

INTEGRITY IS EVERYTHING
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
May 3, 2015

OPENING WORDS #498 ~ Howard Thurman

In the quietness of this place, surrounded by the all-pervading presence of the Holy, my heart whispers:

Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve, that in good times or in tempests,

I may not forget that to which my life is committed.

Keep fresh before me the moments of my high resolve.

Come let us look to what it is that is fresh before us this morning

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Is There Really a Human Race?* ~ Jamie Lee Curtis

A child asks about what is most important in life through the question of whether or not we are competing in a race...and if there is a human race, what's it about?

READING *Panic¹ (abridged)* ~ Edward Friedman

There was a row of dominoes standing equidistant in a long, narrow line that circled back into itself. Since the distance between them was shorter by half than their length, all knew that if ever one lost its balance, all would have trouble keeping theirs.

Now and then, something happened that made them shake, but no force that touched them ever went beyond each other's ability to rebalance, and the dreaded chain reaction never began.

But one day it happened. It was number 10101. Number 10101 teetered, shook, pivoted on its corner, righted itself, and then fell flat against its neighbor.

Its neighbor, 10100, was taken so unawares that it immediately fell against its neighbor, and that sequence repeated itself at least several hundred times before all the dominoes recognized the malignant state of their condition. As the process continued, some gave in without a fight. Others pretended it wasn't happening.

As the wave persistently moved on, each domino mobilized all its energy to hold up or push back its falling neighbor. But the continuing felling force was just too much for each domino's own weight and size. To hold one neighbor up would have been difficult enough, but to fight the accumulating movement was out of the question. It was becoming increasingly hopeless to think that anything could arrest the course of these events before they reached their natural termination, when, suddenly, things stopped.

Indeed, they stopped with such resounding force and suddenness that the cumulative energy created a backlash. A ricochet reversed the process, and the dominoes began to go in the other direction, straightening up again, only to fall the other way. This continued at the same rate as in the previous direction, past the starting point, running right through the original 10101, and mowing down the remainder of those previously untouched, until the last one fell against the other side of the domino that had not gone

¹ Friedman's Fables by Edwin H. Friedman (The Guilford Press, 1990), pp.175-178

down. Again the process abruptly reversed itself, now in the original direction. But, somewhat spent, the energy being expended was just enough to push each, in succession, into an upright position without bowling it over, and before any of the dominoes had time to consider what had happened, all were basically standing once again erect, quivering here and there, but basically stable.

Eventually all began to focus on the point where things had turned. What had happened? Which one had stopped the pernicious process and how? At that spot, all that could be seen was a domino no different in size, or shape, or weight, or color, or density, or any other visible characteristic. The entire line was agog; slowly each began to realize what it owed to this one member of their community.

“But how did you do it?” they all wanted to know. “How did you calculate the proper measure? What did you see that we didn’t?” the others all asked.

“I’m not sure what the difference was,” said the domino that had not dominoed. “All I can say is that while each of you kept trying to hold your neighbor up, my concern was that I did not go down.”

MESSAGE

Dominoes. Peer pressure. Internal conflict. Wobbling between choices. I can remember as a teen, begging my dad to do things that I knew he didn’t approve of...whether it be wearing certain outfits, or going to certain movies, or dances.... “But Dad. Everyone is doing it!” His response...can you hear it...“And, if everyone were jumping off a cliff, would you want to do that too?” Then came my quieter, unspoken response, coming from deep within. “Well maybe I would. Just maybe I would. Especially if there were a clear deep pond below the cliff....”

My father’s response was, I’m sure, grounded in a Bible story...found in Luke 8²...about when Jesus met a demon-possessed man. Jesus commanded the impure spirit to come out, but the demons, who were legion, begged Jesus not to order them to go into the Abyss. The story continues:

Now there was a herd of many swine feeding there on the mountain; and the demons implored Him to permit them to enter the swine. And He gave them permission. And the demons came out of the man and entered the swine; and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

And to make a long story short, the man was cured. If one can disregard the death of a lot of pigs, not easy to do, then, one lesson from this story is that when we are not in alignment with what is ‘right’ or ‘good’ or ‘true’, we are swayed by the action of the masses, and are likely to be run into the sea. The devil made me do it.

Integrity. By one definition it is the quality of being honest, having strong moral principles, and sticking to those principles. Integrity is listening to a voice other than the voice of the crowd, which is not to say you might not find it right to join the crowd after discerning its rightness for you. Integrity is finding that center, still point which poet Stanley Kunitz calls

² Luke 8: 26-39

'that principle of being from which I struggle not to stray.'³ Integrity is living in accordance with who you say you are. And integrity as a community is living and modeling who we say we are.

