

*Sermon Remembering Well: a Sermon on Holding On and Letting Go*

Copyright Sarah K. Person

Delivered November 2, 2014 First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough

How many did you have for Halloween Friday night? I'm not sure, but I think we went through ten bags of candy. Throughout the evening we had loads of action heroes and princesses and our fair share of witches and walking corpses and skeletons. I remember my daughter's first Halloween. She was two and a half. She made the cutest witch, with a wide-brimmed witch's hat and a miniature broom and she sallied out into the night. She didn't want to hold my hand. We stopped first at my friend Trudy Creedon's house. Trudy, a grandmother twice over, loved dressing up for Halloween and wanted to be the first house Katie stopped. We rang the doorbell, and Trudy answered in full witchy regalia: black cloak, pointed hat, platform boots so she loomed six feet tall, skeletons dangling from her ears. Katie took one look at her, grabbed my hand in a viselike grip, and that was it for the night until next year. And the next year she sallied forth boldly and came home with so much candy her father had to carry it for her.

Why do we love Halloween? I think it helps us scorn the power of death. All Hallow's Eve lets us put on masks and scare each other, put on masks that help us master our fears. We're not two and a half years old forever. We don the skeleton mask and take it off as if to say – yeah, yeah, this is what I really could look like in a hundred years, so what? Boo!

All Hallows Eve and All Saints Day and All Souls Day remind us that death is part of life; in us and around us always. They are the ritual embodiment of Forrest Church's maxim: "Religion is the human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." For thousands of years, humans have set aside times to commemorate the dead. I want to stretch the meaning of this time for us. How do we learn and change from remembering and honoring and praying for the dead? Because my maxim is that being human is learning and being transformed by what we learn. How do we come to terms with our ghosts and monsters?

How do we keep scorning the power of death to freeze us and frighten us and make us want more than anything to be safe? Because we carry a little of that inside of us all the time, don't we; that numbness and fear and yearning to be safe. Forrester Church called it living in his tomb and practicing death. "...refusing to risk the sting of victory, not of death but of life. I'm talking about hiding, protecting myself, relying on pattern, routine, and habit, about not feeling deeply enough for pain to sink in and joy to break through." (Forrest Church, "Lifecraft", p.60) Is there a little bit of that tendency in you? I know there is in me. We are encased in these water-logged shells, absorbing everything through our senses and interpreting everything with our minds and memories and sometimes it's just too much.

It's times like that when I yearn for an island where I can protect myself from the wild winds and the confusion of life and living. There are some traditions that suggest we can get closer to our spiritual selves that way; can get closer to something that is ultimate and infinite and all that we were ever meant to be. Not a tomb, they tell us, but a narrow path in the light. A simple life will lead to simple and profound peace. Maybe I will want peace more than anything else, some day.

But for now, I suggest that we embrace all the messiness of our living and choose to let some things go, let go of those "false sources of security" in another work by Forrest Church, those false illusions that keep us in the tomb of our own making. "...we must first let go of things that will not save us. Then we must reach out for things that can." (Forrest Church, "Life Lines" p. xv.) At the same moment that we

choose to let some things go, we can look for lifelines that sustain us – and those lifelines are in the hands of others. “Unless we reach out to and for others, seeking meaning not in our own suffering but in the shared experience of the human condition, our lifelines will not hold.” (Ibid) It is in that choosing, in that letting go and grabbing hold, that we get a glimpse of that which is ultimate and infinite and all that we were ever meant to be. And because we are human and mortal, sometimes the hand we reach for is long in our past. I can assure you, it is still waiting for you – in your interior creative spirit.

We cannot do this alone, but getting ready for it is all our own. Harry Emerson Fosdick once said: ‘Nobody ever finds life worth living. One always has to make it worth living. All the people to whom life has been abundantly worth living have made it so by an interior creative, spiritual contribution of their own. Is life worth living? Most people seem to think that is a question about the cosmos. No, my friend, that is a question about the inside attitude of you and me.’” ( “Harsh Winter Winds” A Sermon preached on December 5, 2010 By the Reverend Carol Rosine The First Universalist Society in Franklin, MA) It is that inside attitude that prepares us, allows us to recognize those moments of our choosing. We have to remember the things that will save us, and forget the things that will not. We have to remember well.

The title of this sermon is in honor of one of the best resources in my toolkit, a book by the same name by Sarah York. She taught me one of the most valuable lessons of my young ministry; that grief unspoken leads to a heart that never heals. All those I have known and cared for have taught me something more; that there is something in all of us that stills the voice – the voice whose cries and shouts might heal our hearts. There’s something in all of us that doesn’t want to heal; or perhaps doesn’t want to *have* to be healed.

Today, let’s speak the things we’ve left unspoken – as a way of honoring the dead we carry around inside our hearts, as a way of exposing our grief to sound and light. I’ve been thinking about everything I’ve learned over the years. What keeps us in our tombs? Yes, it’s a fear of risk, but it’s really about loss. Oh, it comes in many guises. But underneath it all, it’s about loss; the loss of life, or love, or intimacy, or youth, or trust, or certainty, or faith itself. It’s about losing our dreams of what might have been if only. It’s about wanting to be made whole, but not wanting to know we are not.

Today, I ask you to look at your life right now and ask yourself if you are whole. And if you are not, I ask you to think about the things that bind you; these things of fear, these things of grief.

Today, I ask you to look at your life as it was and ask yourself what sustained you. Where did your courage and resilience come from? What will let you sally forth to conquer your fears and make life worth living? What lifeline will you grab hold of? Whose hand was ready to reach out to yours? Whose hand is ready now?

Today, I ask that we let ourselves be transformed by healing, and to remember that, no matter what our circumstances – we are and will be in the end, cherished.

Today,  
we are reminded of our frailties.  
We are reminded we  
carry our tomb with us.

Our stories,  
are stories of faithlessness, betrayal,  
fear, abandonment.  
These things enslave us.

Now we come here grieving  
what might have been  
had we stopped to listen,  
had we not been in such a hurry,  
had we not been so preoccupied with the mechanics of life,  
had we not been so frustrated,  
so frail, so willing to believe the worst –  
had we not been so human.

Today,  
we are reminded of our strengths.  
Our stories are also stories of survival,  
of courage in the face of death,  
of faith out of grief,  
of hope out of faith.  
We accept that we do not know what will happen tomorrow  
or in the days to come,  
and we can treasure one another's presence  
and we can nurture one another's souls.

We commemorate the unity of our humanity; our strength and frailty,  
our love and our fear, our life and our death.

We commemorate the grief of separation.  
We miss those who have left us behind,  
those who have left us apart,  
and whose lives and memories  
have shaped our own.

We commemorate our commitment  
to be shaped and to be transformed no matter how old or how young we are.  
There are promises we make to another, and promises we make to ourselves.  
We promise to leave behind us a legacy of healing and renewal and finally celebration.  
We anticipate the coming of winter, the coming of spring, the death of the blossom and the sprouting of  
the seed.  
We anticipate the serenity of reconciliation.  
Love is the seed of our winter selves.  
Love is beyond death and winter, we tell one another  
and together, we make it so.