

We Can Do Hard Things

Rev. Heather Concannon

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Reading:

Our reading this morning is from Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, from her book “An Altar in the World”.

She writes about the vocation of becoming fully human, saying, “since some people consider being human a liability, and “fully” would only make things worse, I should perhaps explain what I mean. To become fully human means learning to turn my gratitude for being alive into some concrete common good. It means growing gentler toward human weakness. It means practicing forgiveness of my and everyone else’s hourly failures to live up to divine standards. It means learning to forget myself on a regular basis in order to attend to the other selves in my vicinity. It means living so that “I’m only human” does not become an excuse for anything. It means receiving the human condition as a blessing and not a curse, in all its achingly frail and redemptive reality.”

Sermon:

It has been a hard week in the news, my friends.

But yet again, it feels like these days,
most weeks are hard weeks in the news.

From yesterday’s massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh

And gun violence and anti-semitism and white supremacy and

To a the Trump administration’s announcement this week

Of their intention to define gender in such a way that

Our transgender siblings among us would be erased—which we know you will never be—

To a historic Baptist church in Wakefield burning after a lightening strike,

To a caravan of over 7000 migrants—refugees, really—seeking safety in a country they know
will not welcome them

But to try to go is better than to stay...

There is so much that calls out to us

Calling for our attention, our compassion, our money, our time.

It can sometimes feel too heartbreaking, and exhausting, amen?

And this is only just this week.

And this is without even taking in to account

The demands of our own lives,

Of our children, of our parents, our partners, our partners parents,

Our friends, our neighbors.

I feel worn thin myself, sometimes, just trying to

do my job, which I love

and take care of my family and household

and grieve my dad’s death

and make my dentist appointments and
call the bank and the insurance company to tell them I've changed my address
And show up for the rally, the meeting, the people I love.
This work—this vocation, as Barbara Brown Taylor said in our reading—
This vocation of becoming fully human is a hard task
But it is a blessing, not a curse.
Because we can do hard things.
Doing hard things is how we grow
It is how we get closer to our purpose, our vocation,
Of becoming fully human.

We can do hard things.

I've learned a lot about doing hard things from my mom.
When I was in first grade
I was having some sort of problem in the classroom
I do remember that it was some sort of social situation
Not catastrophic, but had upset me—
The specifics of which, honestly, I cannot remember now.
And that it created a lot of stress for me
And my mom gently but firmly insisted that she would
Under no circumstances
Talk to the teacher for me.
She would come with me, she promised
She would practice with me what I wanted to say
But she would not solve the problem for me.
I whined, I'm sure. I protested, I'd put money on betting that I sulked,
But in the end we went in together to talk to the teacher.
At that point, it was one of the hardest things she had ever asked me to do.

You will probably be unsurprised to hear
That research on resilience in children shows that my mom was, of course, right in her
insistence that I advocate for myself.

The Harvard University Center on the Developing Child
Says that “learning to cope with manageable threats
is critical for the development of resilience.
Not all stress is harmful,” they say.
“There are numerous opportunities in every child's life
to experience manageable stress—
and with the help of supportive adults,
this “positive stress” can be growth-promoting.
Over time, we become better able to cope
with life's obstacles and hardships,
both physically and mentally”

The research shows that resilient children are resilient
in part due to personality traits,

like whether they more naturally have an internal or an external locus of control,
and in part due to circumstance and luck,
like having a supportive adult presence in their life.
However, the behaviors that foster resilience
Are learned skills
That stay with us throughout our lifetime
And can be learned at any age.

The scientists who work on resilience research
Say that it is important to think of resilience as a muscle
That can be strengthened and flexed at any time.
In order to build resilience,
They recommend the following practices, all of which can be actively cultivated.

They emphasize the importance of caring and supportive relationships
that offer physical support and allow us
to process and make meaning of our experiences.
They point at and orientation toward optimism—
which is not ignoring that something is hard,
but believing that there is the potential to be happy again
and that challenges can be opportunities for growth.
They also talk about the importance of framing-
To see oneself as someone who has survived challenging experiences
Rather than as someone who has been a victim of circumstance,
And as someone who has control over one's own future.
And, they talk about using one's hardships
To deepen your own sense of purpose in life
Whether it is to do some sort of advocacy,
to become more committed to the relationships around you,
to live your vocation more fully,
or to use your difficult experiences to help others.

