arts college without granola?

The meal plan most of us had brought us there two times a day – once for lunch,
Once for dinner, with breakfast on our own, usually whatever we could
Afford from the money we earned at our work-study jobs picking up
Trash around campus, or washing dishes in the back, or for the lucky few,
Making copies for the English Department.

Which is how I first came to meet Dave, he and I sharing the early a.m.
Shift at the Buildings and Grounds Department, each of us given those long
Poles with a spike at the end, and a hefty trash bag at 6a.m. – ‘*go to it, boys...*’
The manager would say to us, smelling of tobacco and grease from the snow-
blowers, a job he took, he once said, even though he hated it,
so that his daughter could go to this pretty fancy college in the middle of the
of these Wisconsin corn fields...for free,
A perk of all employees.
The things we will do for our children.

I had long-ish hair then, down to almost my shoulders!,
But Dave’s was even longer, blonde, pulled back into a giant pony tail
Half-way down his back, or sometimes, all loose and flying,
Parted right the middle in a part as straight as those country roads
Through the fields.
But this isn’t what made Dave stand out in what was a fairly, at the time,
Eclectic student-body filled with division 3 sports scholarship kids,
And urban Chicago city kids, and east coast prep kids, and international students

From South Korea and Taiwan, and daughters and sons of blue collar Wisconsin parents, the first in the family to go to college, and kids like me, Shot free from all-boys Catholic school, fully embracing our early 90's flannel-phase.

No, what made Dave stand out was the large black cape he wore everywhere,
All the time, no matter how hot or cold it was,
And the black jeans, and black concert t-shirt, because he loved music,
His Walkman headphones always around his head like a halo,
His occasional black eye-liner,
And the black and silver studded belt that wrapped around his waist,
All leading down to the piece-da- resistance,
The black motorcycle boots with silver buckles
And silver plates on the front so shiny you could see your own legs
Reflected in them as you walked by.
Can you see Dave?

Of course you can. Everyone saw Dave. He was hard to miss.
Which, maybe, is how he wanted it, he must have wanted all the attention he got,
maybe...or maybe he was just trying to express himself, or figure out who he was,
Or maybe....maybe he was showing us, with his clothes, just how much he didn't
Feel like he fit in anywhere – his way of showing us just how much of a misfit
He felt on the inside.

Which took courage, I think, as I remember him with you this morning.
But back then, if I'm honest, if I'm really honest,
I just thought he was weird, strange, odd, an outsider,

Someone about whom – I’m not proud – I could roll my eyes about
With the other 18-year-olds I sat with in that mellow-yellow cafeteria at lunch or
dinner,
My longing, my ache to fit in with them, be noticed by them, be welcomed by
them, to not be considered a misfit by them
So strong that I was willing, with an eye-roll, to cast out someone else.

And mostly I don’t think Dave cared, if his eyes and face were anything to go by,
Head bobbing to his music on his Walkman,
All of which only came back to me, as memories so often do when catapulted
By music,
As Karyn has blared David Bowie’s music all throughout the house since he died
Two weeks ago,
Especially that song “Changes” with its lyrics, did you hear?,
That say *So the days float through my eyes*
But still the days seem the same
And these children that you spit on
As they try to change their worlds
They're quite aware of what they're going through.”

Dave liked Bowie – now I’m remembering this, because I remember
Now passing by his dorm room, which was a single, hearing the music blaring
behind his door, always eclectic: improvisational jazz, death metal,
Miles Davis’ majestic album *Blue*, sometimes some classical by the German
composer Wagner, and, yes, Bowie – singing song with titles like *Pressure*, *Fame*,
Let’s Dance, *Heroes*, *Changes* –

Which I never liked all that much, if I'm honest, because I was the folkie flannel guy (still am, mostly),

Until I learned this week how Bowie came out as bi-sexual in the early 1970's

When being gay could cause some to label you as criminal or crazy in the UK,

And how his mother told him that he would probably end up in the asylum

Like his older brother did, and later pretended he wasn't hers because

He dressed like a woman,

And how, in a show about him you can hear on WBUR's On Point,

Countless women and men now in their 50's called in to say

how this artist that some of us in this room no doubt discount or don't like

All that much,

Told them it was ok to be queer, alien, different, outcast, misfit,

Because he got up on stage and showed himself as himself without SHAME!

It's interesting, isn't it, where our UU religious values of welcoming the stranger

And honoring the inherit worth and dignity and making room for the supposed

outcast show up, isn't it?

We living in this world and contributing, at times, this culture that demands we put

everyone and everything into tidy, separate boxes so we can make judgements—

cool kid, strange kid; straight, gay; liberal, conservative;

religious, atheist; ; god-talker, humanist; optimist, cynic;

Renegade, conformist.

Which is why we need the reminder how religion is for life and how we live

Our life, and not really for sanctuaries,

And church, and wearing our Sunday best,

Meaning: this, here, now...this isn't the end game. This isn't the goal.

A grown-up soul is the goal, and all this is in service to that.

A soul, for example, wide enough, and gracious and spacious enough and generous enough and loving enough to sit in that mellow-yellow cafeteria

And notice Dave, really see Dave and notice Dave and not be ashamed to invite Dave over as he turns, one day, in that scary moment we all remember

When he turns with his tray after visiting the entrée line,

A scoop of chicken tetrazzini from the lady who wouldn't even look at him,

His body turning and head uplifted to see where he will sit, his eyes with eyeliner asking:

'who can I sit with? Where and with whom do I belong?

Who will move over and welcome me?

Do you see Dave, tray in hand?

I do. And I also see me – my 44yr-old self looking back on my 18yrl-old self,

Knowing, as Bowie sings, *'how time has changed me,*

But I can't trace time,'

Meaning I, I hear, how I can't go back and rewrite what I did, or didn't do

As Dave stood there, waiting, looking, however briefly catching my eye.

Which was what?

Which was pretend not to see Dave.

So that his eyes went up, and then down, downcast because he was outcast,

As he walked in his heavy boots over to the corner table, in the back,

At a table alone.

Hmmm. I forgot the Bowie connection until this week,

But I have never forgotten that moment.

Forgiveness isn't too big a word for the thing I would ask for from Dave, if I were to see him.

But since I won't get the chance to ask him for that,
Redemption must come from my trying to not make the same mistake again.
Which I surely have.

Which is why I am so bothered and challenged and compelled by this faith of ours,
And these Sunday morning worship hours,
This time and this covenant and this Call to Ministry
That demands of me and of you that we love someone we don't understand,
Welcome someone we'd rather exclude,
Bring in who we'd much rather cast out,
Break down boundaries when we'd rather build them up,
Draw the circle wide when it's so tempting easy to narrow it down,
Forgive when we'd really rather keep warm with the revenge,
Choose change rather than settle for the comfortable status quo,
Choose growth instead of complacency,
Hold hope instead of holding forth with cynicism,
Practice redemption when we're so much better at practicing grudges.
Starting over when it's so easy to keep on looking back,
Invite over the misfit when we'd much rather try to fit in.

It's tough, this faith, this call, this challenge to live
Your life as if someone else and the whole world depended on it - don't let anyone
ever tell you otherwise.

But then all things of value ask us to do hard things, don't they?

They ask us to grow. They ask us to change. They ask us to draw the circle wider. And all that is going to hurt sometimes.

We wouldn't be much a church, and I wouldn't be much of a minister,

If we didn't ask of each other anything less.

Here's to the misfits among us, around us, in us. You are seen.

You have a place at our table.

Amen.