

## **On Being a Guest House**

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, September 17, 2017

### ***Meditation and Prayer***

“Feel Tension and Welcome It”

- a body meditation by Arjuna Ardaugh

Scan your body with awareness.  
Seek out a place of tension or discomfort,  
And rest there with your attention.  
Feel this place exactly as it is.  
Feel it, be with it, just as it is.  
Feel it not so that it will go away,  
But with an invitation that it may stay forever.  
Kiss the tension with the softness of awareness.  
Bring the breath all the way into this place,  
As though you are pouring water into a dry sponge.  
Wait, linger, until the flower opens,  
Until your awareness is completely there.  
Move on to another place of tension,  
And then another.  
Discover the lotus growing in the mud.

### ***Reading***

“Lead” - by Mary Oliver

Here is a story  
to break your heart.  
Are you willing?  
This winter  
the loons came to our harbor  
and died, one by one,  
of nothing we could see.  
A friend told me  
of one on the shore  
that lifted its head and opened  
the elegant beak and cried out  
in the long, sweet savoring of its life  
which, if you have heard it,  
you know is a sacred thing,  
and for which, if you have not heard it,

you had better hurry to where  
they still sing.  
And, believe me, tell no one  
just where that is.  
The next morning  
this loon, speckled  
and iridescent and with a plan  
to fly home  
to some hidden lake,  
was dead on the shore.  
I tell you this  
to break your heart,  
by which I mean only  
that it break open and never close again  
to the rest of the world.

### ***Sermon Reflection***

What does it mean to be a people of welcome? That is the thematic question, the organizing inquiry for our worship services during the month of September. Each week we do our best to shine a light on a different aspect of what that question means to us as a religious community and how we both individually and together are called to answer it. Those of you who have been around here for a while are familiar with the term *radical hospitality* – that’s what we’re talking about. The kind of welcome and hospitality that goes beyond the social niceties and reaches for a deeper sense of acceptance and understanding; a sense of welcome that challenges us and invites us to step out of our zones of comfort, to encounter more deeply ourselves, one another and the stranger. The welcome exemplified by a radical hospitality is nothing less than a spiritual practice that goes to the very heart – in fact, is a foundational root - of who we are as a people of faith. So, this is no small thing we’re talking about here.

This morning I would like to focus in on the **inner work of radical hospitality** that is quite brilliantly illustrated in the Sufi mystic and poet Rumi’s poem “Guest House.” If we have learned anything from our life together in religious community as well as from the wisdom teachings across traditions, it is that any reparative work we seek to do in this world, any and all efforts we strive to make toward the building of Beloved Community in this time and place **must begin within ourselves**...along the lines of the old saying about the necessity of first getting your own house in order...

Many of you are familiar with this poem by Rumi, at least a good portion of it, because I often use it as an introduction to our ritual sharing of joys and sorrows each Sunday morning, but I rarely recite the poem in its entirety. Hear now the whole of it:

“Guest House”

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes

As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent

as a guide from beyond.

~ Jalaluddin Rumi

I first learned this poem by heart back in 2011 – it was the third poem I learned that year as part of what was then a new spiritual practice for me. I started using the first half of the poem in our joys and sorrows ritual that same year – and that is when I learned that not everyone shared my affection for this particular poem. **The criticism of its use**, the negative response to the poem was difficult for me to grasp at first. What's not to like here? Once I got over my initial shock and defensiveness, and really listened to what was being said, I better understood...and my resolve deepened as to the poem's usefulness. The controversy that erupted within the worship team over the use of this poem was a bit of a watershed moment for me in my ministry because I didn't back down in the face of the criticism. I was able to stand within the storm of struggle over it and find my voice.

But that story is for another time. I only raise that long-ago criticism because it highlights a misunderstanding of **Rumi's extended metaphor of this being human as a guest house**. I imagine you may be able to guess where the struggle lies, where the resistance to these words raises its hackles. It's one thing to welcome a joy, a new awareness, but depression, meanness, shame, and the "crowd of sorrows" clearing our house of all its furniture? Seriously? Treat them honorably, entertain them, meet them at the door laughing? And then he goes so far as to suggest we "be grateful" for whoever comes, that whatever emotion comes through the door of our house may be a guide to us.

The point is, if we don't take the time as the wise poet suggests to welcome whatever difficult feeling comes our way, if we refuse to entertain – and here it is entertaining in the sense of spending time with, getting to know – we risk closing ourselves off to the full experience of "this being human." It is, of course, the most difficult guests that require the most of us, that present the most challenge, who go by myriad names, but are best known as fear, anger, and grief.

If we are unwilling to extend this welcome within our own beings, how well are we prepared to truly welcome others?

In her poem, "Lead," that I shared earlier, **Mary Oliver echoes Rumi by inviting us into heartbreak** — not because she wants us to wallow in suffering, but to help us become more open and responsive to a suffering world.

Parker Palmer reflects that:

Heartbreak is an inevitable and painful part of life. **But there are at least two ways for the heart to break:** it can break open into new life, or break apart into shards of sharper and more widespread pain.

A brittle heart will explode into a thousand pieces, and sometimes get thrown like a fragment grenade at the perceived source of its pain — there's a lot of that going around these days. But a supple heart will break open into a greater capacity to hold life's suffering and its joy — in a way that allows us to say, "The pain stops here."

The broken-open heart is not restricted to the rare saint. I know so many people whose hearts have been broken by the loss of someone they loved deeply. They go through long nights of grief when life seems barely worth living. But then they slowly awaken to the fact that their hearts have become more open, compassionate, and welcoming — **not in spite of their pain but because of it.**

– Parker Palmer <https://onbeing.org/blog/an-invitation-to-heartbreak-and-the-call-of-the-loon/>

So, here's a question to leave you with - What can I do day-by-day to make my heart more supple?

Of the multiple possible responses to that question, I'd like to highlight two. The first is to embrace a reframing of what heartbreak means, to refuse the belief in the brittle shattering of a heart in response to pain and suffering and replace it with a trust in the process of life – and the inevitability of pain - as a means to make our heart more supple and responsive. One of the best ways I know to practice this trust is a willingness to take risks, both emotionally and relationally.

The first leads naturally into my second response – to remember that the metaphor of "this being human is a guest house" and any help it might provide us breaks down when we refuse to welcome and address our "guests." The unwelcomed, not listened to, the unrecognized linger longer rather than leave, as is the normal process of a guest house – visitors come and go. The hospitality withheld leaves our guests wanting, hungry, and alone. The welcome withheld creates a desperation and an inability to move on. The guest house can all too easily become a prison.