

Holding the Light Rev Pam Rumancik 12-22-19

“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person.” These words by Albert Schweitzer speak to a deep truth of the human condition.

We need one another to remind us of the light which lives within. Anyone here every experienced this? I know I have; times when I felt sad, or alone, or despairing. Times when life felt too challenging and like it was going to smother me or push me under until I drowned.

But then, some other person, a friend, a partner, a child – an unknown stranger – offers something which changes everything; something that reveals a light that I hadn’t been able to see before.

One of those was the contemporary poet David Whyte. I was in seminary, going through therapy and surfacing all kinds of buried grief than I had ignored through the years. It was sloggy work – it was hard finding out that I acted out in sideways, passive aggressive ways when I thought I was trying to be “nice” – and those actions were the spilling over of unprocessed grief. It wasn’t pleasant to learn and it felt pretty dark.

But a friend from seminary had introduced me to a thing called Dance tribe – which is a therapeutic dancing that has nothing to do with what you look like or how much rhythm you have and everything to do with allowing your body to work out stuck emotions lodged in muscle and bone. When Erin left for her internship and sent a stack of dance music cd’s so that I could still do my own dancing while dance tribe was on hiatus – and in the midst of all them was a single disc which just said David Whyte “poetry of self-compassion”.

I put the stack in my car – cause that’s where I usually listen to music – and went on my way. I mostly just played through the music mix tapes but one day came to the mystery cd. I stuck it in the cd player – started driving – and almost immediately found myself crying. Not just a few tears – but sobbing – you know ugly crying – as the words reached deep inside and shone light on some very tender parts of my heart. Listening changed my life. It’s a series of poem and reflections that all focused on ‘self-compassion’.

You’ll remember we talked about self-compassion a few weeks back. About what it means to love ourselves as much as we love those around us. This poetry illuminated that theme. One was by Mary Oliver called “The Journey”.

*One day you finally knew what you had to do,
and began, though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice—
though the whole house began to tremble and you felt the old tug at your ankles.
"Mend my life!" each voice cried. But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do, though the wind pried with its stiff fingers at the
very foundations, ...
though their melancholy was terrible.
It was already late enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen branches and stones.*

*But little by little, as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds, and there was a new voice
which you slowly recognized as your own,
that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world,
determined to do the only thing you could do—
determined to save the only life you could save.*

So powerful; Whyte talked about why this poem was so compassionate, so full of self-love. “Mend my life!” each voice cried. But you didn’t stop.... Though their melancholy was terrible. It was already late enough and the road full of fallen branches.”

Describing how hard it is to leave a bad situation. How much energy it takes to break free of things which pull us back, again and again, into places where we are not full or free or allowed to be the people we know ourselves to be. It was a voice speaking through the ether, affirming the journey I had made so far, the work I was doing, the promise of saving the only life I could. During that time the light within me had dimmed, but the poetry of a stranger blew it back into life – lit a path that could take me deeper and deeper into the world.

Have any of you experienced something like this? Some piece of poetry or literature that spoke directly to you? But, you know, it was a human being who reached out and shared that compilation with me. She didn’t explain it or tell me how it would change my life. She simply sent it along and trusted the universe to deliver it when needed.

And I have to tell you that CD has come back to shine a light in my life over and over and over again. Each time, a different poem stands out. I’ve cried to all of them! All because Erin sent me a CD that she loved. All because another human shone their light.

Today we’re talking about holding on when the light within seems to have receded completely. Here’s an obvious confession. I usually am preaching what I need to hear. The world feels dark. I won’t list the things weighing upon me because it’s just too dismal – but I suspect there might be one or two others feeling the lack of light in the world. It reminded me of a book from the ‘90’s by Thomas Cahill titled “*How the Irish Saved Civilization*”

Cahill described the demise of the Roman empire, how it was going so slowly that those at the top didn’t even realize it was happening. He details the symptoms, writing:

“the creation of an increasingly unwieldy and rigid bureaucracy, whose own survival becomes its overriding goal;

the despising of the military and the avoidance of its service by established families, while its offices present unprecedented opportunity for marginal men to whom its ranks had once been closed;

the lip service paid to values long dead;

the pretense that we still are what we once were;

the increasing concentrations of the populace into richer and poorer by way of a corrupt tax system, and the desperation that inevitably follows;

*the aggrandizement of executive power at the expense of the legislature;
...the moral vocation of the man at the top to maintain order at all costs, while growing
blind to the cruel dilemmas of ordinary life.”ⁱ end quote.*

This was 5th century Rome – and written in 1995.