In short, research for both children and adults
Stresses that we learn how to cope with hard things
By doing hard things.

So, if you want to increase your own capacity for resilience,
Do a hard thing.
And, so often the Hard Thing—
Capital H capital T
Is made harder by the fact that I have such a hard time
Facing it head on.

The blogger and writer Glennon Doyle says
“*Brave* is not a feeling that you should wait for.
It is a decision.
It is a decision that compassion is more important than fear,
than fitting in, than following the crowd.”

You do not have to feel unafraid to also feel brave
You have to make a decision.
A decision that is in service to a greater purpose
The calling of your life that insists it be heard
That still, small voice inside
That knows what must be done
Even if you would prefer to not have to face it
Because whatever it is is too hard, too scary, threatens with too much loss.

Perhaps more than my first grade lesson in self-advocacy
I think of my Mom even more so
As someone who has done the hard things
and made brave decisions
In service of a larger purpose.

You see, my mom grew up in a very unstable home situation.
The oldest of four children,
Her parents were divorced before she was two
And she grew up with her mother.
With her mother, she moved every few months to years
There were several different boyfriends or stepfathers who lived with her mother during her
childhood
And my mother's mother, my biological grandmother,
struggled with untreated addiction,
and severe mental health issues,
The specific combination that meant that she was in no shape to be caring for four young
children.
Neglect, poverty, food insecurity, abuse, and foster care were all woven throughout my
mother's childhood.

For various reasons,
Mostly relating to the way the Department of Children and Families
Prioritized custody with the children's mother in that era,
My grandfather could not get custody of my mom
Even though he had been fighting a losing legal battle throughout her childhood.
They had regular visits,
But my grandfather at that point was remarried,
He had a suburban house, and a four year old son
And a wife and a job.
And finally, as far as I understand the story
When my mom was 15
She and her dad worked out a plan
To meet up after school
Without telling her mother
And she moved in with them
And never went back to live with her mother.

I called my mom to ask if I could tell this story last night
Because we know that consent is more than just about physical touch,
But we got to have a good conversation
About bravery, and how to do the brave thing even when you are scared,
And how doing the hard thing can also liberate us.

“I was so scared” my mom said. “I was leaving everything I knew-
my family, my school, all my stuff, everything.
My mother wouldn’t let me come get any of my stuff, once I left,
All of my childhood pictures, mementos, clothes, nothing.
The hardest part was recognizing that biology didn’t necessarily mean love, or obligation, to
get to the point of leaving.
But I also knew that living with my mother any longer was unsustainable.”

“If you are going to talk about bravery, you need to talk about Mimi.”
My mom said, referring to her stepmom,
the woman I know as my grandmother.
(who, sometimes watches my sermons—shoutout to Mimi!)
“She had a home, a marriage, a four year old,
a stable family life, and she took in a 16 year old and all of her baggage,
including her irate and unpredictable mother.
She had no idea how it would all turn out,
but she never once made me feel like she regretted
her decision to have me move in with them.
Inviting me in—that was bravery.”

We can do hard things.

My friends,
I know each of you have stories
Of your own hard thing that you have done
Your own brave decisions,
And reflecting on times when you have made it through
When your own life has been a testament to the fact
That *you can do hard things*,
We can boost our resilience for what we face now.
These kinds of life-course-setting
Hard, big decisions
May only happen a few times in a lifetime
But we can grow our muscles for resilience
By doing the Hard Thing that has been weighing on us.

We don’t have to do hard things for the sake of doing hard things
There is not some sort of redemption in suffering for suffering’s sake.
But often the hardest thing is also the thing that will liberate us.

So, schedule the conversation you know you need to have
Call your ministers and ask for help.

End the relationship.
As them out.
Write the essay.
Go to the dentist.
Set the boundary.
Ask your doctor about mental health medication or counseling.
Get that lump checked out.
Make the call to the friend whose absence is palpable.
Be the first to apologize.
Leave the job.
Confess the truth.
Share your truth.
Cut off the person whose presence in your life is toxic.
Go to the AA, NA, OA, GA meeting.
Go to the Alanon meeting.
Give your time to someone who needs you.

Do *your* hard thing.

Beloved people of UUAC,
Remember,
We can do hard things.
Because we have one another
Because we have done them before
Because we can write our own stories
Because the story is not yet finished
Because there is liberation on the other side of the hard thing
Because we are working to fulfill our vocation
Of becoming fully human.
May it be so, and amen.