

Sermon The Dividing Line for website

Sermon

For my first few years as a librarian
in a state psychiatric hospital,
I would load up a book cart and go up to the wards,
never quite knowing what would greet me
when the elevator opened.
On a day I witnessed
a patient violently lose it in the day room,
two burly young attendants
pinned him to the wall
with a mattress held lengthwise across his body
from his chest to his ankles.
All the while they spoke quietly to him,
until they lifted the mattress away
and he fell to his knees and wept.
I learned that if anything happened,
it happened quickly and, if handled right,
ended quickly and with no regrets on either side.
And I learned the real meaning of compassion
from these two young men
who had all the power in the world and didn't use it.
A day they didn't have to hurt someone was a good day.

Where did they learn this?
They were both big and tough.
One had grown up running the streets
and had a certain skill at liberating cars.
They handled themselves with matter-of-fact humor
and their patients with casual respect.
Where did they learn not to cross a line into abuse?
Where did they learn
to respect people who had lost it all?
Neither one was what I'd call a bleeding heart,
but they knew their charges,
and, more importantly, they knew their stories.

They knew the woman
whose undiagnosed deafness
led her to be raised
at a state school for the developmentally disabled
until she went crazy.

They knew the brilliant boy
who developed schizophrenia in his late teens.
They knew the daughter of the police chief
who lost everyone,
literally everyone she knew and loved
in the great flu epidemic and just gave up on life.
They knew the addicts whose bodies and brains
were irrevocably scarred.

They knew the ones who were
fighting back to sanity and a normal life,
and the ones who just wanted
to make life bearable within the hospital borders.
They knew their stories.

I've been thinking about those two
while listening to the news
from a bridge in Boston,
from Bridgewater State Hospital,
from Ferguson, from New York, Cleveland, Milwaukee,
from a senate intelligence report
on enhanced interrogation techniques.
The media storm says that
the very people we trust
to keep our communities and our country safe
crossed a dividing line of right and wrong. It says that if push literally came to shove
that we would not be safe from them.
It says that they don't feel safe from us.
It says when we look across
our metaphorical dividing lines of right and wrong,
we see monsters.
And if we cross that line,
in the heat and chaos of the moment
or with cold and calculated purpose,
we have become monsters ourselves.

At a very elemental level,
this is our fear at work.
This is our grief at work.
This is our anger at work.
Our fear is that we won't be safe.
Our grief and our anger is that
we are no longer safe because of something
or someone beyond our control.

I use the pronoun “our”
because I believe that
we and those in authority can be in the same place,
in that place of fear and grief and anger,
in those critical moments;
those critical moments when
we are fighting to gain control
of a situation suddenly out of control.
One side wants rights, the other wants order.
Both want the power to create order in the chaos.

Where is the line
between keeping the peace and committing violence?
We want there to be a line.
There’s a line from a song by Vienna Teng,
“we will find a black and white in the gray” (*soon love soon*).
I live in the gray, where it’s hard enough to see ahead.
I want a black and white line in the gray.
I don’t want the forces I depend upon
to be on the other side of that line.
It’s as simple as that.

Our institutions arise out of
our humanity and serve our humanity
and can swing off course because of our humanity.
We are the only ones who can bring our institutions back.
Each one of us carries a sense of morality like a compass.
Our moral compass is a natural feeling that makes us know what is right and wrong and how
we should behave.
It goes beyond religion, beyond law, beyond social etiquette.

Morality goes deep into the essence of our rational existence.
It is grounded in reason and human experience.
It defines for us how we are to live together.
But I believe that our moral compass needs more than reason and experience,
our morality is dependent upon one thing; empathy.
It’s the empathy that gets lost when we see the ones on the other side of our dividing line as
monsters.

Empathy is our capacity to understand the emotions of others
and relate to them.
Empathy does not prevent us from holding someone else accountable if we have that power,
it simply means we understand someone else’s story and can relate to it.

In practice, it means that the feelings we have when we disagree with one another are much more tolerable if we feel that we're being heard and treated fairly.

All of this is well and good when our disagreements are manageable.

But what about when our emotions are high?

What about when it becomes a loud issue that involves danger and sirens and flashing lights and strangers?

How can someone in power maintain empathy with us, understand us, when we are afraid or outraged?

How can we do the same?

Our failures make headlines.

Success takes care, it takes training, it takes trust.

The line between right and wrong requires a constant commitment to keep it so.

The line between right and wrong requires that we know and relate to the stories behind every encounter.

In Somerville, and in cities around the country, there are efforts to re-instill empathy in police academies.

Somerville is educating crisis intervention teams of young officers who are taught how to recognize mental illness, and use their knowledge to de-escalate situations.

Other cities are preparing officers to be guardians of their communities, rather than warriors with military training.

They are reminded everyone has a story, no one is faceless.

The police chief of such a city has been recruited by the Department of Justice to go to Ferguson to review civil rights charges.

Where is the lesson for us?

We are not actors on the national stage, but we can bear witness, and we can reflect our witness in the way we carry out our lives.

The lesson is three-fold:

First, we must commit ourselves to always testing our moral compass with our capacity for empathy.

To do so we have to open ourselves always to the possibility of being hurt.

Our hearts must be open as wide as possible in our dealings with each other, and we need to accept our own fear.

Second, we must recognize the power we have and how we reveal it to ourselves and others. We have power in who we are, in what we are, and in what we do.

It has nothing to do with force.

Our very appearance can engender fear and grief and anger in someone else and we need to understand that – no matter how hard it is to believe.

Third, and most important, we have to recognize that we cede moral authority to our institutions, and yet we must hold them accountable for their lines between right and wrong.

This is a constant process of negotiation and correction and requires as much diligence toward them as we offer ourselves.

I go back time and time again to our principles and practices
of inherent worth, of dignity, of responsibility and our assumption of power.
What they come down to is: a day no one has to get hurt is a good day.

May it always be so.

Bon Jour, Bon Mois, Bon An (Middle French) translated by Dan Hotchkiss

Bon jour, bon mois, bon an	Good day, good month, good year
Et vous doint esperance certaine	And may he give you certain hope
Sans tristesse, sans pensee villaine;	Without sadness, without ugly thoughts;
Tous voz desirs acomplir de cueur fin.	All your desires be achieved of keen heart.