

“Dora Hillman Baked A Cake”

Rev. Annie Holmes

Dora Hillman baked a cake. Not just a small cake, but a rather large sheet cake. It was a lemon cake with a white frosting. It almost filled her tiny apartment kitchen. She was so pleased. She hadn't baked in months. Well, with the divorce and going back to school, she hadn't wanted to bake. But this day was special, it was an anniversary. Dora wanted to do more than just bake something, she wanted to share her joy and somehow the cake was a symbol of her joy, and she was going to share it with those who had come to mean so much to her.

Cake, she mused, has turned into such a celebratory piece of our society. Cakes for weddings and birthdays, cakes for when someone was sick or there had been a death in the family. Lemon cake had always been her favorite so it seemed proper that she should make one today. That special feeling you get when you know in your heart of hearts that you haven't let something go in your life because you were too busy, thinking you were not worth the fuss or the time or attention. All that false humility that is really only denial, only covering the fact that you feel truly you are not worth the effort. Well, enough of that, she told herself. Since living alone and having to be her best friend, she had changed toward herself, out of necessity she thought. And this cake was to celebrate her life, her accomplishments, her freedom, her moving to a new level of spiritual and mental balance. “Wow,” she thought, “this being present for yourself is really a cool thing. I must do it more often.”

It seemed her kids loved to come over more now, just around dinner time and hang around until Dora realized she had to feed them and their girl friends and sometimes even some other of their friends. But there was always lots of laughter and love shared. And now with her children just popping in, her apartment was still treated like the large four bedroom house she and her ex-husband used to own. But she found herself looking around at them with satisfaction, her two fully grown boys, so handsome and coming into their own lives, and their girl friends, so sweet and blossoming into womanhood. Dora would feel a peace and contentment she had not known since she was a child and had felt a special attachment to her bedroom, the only place in the house that she ever felt was truly hers. Then it was time to throw the kids all out and savor the peace and quiet of the sacred space that was her apartment.

She had never had a space of her own before. In the home of her childhood she had shared a room with her younger sister until she went away to college. In college she had always had a roommate. She married while still in college and had her sons soon after. Now, this was new to

her, her own space, her own time, her own money, she loved every minute of it.

Right after the divorce, in the beginning, it was hard living alone. She was often restless, she was annoyed by the silence. There was never anyone to whom she could ask advice on things like, are the potatoes done, or is this a good color for the living room drapes. How was she to spend her free time, if it wasn't serving others? Her counselor told her to write down the 10 top activities she loved to do in the world. Then take some dice and throw the dice and see the number that comes up, and do that one thing. Dora had had to do that for some time. But soon she realized she could pick and choose the activity without the dice. And as time went on she realized, she liked spending time alone, and there were definitely some relationships she could do without, if it meant the loss of her integrity and her sense of self worth.

So Dora had decided, on this special day, to bake a cake, a really big cake and celebrate her one-year anniversary of living alone. In her mind she had it all worked out. She would leave her apartment door slightly open and watch as people got off the elevator and ask them in for a piece of her cake. Some of the celebration she had realized was that for the first time she had developed relationships that were of her own choosing. Her friends, not just casual relationships because of her ex-husband's business or because they were the parent's of her children's friends – no, these were growing friendships where the relationship grew from a mutual sense of respect.

The people in her building were a funny, strange, international group, Dora mused, as she started to brew some coffee. They were as diverse and as unlike her as any group of people could be. They were thrown together in this building by chance, but what they were building together was certainly not by chance.

Often throughout this last year she was reminded of the story her Grandmother had told her about her name. Her Grandmother's name was also Pandora after the woman in the Greek myth who had opened the box that supposedly had held evil and destruction and thereby unleashed it on the unsuspecting world. Dora was often told she was named after her Grandmother. But, her Grandmother told the story of their names just a little differently.

Grandmother Pandora had told Dora that there was an older story told of the Greek goddess Pandora. A story that came from ancient Greece. Indeed Pandora had been given the box for safe keeping. But the goddess Pandora realized that the people were getting lax in their appreciation of the gifts of love and happiness and affection that had

been given them. They no longer saw these as gifts as offerings from the gods, so Pandora chose to unleash the opposites of love, peace, honesty and appreciation, so the people would know the full range of feelings, and then appreciate and cherish love, goodness and order in their lives. The yang to the yin was a gift in itself of the Goddess to her people, as they needed both to value the depth of life.

And Dora chose now, in the midst of the wonderful and confused people in her building to celebrate the fact that they were a community, special and so deserving. She would be the antithesis of the pain, the isolation, and the fear that surrounded these people in many other part of their lives. Today would be the beginning of a conscious celebration for her and these people who had become so important to her. As gentleness, love, acceptance and appreciation were growing in her life, she, on this day would spread a cloak of gentleness on the shoulders of all who would pass her door.