But Cahill’s ultimate story is that, through the establishment of monasteries by the Gaelic people throughout Ireland, and the monk’s love of learning, they gathered and hid much of the culture, writings, and wisdom that had been accumulated during Rome’s heyday. They kept it safe in the back-water spaces of Ireland. These monks so loved the culture and literature that they passed it down from one generation to the next, sharing it until a renewed interest arose and medieval Europe was ready to appreciate and build upon their libraries.

Now there have been critics of the book and folks who claim that it wasn’t the whole truth, but even if it holds a smidge, it’s still fascinating - illuminating. It’s a tale of people who were enthusiastic for life, holding onto that enthusiasm, that light, until it could again be shared and spread. These groups of monastics supported one another, shared their joy, kept the lights on while the rest of Europe was fighting or slogging along just trying to survive. And isn’t that what we hope for? We long to know that we aren’t in this alone.

Here’s a poem actually written by David Whyte called “Everything is Waiting for You”:

Your great mistake is to act the drama as if you were alone.

As if life were a progressive and cunning crime with no witness to the tiny hidden transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny the intimacy of your surroundings.

Surely, even you, at times, have felt the grand array; the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding out your solo voice

You must note the way the soap dish enables you, or the window latch grants you freedom. Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.

The stairs are your mentor of things to come, the doors have always been there to frighten you and invite you,

and the tiny speaker in the phone is your dream-ladder to divinity.

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation.

The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last.

All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves.

Everything is waiting for you.

Didn’t you suspect as much? Or wish or hope? Whyte advises us to put down the weight of aloneness – ease into the conversation; to claim our place. And reminds us that all the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves – and we know them to be beautiful.

So are you. Even when the road ahead seems blocked by impenetrable fog. Even when you've lost your bearings. Even when you cannot see the light shining so brightly behind gathered clouds.

We are lost and found, dark and light, hope and despair, all inside that pair of comfy sweatpants or designer jeans. Our humanity is united in the feeling that we might not be enough – and that everyone else has their life figured out. That's the grand jest and outrageous chuckle that the universe giggles behind our backs.

But luckily, some of us, at least some of the time, remember a deeper truth. The 14th century Persian poet Hafez writes:

Admit something: Everyone you see, you say to them, "Love me."

Of course you do not do this out loud, otherwise someone would call the cops.

Still, though, think about this, this great pull in us to connect.

Why not become the one who lives with a full moon in each eye that is always saying, with that sweet moon language, what every other eye in this world is dying to hear?

Six hundred years ago Hafez was saying that humans felt unloved, unseen, unconnected – even without social media to highlight our inadequacies! Why not? He asks. Why not be the one who lives with a full moon in each eye... saying what every other eye is dying to hear? Why not shine into the darkness, committing yourself to be a bringer of light – a holder of light – when darkness threatens to swallow everything?

Contemporary writer Mark Nepo uses prose more than poetry, but he also advises us to walk in light – hold the light. He writes:

We waste so much energy trying to cover up who we are when beneath every attitude is the want to be loved,

and beneath every anger is a wound to be healed

and beneath every sadness is the fear that there will not be enough time.

Our challenge each day is not to get dressed to face the world but to unglove ourselves so that the doorknob feels cold and the car handle feels wet

and the kiss goodbye feels like the lips of another being, soft and unrepeatable.

I don't know about you but I know I spend too much time paying attention to my inadequacies, hiding the darkness that feels impenetrable. I suspect that many of us waste the time we have and the beauty that is possible. But the blessing is – this is why we gather in church – on Sunday mornings or at Solstice services. Why we join committees, task forces, conversation groups; why we imagine and create and bring to fruition. Because the world is so much brighter when we remember our connections. Because alone, any one of us can succumb to the persuasive fiction of the dark. Can believe that our lives don't matter or that we don't have anything to offer.

But when we gather, someone will hold the light. Someone will remember that each and every one of us is connected through spirit and light. Someone will pull back the curtains and reveal the blazing glory that waits patiently in every heart.

Each of us takes a turn – both giving and receiving. Each of us bears the light and can offer it to an enveloping darkness. So whether you are basking in starlight or simply groping your way through – remember the light is always there - Today might be your turn to shine it on the world. Amen & blessed be.

<https://www.gracefulpassages.org/gp2/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Poetry-on-Compassion.pdf>

ⁱ (Cahill, 1995)