

“The Ultimate Weakness Is Violence”

Rev. Annie Holmes

Where I took this statement for the title of this sermon, the passage actually reads,

“The ultimate weakness is violence. That it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, violence multiplies it. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

But sloppy, contrived, forced good wishes are not the kind of love that has changed me and my life. No single material gift has given me what I needed the most. No, what has changed me forever is what I have felt, unconditional love. The kind of love that swoops you up, embraces you fully and never, ever, ever lets you go. No matter how many mistakes you make, how many times you fall back into despair and imagine you are not worthy of this kind of happiness, acceptance, peace, this love pulls you back and drapes a cloak of magic, a mantle of gentleness around your shoulders and says, “Yes my child you are this worthy, this wonderful, this deserving and so much more”.

I have felt this kind of love as an angry, belligerent, confused child and teenager as my Grandmothers would wrap me in her sturdy, capable arms and gently remind me what a gift I was in her life. She was fierce in her love for me, and I knew no matter how I wriggled, or wrestled or wondered, I knew this woman was not going to abandon me, was not going to let me go.

I felt this kind of love as a confused, sometimes bitter, and scared adult when my partner Bille’ and I found each other. No matter how I worried and wondered and questioned whether I would ever be worthy of such a person and such a love as hers, she has said in a life affirming way that she loves me.

I have felt this kind of unconditional love, as I became a Unitarian Universalist. I was told over and over again that I would be loved and accepted even as I was growing into what it was that I believed. It didn’t matter how long it took me to articulate my beliefs, that wasn’t the point. I wasn’t accepted or loved because I believed a certain way or as others believed, I was loved simply because I was a person who needed and wanted a church home. Now, what is someone like me, who has felt so unworthy of such unconditional love, supposed to do with all the love that has been given me? Why, share it, of course!

But what of those people who never feel any kind of love, much less unconditional. Many people have felt so abandoned by people who should have loved them. There doesn’t seem to be worse emotional pain than to be let down by those people who said they would love you. That kind of denial does make people weak and out of that and so many more reasons many turn to harshness and violence in response to their pain.

And how would you define violence, would the definition include; aggression, fighting, hostility, bad behavior, brutality, cruelty, sadism or bloodshed? And is everyone and anyone

capable of any of those behaviors if pushed far enough? The age-old question: if someone was beating or hurting someone you loved what would you do? How far would you go to protect them or protect yourself? I always saw myself as the most passive person alive, but a monster came alive in me at one point in my life and that monster scared me. Oh, even mild mannered, seemingly passive people do have their limits and the question for people who strive for balance and health is how far is too far?

The monk's robes were swishing back and forth and back and forth in front of me as we walked. It was our twice a day walk and meditate time on the silent retreat I was attending. "Om, mani padme om," they chanted, and we replied in the same monotone rhythm. It was a peaceful thing being there with all my meals taken care of and someone else who made my bed, and there was no TV, no music, no talking what so ever. At first I was uncomfortable, ancy. I berated myself for even spending all this money on such a silly thing. My divorce had come through, I was just accepted into UU seminary and here I was in the woods in Wisconsin, quiet. And I figured I had so much to say. I felt I had been kept quiet for 40 years, I was bursting to speak.

But what I learned was that I really wasn't ready to speak. Because what I had to say was angry and spiteful, nonsense really. I wanted people to pay for what I had gone through. I wanted to tell people off. I wanted to box their ears in. I wanted them to hurt as much as I was hurting. Om, mani, padme, om. I kept wishing they would stop that nonsense. Enough of the praying, meditating, give me some action. I kicked the leaves as I walked. I cried. I laid on the grass and the leaves and imagined how I would take these people who in my life had never really seen me, never really tried to know me and I would tie them up in a straight backed chair, and I would tape their mouths shut with duck tape and I would proceed to tell them every single bad thing they had ever done to me. They would have to listen then. I would have my say. Then I would force a confession out them. It would be beautiful. Oh yes, I would finally have my say.

I was so full of rage, temper, fury and ire. It felt so good after years of being the good little girl. It was like a gift. Maybe the gift was just to be able to feel at all. I will never, ever be able to explain to you what it feels like to be married 17 years and be a lesbian. There are no adequate words to describe anguish, confusion and the huge amount of guilt I felt with each passing year. Being a Lutheran minister's wife and living in the parsonage and knowing in my heart of hearts what I was playing at was all a lie. The pressure at times was unbearable. At first I tried to force the gayness out of me. That was a self inflicted violence all by itself. Then I tried praying it away. Begging God to do the right thing by me. I wanted to die. Thought of suicide many times. I was sure my children would never survive a divorce and a lesbian mother. I stopped eating. I didn't sleep well. I went to endless Bible studies looking for an answer. Ending my life seemed to be the best way out. There seemed to be no other answer possible. It is a violence that has within it the most subtle forms of abuse possible. What is left after a suicide is only regret by those left behind, and lament without any relief.

