

EMERGING VOICE: INSPIRED BY "NANETTE"

THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH

REV. JULIE STONEBERG

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OPENING WORDS

~ *Angela Herrera*

Don't leave your broken heart at the door: Bring it to the altar of life.

Don't leave your anger behind; It has high standards, and the world needs vision.

Bring them with you, and your joy and your passion.

Bring your loving, and your courage, and your conviction.

Bring your need for healing and your powers to heal.

There is work to do; And all that we need to do it is here.

So let us come in and then reach beyond the walls of this [community.]

Let us fill this sanctuary with love and then harness its power to stop oppression.

Let us join together in worship and together let us [answer the call] of love.

STORY FOR ALL *Red, A Crayon's Story* ~ *Michael Hall*

(Red, a young crayon, can only colour blue, but everyone keeps trying to make him be red, until a berry-coloured crayon encourages him to draw an ocean.)

READING "*That Ecstatic Parade*" (abridged), from *Tiny Beautiful Things* ~ *Cheryl Strayed*¹

Dear Sugar,

I'm a twenty-one-year-old guy. I'm in college right now. Though I work full-time to pay for some of my bills, I'm still dependent on my parents for room and board. I also use their car. I have no problem with living with my parents - at least I wouldn't if I wasn't gay. My parents ... believe that being a homosexual is a "sin" that someone struggles with similar to alcoholism or drug addiction and that gays should repent...

When I was seventeen, my mom threatened to kick me out of the house because she didn't want "my diseased behaviour under her roof." In order to stay at my parents' house I had to go to [] counseling to undo my gay-ness. I went but it did absolutely nothing for me. It only confused me more....

Though I act straight around my parents and sister, I am out to friends and co-workers and also to my brother (who accepts me unconditionally.) ...

I would move out, but I can't find any available rooms within my budget... I don't want to run away from my problems...but right now I feel like I'm stuck... I feel suffocated by the expectations of those on both sides of my double life. One

¹ Strayed, Cheryl, *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar* (Vintage Books: New York, 2012) pp. 31-36

side would damn me to hell if they found out I was gay. The other side wants me to cut myself off from my family.

Is there any advice you could offer that could help?

(Signed) Suffocated

(During the following meditation, all were invited to consider how best to respond to Suffocated)

READING UFP's WELCOMING CONGREGATION RESOLUTION

Resolution of the Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough, April 2008

WE DO HEREBY RESOLVE TO:

- Be inclusive and expressive of the concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, and
 - Nurture ongoing dialogue among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and heterosexual persons and to create deeper trust and sharing, and
 - Celebrate the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and all people and our diverse ways of expressing love for each other, and
 - Advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons and to promote justice, freedom, and equality in the larger society,
- AND THEREFORE DECLARE OUR INTENTION TO BE KNOWN AS A WELCOMING CONGREGATION.

MESSAGE *Emerging Voice: Inspired by "Nanette"*

First of all, I owe you a trigger warning. Some content in today's message may be difficult to hear; please take care of yourself and exit the room if necessary (the library down this hall may be a calming place for you to sit) and know that I'll be available after the service to talk. That said...

How many of you have seen 'Nanette?' I forgot to give you that 'homework' last Sunday, although I did post a suggestion on our FB page that you try to see it before today.

While it contains a few 'off-stage' moments, it is essentially a live performance delivered by Hannah Gadsby, a lesbian comedienne who grew up in Tasmania. It is rich with self-disclosure, challenge, anger, pain, hope. There have been many reviews of it, and lively discussion about it on social media, both raves and pans...some which dismiss the content by pointing to her technical misunderstanding of what comedy is... some which praise Gadsby for her courage and her heart. As with the many #metoo disclosures, her voice is not heard by those who choose not to hear it.

I want us to hear her.

I cannot do justice to her performance, but humbly offer a brief synopsis of it for those

who haven't seen it.