By another definition, integrity is the state of being whole and undivided. These two definitions are not unrelated...our principles, our consciences, are parts of the whole that is us. This morning we're focusing on the first definition; next week, we'll explore that second definition...integrity as wholeness.

Integrity. Our UU principles state the value of integrity in a couple of ways. First, we affirm and promote the individual search for truth and meaning. Rev. Fred Campbell says in his book *Religious Integrity for Everyone*: "A person has integrity when his or her words communicate congruence with personal experience." By my lights, it's not only our words, but also our deeds, that need to communicate that congruence. So, in order to have integrity, we have to be continually engaged in a search for truth and meaning which aims to make sense of our experience, and to provide critical guidance about how to speak and how to act.

Second, our principles call for the right of conscience, which is to affirm that we each have the right to make choices, to act, to live, according to the voice of our own conscience. Our own conscience. I fear that many of us, myself included, recoil a bit at the mention of integrity, because it comes pre-loaded with associations that are uncomfortable...expectations, shoulds, commandments, the one voice of truth and right...associations that lead to guilt and shame...diseases from which we are constantly trying to inoculate ourselves. This is important. Our principles state the right of conscience...your conscience, my conscience, the consciences of each person. Integrity, rather than being owned by some outside judge or power, is about you and me listening to our own voice, our own north star, our own inner wisdom.

This is hard to explain or to grasp, but I think we all know what it means. Imagine a time when you've felt like one of those wobbling dominoes. Shaky. Worried about, and feeling the pressure of actions that others are taking. You know...I believe that you KNOW...the sound of your own voice, your own conscience. That is the voice, your own, that will show you the way to integrity.

Granted it is sometimes very difficult to hear that voice. There is a lot of static and clutter. We have all had experiences and persons of influence in our lives that crowd our inner landscape. An actor friend of mine calls this his personal audience. They might be booing, they might be applauding, they might be silently watching...but whatever their reaction or input, the audience is NOT your true voice. They might have good advice, they might be saying something that resonates with you, they might be shouting 'shoulds' at you...whatever you hear from them, remember that their voices are NOT your true voice.

This is the work of integrity. To hear your own voice, to get to know it so well that you easily recognize it as your own, and then to respond in words and deed in ways that are true to that voice.

³ The Layers

I want to offer some gratitude to Sheena for her flexibility, and her patience. I had chosen several possible readings for today, and I was waiting for the one to rise to the surface, to make itself known as the one best suited for this morning ...the one that had the most integrity with the theme of this service. But their voices were competing. It's not that any of them were bad or wrong, but I was unsure.

I thought that one reading would be best, yet was unsure of which that was, and also wondered which would contain the message you want or need to hear today. It simply wasn't clear.

My original choice, the one listed in the order of service, comes from a business perspective⁴. Its author, Amy Rees Anderson, made the point that if you don't have integrity...integrity that is evident in the way you relate to and treat clients...you will fail. No business can succeed, she insists, if your customers cannot trust you and then gladly refer you to others. It was a fine choice, but I wasn't completely comfortable with it. I didn't particularly like that integrity was something she advocated for as a means to a successful ends. True, and perhaps a good message, but not right for me, today.

Another choice, discovered during my week of research, I heard in a sermon titled *The Creative Encounter: Integrity* by Howard Thurman, recorded in 1958.⁵ I transcribed the story, called "The First Robin," which Thurman read with such style that I was completely drawn in. It is told as a local news story, where the first sign of spring, in below zero temperatures, is a dead robin in the town's commons. Its author, who Thurman did not identify, imagined how that robin started off on his journey well before any reasonable robin weather might be expected. He took off on his journey against the advice of all the other robins, who were basking in the southern sun. "I wouldn't be surprised to hear," opines the author, "that the first minute of flight is rewarding enough, no matter what follows. And so in a metaphorical way of speaking, I bare my head and bow low in the general direction of the ice-covered plane that is known as Penn Commons, and I think the grief address should carry the statement: 'You are the first and after you will come others. They will inherit the grubs and the nests and the comforts. But yours is the glow. You are the first robin.'"

Pardon another quote, but I can't say this as well as Thurman did:

"Now it is simple to say that in the kind of life that you live, and that I live, that we are never confronted with a destiny dealing moment, in which we ourselves may have the live option of acting as the pioneer or as the hero. But let us not comfort ourselves with delusion.

Wherever in the living of your life you are brought face to face with the kind of experience that pulls back the curtain and gives to you the long look with all of its implications for your little life...whenever you find that with all of your being you give your assent to something which seems to you to be right and true, in that moment...the barrier that stands between you and a wider meaning for your little life is removed, and the affinity that there is between that which is deepest in you and that which is deepest in life becomes articulate."