Dora started cutting the cake very carefully as Mrs. Ruiz was getting off the elevator with her son Daniel David. He had just gotten out of the hospital. Daniel was 17 and had wanted out of the gang that he had been a part of since he was 14. In order to leave a gang, Mrs. Ruiz had explained, you had to allow yourself to be beaten by every member of the gang. If you lived through the beating, you were allowed to leave. If you did not allow them to beat you they would find you and kill you. Daniel was still bruised and his face was swollen, his arm in a sling, but Dora, marveled, he was alive.

Daniel ate very little of the cake, feeling foolish sitting in this woman's apartment with his mother, Dora assumed. Daniel took a piece of cake home with him for later, as he left, Mrs. Ruiz winked at her, and thanked Dora for the cake and conversation. After Daniel went on ahead, Mrs. Ruiz explained it would not take such a very long time for Daniel to heal from the bruises, but to heal from the effects of the gang and find a new life now that he was free from the gang's influence, may take quite a while. Dora promised she would help in any way she could.

When they left Dora called both of her own sons just make the contact, just to hear their voices, just to reassure herself they were safe. Indeed they were. Dora felt the cloak of their gentleness laid upon her shoulders, as they told her how proud they were of her for being so brave. She felt so blessed.

Dora's Mother had told her moving back into the city was a terrible mistake. "There is so much crime and drugs in the city, it isn't safe for a woman alone," her Mother had said over and over again. Dora had smiled. After being here a year, she reflected, on how much these people in her

apartment building had given her. She was safe, fulfilled and excited again about life. What more could she ask for? The city had called her name. In her heart she felt compelled to rebuild her life here as the neighborhoods around her were also being rebuilt.

Dora remembered a friend of hers, a father of five children who was literally drowning in fear because his youngest daughter's life was consumed with drugs and all that goes with trying to be constantly high. He had a dream he shared. In the dream he came to a very turbulent river where a flock of sheep was crossing. They all seemed to be making it across except for one – a lone black sheep that was caught in the swirling waters. The father dove in and grabbed for the sheep, but realized he was about to be swept away as well. A booming voice came from the heavens and said, SAVE YOURSELF! And he woke up.

There had been silence all around the circle of those in the dream group. Everyone could imagine a situation where they had gotten too close to drowning themselves as they had strove to save someone else. A close call, a close call, a very close call. What a fine balance it is in our lives between caring for others and self care. Where are the lines of demarcation? Who had the handbook on how to do this thing? So many religious traditions had clues it seemed, so much self help, counseling, books available, but when it is your sweetheart, your child, your soul mate, your friend, what are the boundaries? That is what Dora was discovering. Save yourself to be the help, the friend, the wise counselor, knowing if you are drowning you will not be there for anyone else, ever.

Next off the elevator was Henrik Shimek. He was a recent immigrant from Bosnia. He was always so gracious and anxious to make friends. Here alone without his family who were still in Bosnia, he was saving every dollar to send for them as soon as he could. Henrik gratefully took the cake, not really understanding what Dora was explaining. But that was OK she thought. She had learned about a dozen Yugoslav words and his English was progressing. The lobby of their apartment building was used as an English as a second language classroom on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Dora was one of the teachers. The teachers Co-op had decided they would not simply teach English to their students, they would commit themselves to learning some of the participants native languages so the education would be a two way street.

Dora realized for the first time in her life that's what relationships were about, traffic on a two way street. Before, in her life, relationships were always so dependent on her. If she didn't manipulate everything, there would have been no relationship to speak of. Now she was finding out, people were in her life, a part of her life without manipulation, without her having to keep the relationship alive. She was reminded of the college

course she was taking where they were reading the works of great philosophers.

Martin Buber, a German Jewish theologian/philosopher, had imagined that the highest level of sophistication a person could achieve was the realization that there was another in the world besides yourself. The individual was important it was true as a foundation for that person's life, but to recognize there was an "other" and treat them with respect and dignity was the mark of true humanity in an individual. The theory was called "I-Thou" Dora remembered. When she had first heard it, it sounded simple and stupid. Now, that she was living it, it sounded profound.

For so much of her life she had heard of people referred to in terms of blocks of people. Those Blacks, those whites, those Jews, those Latinos, and those gays on and on. For the first time in her life she no longer thought in those terms. For her, today, it was Mrs. Ruiz, Daniel David, and Henrik and others. Individual faces, full of gifts and talents and needs and desires.

As she was musing, three young girls who recently moved in down the hall passed by. She called them inside. Giggling they put down their packages and eyed the lemon cake hungrily. Dora had to smile, they were so young, so full of promise and excited new life. It was rumored in the building that one of them was pregnant. She was hoping to coax enough of a relationship with them to help them out when the time for the baby came. They took much more of the cake than Dora had expected them to. They must be hungry she thought in the silence after all their chatter and packages had moved on to their own apartment.