She begins in typical comic fashion...telling stories of growing up in Tasmania where homosexuality was a crime until 1997. She pokes fun at the culture and herself, although her telling is laced with unexpressed pain.

Gadsby goes on to offer a critique of comedy, saying that it has been, for her, a way to get permission to talk and to tell her story, but only by being self-deprecating. And, she concludes, to do so is not humour, but rather is internalized homophobia...self-humiliation, really.

She also says that comedy as a genre doesn't allow one to tell the whole or the true story, because in order for it to be funny and retain the tension that comedy demands, it's impossible to resolve the story. This forces one to live with, and focus on, a story without an ending. Often that means that one remains stuck in the traumatic moment, and the trauma happens over and over again.

And so now she tells her story true. Rather than telling of how a guy once assumed she was a male hitting on his girlfriend, and of how when he realized his mistake, he skulked away a bit embarrassed and not also getting that she could be hitting on his girlfriend...which is the story she used to tell...she now tells of how, when he figured that out, he came back and beat her up, to the point of requiring hospitalization. Rather than laughing about how she was misunderstood growing up, she now tells of how she was raped, multiple times, by those who couldn't accept her difference.

You see, she says, we can only learn from the real, whole story.

And that brings me back to Dear Sugar, and the letter from Suffocated, who felt he was not able to live fully as his authentic self, or tell his whole story. Here is just a bit of what "Dear Sugar" offered in reply:

Dear Suffocated,

Yes. There is something I can offer that will help. I can tell you to get yourself out of that house. You mustn't live with people who wish to annihilate you.

Even if you love them. Even if they are your mom and dad....

I'm sorry [your parents] have made you suffer so, sweet pea. There is nothing correct about their ideas regarding homosexuality. We are all entitled to our opinions and religious beliefs, but we are not entitled to make shit up and then use the shit we made up to oppress other people. And by choosing to pretend you're straight in order to placate them, you're also doing it to yourself.

...You write that you feel "suffocated by the expectations of those on both sides," but there are not two sides. There is only one and you're it. The real you.

Be him.

...This doesn't mean you have to break all ties with [your family.] There is a middle path, but it goes in one direction: toward the light. Your light. The one that goes blink, blink, blink inside your chest when you know what you're doing is right. Listen to it. Trust it. Let it make you stronger than [think] you are.

There is a world of people out here who will love you for who you are. A whole, vibrant, ..., happy, conflicted, joyous, and depressed mass of people who will say, You're gay? So...what? We want you among us.

I don't know if Suffocated ever found his voice and his ability to live his whole story. I do know that Hannah Gadsby has found her voice and is unwilling to keep silent. Somewhere, somehow, her voice emerged...loud and clear.

Each of us is called, and has the right, to live our authentic selves fully, and to give voice to the unique beings that we are. And each of us struggles with owning and allowing that voice to shine (although I've been told it's somewhat easier for white, straight, cis men.)

How do we do that? How do we get there? What makes it possible for our voices to emerge?

Do you remember what happened for Red, in A Crayon's Story? Red struggled until one friend, one berry-coloured crayon, asked for an ocean in Red's true colour, Blue. That bit of assurance and encouragement opened up a voice for Red that hadn't been possible before, so that Red could colour bluebells and blue jeans, and bluebirds, and whales...and skies.

We can be berry-coloured crayons for each other. We can create a space where each person is loved for who they are and is able to give voice to their whole story. We can offer each person the opportunity to use their true colours, without expectations or judgment.

Let me speak for a moment directly to those of us, myself included, who identify as straight, cis-gendered, white, (male if you are), able-bodied, financially secure, etc. We are the ones to whom a lot of power has been granted in society. We are the ones whose voices are commonly heard and centered in discussions and decisions. We swim in the water of what has been deemed 'normal', and we often don't see our incredible privilege, and use the power that we have to the fullest in pursuit of a just society.