⁴ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/amyanderson/2012/11/28/success-will-come-and-go-but-integrity-is-forever/print/>

⁵ <http://hgar-srv3.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room/detail?id=340644>

The First Robin certainly was a close second to the story of the dominoes which Sheena shared, as thinking on it, I began to imagine the debate among the robins before the 'first robin' took flight as something similar to that debate or 'wobble' that happens within us when we are trying to find our integrity. But what swayed me away from using story was the same thing that Thurman seems to struggle with...that in associating the fight for our integrity with a 'destiny dealing moment'...one that might even lead to death...we would come to see that this struggle is not one that we, in our little lives, face all that often, if ever. This is a message needed for some at some time, and maybe even one that holds meaning for you today, but it's not right for me.

The third reading I considered for today is one included in the monthly theme packet which was sent to your email inboxes last night...copies are also available in the brochure rack. It is a short transcription of a personal story shared on National Public Radio's program, *This I Believe*⁶. Its author, Bob Barret, tells of participating in an exercise in which he was asked to put sixteen of his personal values on note cards, and then to imagine surrendering them, one at a time, as circumstances in approaching the end of life required. This is what he shared: "At the end [of the exercise] I had two cards: One read "Integrity" and the other read "My Family." How could I choose between these two; such a choice was unfair and impossible. My initial thought was that I would give up my integrity, because I love my daughters and would want their comfort at my death. But then, I realized that dying without integrity might be worse."

Barret doesn't really say what integrity means to him...only that in the end it means everything. He would surrender everything else before he would surrender his integrity. This man's story resonates with many of the inspirational quotes contained in our theme packet...really all of which make integrity out to be a really big deal...critically important...a hinge on which all other values hang. His story was the inspiration for the title of today's message... "Integrity is Everything."

So, why did I choose Friedman's fable about dominoes? It was because of its complexity. There are several things in that fable that I find important...and none of them can really stand alone.

First, it explains how we exist in relationship, always, showing that like the dominoes, we are powerfully influenced by all that's around us, as well as having the power to influence others.

Second, when the dominoes fall, they fall hard and fast. When the dominoes fall, it becomes really difficult for any one domino to hold its position. When the crowd, when the predominant culture, when 'everybody else' is heading in one direction, it takes integrity to stand firm, or even more, perhaps, to go in a different direction.

For another thing, the domino that stood its ground was a domino just like the others. There was no difference in its size or weight, nor did it contain a unique stamping of dots. It was just an ordinary domino. Nothing special.

But, the one thing that was different about that one domino is that it listened for its own voice first. It made the choice to put all of its attention on staying true and upright without regard to

⁶ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16832392>

what was happening around it. Friedman names the moral of this fable as, “put your own oxygen mask on before helping others.”

Your own oxygen mask. Your own ability to breathe. Your own basic sustenance. Find it first. Find it principally. Find it or you cannot live true to yourself. Integrity is both a very simple, and a very complex, value to live.

I offer you a last bit of wisdom. A colleague, in a sermon on ‘resolve’⁷, suggests that beyond knowing what is true, beyond acting in accordance with that truth, it is essential, especially when going against the status quo, to openly state that you are acting on your understanding of right and wrong. Make it clear that you are making principled decisions. Claim your integrity. Doing so will make it easier.

It is fitting, as the city of Baltimore burns in righteous anger, to close with these words of Martin Luther King Jr:

“On some questions, Cowardice asks the question, “Is it safe?” Expediency asks the question, “Is it polite?” And Vanity comes along and asks the question, “Is it popular?” But Conscience asks the question, “Is it right?” And there comes a time when we must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but we must do it because Conscience tells us it is right.”

Your conscience. My conscience. May we listen and know its voice.

Amen.

RESPONSIVE READING

#521 ~ Eusebius

May I be no one's enemy and may I be the friend of that which is eternal and abides.

__May I wish for every person's happiness and envy none.

May I never rejoice in the ill fortune of one who has wronged me.

__May I, to the extent of my power, give needful help to all who are in want.

May I never fail a friend.

__May I respect myself.

May I always keep tame that which rages within me.

__May I accustom myself to be gentle and never be angry with others because of circumstances.

May I know good people and follow in their footsteps.

CLOSING WORDS

That Which is Worthy of Doing ~Steve J. Crump

That which is worthy of doing, create with your hands.

That which is worthy of repeating, speak with a clear voice.

That which is worthy of remembering, hold in your hearts.

And that which is worthy of living, go and live it now.

Go trusting that you know what is worthy of your living. Go trusting a star to guide you. Go in peace.

⁷ <http://carbondaleuf.org/sermons/resolve/>