I believe this is where true violence, or the permission to be violent comes from; such self loathing and self hate that only by making others feel the pain someone feels, do they feel any release at all. It is all very circular and useless. As so many in our society feel so much self hate, I guess there will always be violence. Pity that it seems this is the world we have created. But there we have it. That's why the antidote to all this is love and forgiveness. Sounds kinds cheap and Pollyannaish I know, but every single world religion will tell you the same thing...the Tao; "less and less do you need to force things, until finally you arrive at non-action. When

nothing is done, nothing is left undone. True mastery can be gained by letting things go their own way. It can't be gained by interfering." Jesus: tells us to turn the other cheek. Buddha tell us: suffering caused by selfishness, greed and desire can be overcome by the right actions and meditation. Thich Nhat Hahn reminds us, whether we believe it or not, that even thinking thoughts of violence, meanness, etc, even wishing harm on someone is tantamount to the act. I think he said that because thoughts very often produce actions. Most of us don't know how much love we have in us until we are faced with the possibility of violence done to us or those we love or we could do to ourselves. There is the power of the opposites. Gandhi created a whole new world for India without firing a gun. Vaclav Havel led the velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia. And of course Martin Luther King Jr. whose birthday celebration we honored this past week. The problem comes I think in that there are not very many leaders who change the world without violence. So we have to use the same few over and over again as examples. But isn't it beautiful how they slowly, methodically and easily seem to do their task of changing the world without force.

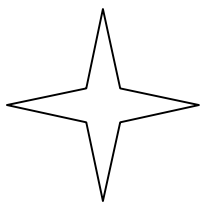
So, meanwhile back at the scenario of Annie getting in her licks to all those people who needed some attitude adjusting. Well, after the 8th day of the silent retreat a miracle happened. Laying in my now favorite spot under the trees, by the creek away from everyone, I once again closed my eyes and played out my favorite fantasy of having my say, as they are still tied to the chair and duct taped. But now it felt silly rather than forceful. I had faced some pretty scary demons in my own soul and had come out alive. So much fear had left me of how my children would survive and how I could possibly be this new person. The continual Om mani padme om was no longer grating and offensive...as I relaxed and believed for a brief moment that my life just might be ok with all the changes, I could untie each of the people and pull off the duct tape and let them go their own way. This is what love can do. It can take a confused, angry, enraged child of an alcoholic and transform them into someone who can walk through the world head held high with a purpose to live.

Without the silence I wouldn't have come to the healing. Without the traveling through what I saw as the "valley of death" I would never have known the bliss and the utter and complete freedom of simply being myself, whatever the cost.

People who are stuck in their rage will continue their violence to themselves and others. They will stick needles up their arms and pump in the drugs hoping to stop the pain and punish everyone around them for the pain they are feeling. They will rob banks and steal from homes, take sarcastic shots at the weaker people and generally make a whirlwind of mess wherever they go. This is a real and true problem in our world. Of the many kinds of love and there are many; Eros, romantic love, philios, brotherly love, theos, Godly love, the one love that must come first is self love. Probably the hardest one of all.

For all you with children this is your greatest task; teaching them to love themselves. "Yea though I walk through the shadow of the valley of death I will fear no evil for you are with me, your rod and your staff protect me." People walk through the valley of the shadow of death on their way to school and work. People live in situations that are unimaginable for their potential of bodily harm. But at least saying the words, "the ultimate weakness in our world is violence" is a start to seeing what has become so common in our world, violence may become more uncommon so it may become extinct.

A world without violence, now wouldn't that be a blessing. Many have dreamed of it. And their dreams have been fuel for each of us to also imagine such a world. And when we do imagine such a world, a space opens up in our heart and we are again reminded that we need to love us.



Some Thoughts On Rage

From Clarrisa Pinkola Estes

Unhealed anger and rage breed violence and mayhem. But as the story I told reminds us, rage can be worked with and healed. And of course as we know but may need reminding, the greatest task we have is to do the healing work on ourselves before we jump out and try to heal others.

1. Patience will help in dealing with anger.
2. Restoring order to the psyche will thereby bring healing to the anger itself
3. One must go to the areas of the psyche you may have been afraid to go to before if there is to be true and lasting healing
4. Recognize that the compassionate self is not the same as the tame self.
5. Coming back from the mountain with the new knowledge is bringing the psychological knowledge down to earth, down to your everyday life
6. Apply patience to rage and all will be well
7. The story reminds us we can use the light of rage in a positive way, it may allow us to see into places we have not before been able to see
8. The negative use of rage is to destructively concentrate rage in one tiny spot until like acid creating an ulcer it destructively burns a black hole right through all the delicate layers of the psyche
9. Allowing oneself to be taught by the rage will disperse it. Then one's energy returns to be of use in other areas, especially the area of creativity. A person creating out of rage tends to create the same thing over and over again. Untransformed rage can become a constant mantra about how oppressed, hurt, and tortured we were.
10. Our rage can for a time become our teacher, a thing not to be rid of so fast, but rather shaped into something useful in the world and then we can let it go back down to dust.

11. In the wild life, rage is not a stand-alone item. It is a substance waiting for our transformative efforts. The cycle of rage is like any other cycle; it rises, falls, dies and is released as new energy.
12. Unresolved rage is like sealing ourselves into a room full of only it, for the rest of our lives. There is a life beyond thoughtless rage. But it takes a conscious practice to contain and heal it. It truly takes only climbing through one step at a time.
13. Ask yourself; who will be your crescent moon bear, in other words who will be your healer? One must know, in order to go to that healer and receive release.
14. Our goal is make out of our rage, righteous or unrighteous, a fire that will actually cook something, rather than a fire of an inferno.
15. Four stages of forgiveness: 1. To forego: to leave it alone. 2. To forebear: to abstain from punishing. 3. To forget: to hold it from memory, to refuse to dwell there. 4. To forgive: to abandon the debt.
16. After healing you are not waiting for anything. You are not wanting anything. There is no lariat snare around your ankle stretching from way back there to here. You are free to go. It may not have turned out to be a happily ever after, but most certainly there is now a fresh Once upon a time waiting for you from this day forward.