She filled her cup full of coffee and sat down and looked out her kitchen window. There on the window sill was the bluebird of happiness statue her sister had given her as an apartment warming gift. She fingered it gingerly as she remembered the days not so long ago when she had felt a prisoner in a another kitchen, unable often to breath or think or feel free. She had allowed her husband so much power over her. Her whole life seemed then to be other's expectations, her lost youth, and sense of a loss of freedom to choose. The world had seemed so small back then, so confined to a kitchen. Now, also from a kitchen, she felt she was entertaining the whole world.

Brushing aside the unbidden tears, Dora looked at the clock. It was getting late. Once more the elevator opened and Tonya, Darian and the baby set out on their way to visit Darian's mother. Dora called to them in excitement as she held her arms out to hold the baby. They had had such good conversations in the past on how tough it is for them to be an interracial couple. Dora had often watched the baby while Tonya and Darian had taken Mrs. Freeze out to shop. They were so appreciative of

the cake and wished Dora congratulations on her celebration.

The kitchen was so dark as they left Dora turned on the light. She jumped in surprise to see someone sitting in her usual chair. They were licking frosting off their fingers. It was Lupe, the five year old from downstairs who lived with her mother. They were from Ecuador. Dora wrapped the child in her arms, cutting her a regular piece of cake and they both sat down. Lupe ate big pieces of cake while watching Dora with her huge brown eyes.

Soon Mrs. Ortiz, Lupe's mother was at the door with a mixture of relief and fear on her face. Francisca Ortiz had been through more of what life can dish out in her 34 years than most people live in 80, Dora remarked to herself as Francisca ran to Lupe. Dora remembered the day they had moved into the apartment. Francisca had told Dora she was one of the women who had contracted cancer in Ecuador because she had worked for the American firm FTD florists. She had grown flowers for FTD for four years. Not one of the Ecuadorian women working in the large Green houses knew the dangers they were exposed to by placing their hands day after day in the fertilizer/insecticide liquid they used on the flowers. Francisca and others had headaches and stomach problems after the first year. Some of their babies were born deformed.

First FTD gave the women gloves to wear, but with no instructions on why or for what reason, most of the women would not wear them. Soon the first woman of the village died of cancer and many more followed. Francisca was one of four women FTD flew to America to test for possible signs of cancer. She spoke very good English, she had a child, they were told they were guests here in America to determine FTD's responsibility in this matter.

Francisca cried frequently missing her home and her family. She was angry at the American company. Why had they not told the women of the risks? She asked Dora, "Is the availability of fresh flowers worth the lives of Ecuadorian women?" Dora did not have an answer. Dora had stopped buying fresh flowers. She took care of Lupe when Francisca testified at the trial that was going on its second year. She was awfully glad for Francisca's company and friendship.

When Mother and daughter had left, Dora started fixing dinner, as two of her friends from her old life in the suburbs were coming to visit the "city girl" as they called her. She wanted everything to be perfect when they arrived. As the spaghetti was boiling and the sauce was simmering, Dora lifted the last couple of pieces of the cake from the sheet pan onto a fancier plate. So there it was, the celebration cake had now gone from her home into the homes of so many others. The cake was a symbol for

her of the connections of the new relationships she had made with these wonderful people.

On her refrigerator there was a worn piece of paper that she often read while waiting for her supper to cook. She read; "In the historical community, in the fate of living together, women and men confront the divine powers that form community and the perverting powers that destroy it. They confront these powers not only in themselves and in individual persons but also in the forces that assume impersonal, institutional form. Indeed, the quality of individual personal existence is partly conditioned by the institutional patterns that constitute the body politic. Thus every personal problem is a social problem and every social problem is a personal problem." She knew it was written by a Unitarian Universalist theologian named James Luther Adams.

The last line of the that piece buzzed over and over in her head, **every personal problem is a social problem and every social problem is a personal problem.** She knew throughout all times of history, people had taken responsibility for each other. That responsibility had moved them to a response of the love they too had felt in their lives and a willingness to share not only that love but the responsibility for creating community where ever and when ever. Ordinary people reaching out to each other making a difference in neighbors and friends lives. People loving simply because in the midst of heartache and overwhelming odds, they realized love was all that would really sustain them. In other words, they could do no other. This love was the cake, the rest was all frosting.

She began to feel a part of a long history of people rediscovering the principles of; interdependence, local autonomy, free discussion, rejection of coercion, protection of minorities, striving for equal rights and the separation of church and state. She was entering a new age of social organization where on a very small scale she was making a difference, she was part of a radical reform where the personal and the community came together.

Dora knew, because of a lifetime of experience that all relationships have to do with power. She saw so clearly how each of us is free to respond or not respond, within the power we have been given, or the power we believe has been taken away from us. In a perfect community economic status, social rank, racial origin would be abandoned to a broader transcending, transforming power, and that would only be achieved one relationship at a time. Building on these budding relationships she now had planted would take all the skill and bravery that she had so recently acquired and of course time. Dora smiled, and maybe even once in awhile some lemon cake.
