

## **Where Does It Hurt?**

*A Sermon by Rev. Heather Concannon*

*Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Area Church at First Parish in Sherborn*

*October 2, 2016*

### **Reading:**

From *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, by Parker Palmer

The politics of our time is the “politics of the brokenhearted”—an expression that will not be found in the analytical vocabulary of political science or in the strategic rhetoric of political organizing. Instead, it is an expression from the language of human wholeness. There are some human experiences that only the heart can comprehend and only heart-talk can convey. Among them are certain aspects of politics, by which I mean the essential and eternal human effort to craft the common life on which we all depend.

When *all* of our talk about politics is either technical or strategic, to say nothing of partisan and polarizing, we loosen or sever the human connections on which empathy, accountability, and democracy itself depend. If we cannot talk about politics in the language of the heart—if we cannot be publicly heartbroken, for example, that the wealthiest nation on earth is unable to summon the political will to end childhood hunger at home—how can we create a politics worthy of the human spirit, one that has a chance to serve the common good?

### **Sermon:**

Thursday afternoon,  
I was driving up Rt. 27, in to Natick, to stop at the library on my way home.  
And as I drive through Natick,  
I see a yard sign along the way  
That says “Everybody Sucks 2016: The US is Doomed” and I think:  
Maybe. Maybe we’re doomed.  
I’ve just been thinking about the Mary Oliver poem  
The line where she says “you tell me about your despair, yours,  
and I’ll tell you mine”  
And the Wendell Berry poem we opened worship with  
Which starts with “when despair for the world grows in me”  
And I think it’s no coincidence that both of these poems have floated through my  
brain this week  
And I wonder, to my friend with the “Everybody Sucks 2016” lawn sign:  
What is your despair, friend? Is it so great that you put felt compelled to put that  
lawn sign up? Or is it humor, trying to lighten the mood of a polarized election?  
But then a few houses down  
Before I can barely even complete that thought,  
I see a rainbow peace flag

Because, in Natick over the summer, a lesbian couple's house was vandalized  
Eggs thrown at their house and the rainbow flag  
That they had put up after the Orlando nightclub shootings  
Was stolen.  
And this couple's neighbors, perhaps some of you, in response, all put up peace flags.  
And as I drive along  
I see a second rainbow flag  
And then another, a few more houses down.  
And a fourth, and a fifth, and a sixth  
I've lost count by the time I reach the library  
3 minutes later.

And these images have stuck with me  
The flags and the sign  
Hope and despair  
Solidarity and disillusionment  
Standing side by side along the road.  
Like little pulpits proclaiming our current theology about humanity.  
A stark contrast between corporate politics and grassroots organizing.

And as I drove by all these rainbow flags  
I think about the On Being podcast I listened to last week  
(as a side note, you all should know that I really just want to preach about podcasts  
every time, I love them so much.)

In this episode of On Being, the host Krista Tippett was interviewing Ruby Sales,  
A Black civil rights activist and theologian who talked about the need for public  
theology,  
And about religion in the civil rights movement  
And what she called today's spiritual crisis in white America.  
Ruby Sales asks the question, "Where does it hurt"  
A question she says she learned to ask during the days of the civil rights movement  
That cut through everything, right to the heart of the matter.  
Opening up the human element of each of the issues we collectively face.  
Krista Tippett, the host, commented that it's a question we scarcely know how to ask  
In public life right now.  
That pain comes out looking like anger in public life  
And that pain has a huge force in shaping the polarization of this country and the  
world.  
And yet, she says, "where does it hurt?" is a question we must contend with  
Regardless of who our next president will be  
Or what happens with the ballot questions in Massachusetts  
Or any other of the decisions we must make as a collective.

Pain often comes out as anger in public life  
And anger is a legitimate feeling,

Especially in response to the experience of being marginalized, oppressed, dismissed, discounted, pointed at as “the kind of person to fear”.  
And sometimes anger masks pain in a way that keeps us distant from one another  
Making it difficult to see the vulnerable places: what is hurting underneath.

A confession:

I knew I was preaching on politics, and pain, and polarization  
And yet I couldn't bring myself to turn on the TV and watch the debate  
on Monday night.  
Monday was my day off, I was in a good mood,  
I had other things that I wanted to do instead,  
And I just felt like “I know what it's going to be like, it'll just make me angry.”  
And I, jumping right to the conclusion of my own anger,  
Even notice in myself that before it makes me feel angry, it will also make me feel  
sad, and worried, afraid, as Wendell Berry says,  
“of what our life and our children's lives might be”.  
It took me many days to finally watch the debate.

During the primaries, a Religious Educator friend of mine, Lauren Wyeth, posted a Facebook status that has stuck with me. She wrote:

Me: Feeling lost in our hate-filled world.  
Some of them: Feeling lost in our godless world.  
Some of them: Feeling lost in our changing world.  
Others of them: Feeling lost in our hopeless world.  
All of us: Feeling outnumbered in our divided world.  
If there's a way home, we need to help each other get there.

Friends, will you sing with me again?

*Courage my friends  
You do not walk alone  
We will walk with you  
And sing your spirit home.*

Tell me what breaks your heart—yours—and I'll tell you what breaks mine.  
Parker Palmer says that we think of heartbreak as a personal, not political,  
condition.

But he also reminded us in our reading, that politics  
are fundamentally “the essential and eternal human effort  
to craft the common life on which we all depend.”

And my heart is broken by a common life on which some people can depend  
But not everyone.

And perhaps yours is too.

My heart is broken by the news that we've just crossed the threshold into 400parts  
per million of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere  
Because I'm scared of what will happen, who will be hurt, when the next storm hits.

And perhaps your is too.  
My heart is broken by news story after news story of black lives being devalued,  
degraded, killed;  
Because I cannot imagine what it must be like to have inherited a history of  
enslavement, disenfranchisement, trauma, and I cannot imagine what it must be like  
to wonder, every day, if the color of your skin could be a death sentence.  
And perhaps your heart breaks for this, too.

Or perhaps your heart breaks at the ways you or people you love struggle to make  
ends meet,  
Or perhaps it breaks when it comes face to face with the cruelty of addiction, or  
anxiety, or depression,  
Tell me what breaks your heart—yours—and I'll tell you what breaks mine.  
Because underneath all of the rhetoric and anger  
And the differing reasons that we might point toward that underly these  
heartbreaks  
Is a struggle to craft a common life on which we can all depend.  
And this is not a question in which politics are over here  
And faith and religion is over here.  
Because our faith tells us that we are in an interconnected web  
That we cannot extract ourselves from one another  
That good intentions are not enough—we need to attend to the impact of our  
actions on one another, and on the larger whole.  
That we must craft a common life that takes into account not just being people who  
live our values,  
But crafting a common life that lives our values, as well.

Parker Palmer says that there are two ways to picture a broken heart,  
Using *heart* to mean not just our emotions but the core of our sense of self.  
The conventional image, he says, “is that of a heart broken  
By unbearable tension into a thousand shards—  
Shards that sometimes become shrapnel aimed at the source of our pain.  
Every day,” he says, “untold numbers of people try to “pick up the pieces,” some of  
them taking grim satisfaction in the way the heart’s explosion  
has injured their enemies.  
Here the broken heart is an unresolved wound that we too often inflict on others.”

“But there is another way to visualize what a broken heart might mean”,  
Parker Palmer tells us. “Imagine that small, clenched fist of a heart  
“broken open” into largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold ones’ own and the  
world’s pain and joy.  
This, too, happens every day.  
Who among us has not seen the evidence, in our own or other people’s lives, that  
compassion and grace can be the fruits of great suffering? Here heartbreak becomes  
a source of healing, enlarging our empathy and extending our ability to reach out.”

Friends, will you sing with me again?

*Courage my friends*

*You do not walk alone*

*We will walk with you*

*And sing your spirit home.*

We need broken open hearts that are the beginning of healing.

And so I'm driving by all these rainbow flags in Natick

And I think "Someone must have had a broken heart, hearing what happened  
To that couple whose house got egged"

And that broken heart was a heart broken open to compassion and action—  
I hear that it was children who went door to door, delivering these flags to their  
neighborhood.

And I think about when I was in 10th grade

And we were in the midst of a public debate about gay marriage here in  
Massachusetts, around 2003.

I was just coming out as a queer high schooler

Before I was even old enough to vote on any of the things being debated

Which—thankfully—never came to a vote

And to my 10<sup>th</sup> grade self, it felt like

my very validity as a person—this newfound truth I had about myself— was being  
debated on the nightly news.

The pain hearing people talk about what I now understood to be *people like me* in  
such a disparaging way was deep,

and caused me be ready to snap and lash out

always on the defensive, on the alert--

for anyone who I perceived as being even the tiniest bit unwelcoming.

"Where does it hurt?" Ruby Sales wisely asks?

In 10<sup>th</sup> grade I *never* could have imagined a town like Natick,

much like the Massachusetts town I grew up in, putting up all those flags,

Or seeing last year in the newspaper of the town I grew up in

that the Gay-Straight Alliance had just gotten the school to create gender-neutral  
bathrooms.

But then last year I attended the OWL guest panel with church's 7<sup>th</sup> graders

And for those who are unfamiliar, OWL stands for Our Whole Lives, and is our  
comprehensive sexuality education program

Written by our Unitarian Universalist Association

That we offer for middle schoolers.

And at the OWL guest panel, a number of students from Out Metro West

An organization that support LGBTQ high schoolers and their allies in this area

Came and spoke to our OWL group about their experiences

Being LGBTQ in high school

And some talked about being bullied, dealing with depression,

or conflict with parents over their gender or sexual identity  
And I thought “we’ve come so far, and we still have so far to go.”  
My heart broken open once more.

Compassion comes from hearing one another’s stories  
Being reminded that we cannot see all the pain there is to see  
From our limited vantage points.  
I have heard sociologists suggest that one of the reasons we’ve seen a relative culture  
shift around many LGBTQ issues in recent years  
Is that so many people have a personal story—so many people  
have heard stories from someone they love  
About their lives, about where it hurts,  
And it is only when we know one another’s stories that we can grow our  
compassion.

There is a Hasidic tale, where a disciple asks the Rabbi:  
“Rabbi, why does the Torah tell us to ‘place these words *upon* your hearts?’  
Why does it not tell us to place these holy words *in* our hearts?”  
And the Rabbi answers,  
“It is because as we are, our hearts are closed,  
and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts.  
So we place them on top of our hearts.  
And they stay there until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in.”

Friends, may our heartbreak be the  
healing of our democracy.  
As we endeavor to build a common life.  
May the source of our pain  
Also be the source of our compassion  
And may the compassion we offer to one another  
Be a source of hope, comfort, and courage.

Will you sing with me once more?  
*Courage my friends*  
*You do not walk alone*  
*We will walk with you*  
*And sing your spirit home.*