If anything is going to change, we have got to intentionally move out of the center. We have got to put ourselves out of the water of privilege and see what's really happening around us. We have to do everything we can to encourage those voices which have

been marginalized to move into the center, and that also means using our voices to help other 'centered' individuals to hear and respect the voices of 'others'. As in our story, sometimes it doesn't take much for the crowd to be swayed from derision (*I don't think he's very bright...he's lazy...he's got to apply himself...I wonder if he's really red...*) to affirmation (*he's brilliant! I always knew he was blue... his work makes me happy...*)

Sometimes. Sometimes our efforts, however small, make a difference. But, even if we don't see immediate progress, even if things don't change on our time table, even if the crayon chooses not to do it OUR way...acting for change is the right thing to do. There simply is no reasonable or humane excuse for not using the power that we have, whenever we can, to work to create a world in which the whole rainbow of colour is celebrated. Gadsby again says it best: "Difference is a teacher. We can paint a better world if we learn how to see it from all perspectives."

You see, Gadsby had a similar experience to Red's, that crayon whose family and friends worked so hard for them to be normal. She tells that her mother now admits that she knew, before Hannah did, that her life was going to be difficult, and she badly wanted to change Hannah so that it wouldn't be so hard for her...just like Red's family who suggested he who he should colour with, or that he wear a warm red scarf to be more normal. Now, her mother regrets that she tried to raise Hannah as if she was straight, as if she were someone she is not.

"There's nothing stronger than a broken woman who's rebuilt herself," says Gadsby, so "I won't allow my story to be destroyed." Because she now knows what it would have meant if she could have heard a story like her own. If she had heard such a story, she wouldn't have felt so alone, and she would have given anything to have felt connected, and to know that it was possible to be loved for who she was, for who she is.

Dear Sugar concludes her letter to Suffocated with this:

...Have you ever been to a [PRIDE] Parade? Every year I take the baby sugars to the one in our city and every year I cry while watching it. ...

My kids never understand why I'm crying. The parade seems like a party to them, and when I try to explain that the party is an explosion of love that has its roots in hate, I only confuse them more, so together we just stand on the sidelines, laughing and crying, watching that ecstatic parade.

I think I cry because it always strikes me as sacred, all those people going by. People who decided simply to live their truth, even when doing so wasn't simple. Each and every one of them had the courage to say, This is who I am even if you'll crucify me for it.

Just like Jesus did.

Yours, Sugar

I have to believe that receiving this kind of a response was life-saving for Suffocated. Someone finally heard his whole story. Someone validated it by witnessing it with clear eyes.

Connection is what we need. Community is what we need. Each one of us needs to know that we are loved for who we are. Each and every one of us.

Gratefully, there are many of us who DO have those connections, and if that's you, I urge you to help make a 'connected' reality possible for someone else. If you are here needing that connection, I want you to know that I will hear your story true, however and whenever you tell it, and that I am not the only one here willing and ready to do that. Your colour, your perspective, your very being matters, and you have a place here.

Every week, every day, I want this community to be like a PRIDE parade...where everyone is able to simply live their truth and no one will be crucified for it, but rather, that they be LOVED for it.

So be it. Always.

*** CLOSING WORDS**

~ Victoria Safford (adapted)

Ours is absolutely, gladly, hopefully and humbly, gaily, a gay church, a gay tradition, where everyone, including heterosexual members and friends, is welcome, where everyone is needed, where everyone's experience is cherished as a sacred text, because no one's experience of living or loving can be comprehensive, because each of us holds clues the others need about how to live with dignity and joy as a human person, and none of us knows enough about that yet to be considered whole.

I know that on some sad and disappointing days these words describe the community that yet shall be and not the congregation that is.

But I know too that to build the community of which we dream is an act of co-creation. To live into its creation, is a privilege, a prophetic imperative, a joy, a duty, and a holy sacrament.

So, bring your passion, your action, and your pride, that a world of love and justice will emerge. We're all in this together.

Amen. Blessed Be.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME