

*Do Not Let the World Make You Hard*

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JANUARY 20, 2019

**OPENING WORDS** *The Only Ones Who Ever Win*<sup>1</sup> ~ Eileen B Karpeles

Out of our separate lives we come,  
to walk this path together for an hour or a day,  
for a week or a month or a series of months and years.  
For this space of time we travel together,  
making much or little or nothing at all of the fact  
that another walks beside us.  
We can keep our eyes cast down  
protecting ourselves from the pain we risk  
whenever we allow another human being to touch us,  
living safe little lives inside our sterile wrappings.  
Or we can reach out,  
risking a little or a lot or every coin we have,  
because we believe that loving and being loved  
is the only game in town.  
The choice is ours.  
Those who risk much lose much.  
But they are also the only ones who ever win.

Showing up here to create community together is a risk that we take, knowing the rewards may be great. Welcome to this time of meaning-making and connection.

**STORY FOR ALL** *Big Wolf and Little Wolf* ~ Nadine Brun-Cosme

*(Big Wolf has always been alone at his tree, until Little Wolf comes along. At first, Little Wolf is an annoyance, but gradually wiggles his way into Big Wolf's heart.)*

**READING** *Humans' Core Function Is Love*<sup>2</sup> ~ Adrienne Maree Brown

Adrienne Maree Brown is a women's rights activist and black feminist based in Detroit.

When we are engaged in acts of love, we humans are at our best and most resilient. The love in romance that makes us want to be better people, the love of children that makes us change our whole lives to meet their needs, the love of family that makes us drop everything to take care of them, the love of community that makes us work tirelessly with broken hearts.

Perhaps humans' core function is love. Love leads us to observe in a much deeper way than any other emotion....

If love were the central practice of a new generation of organizers and spiritual leaders, it would have a massive impact... If the goal was to increase the love, rather than

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/opening/184540.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/humans-core-function-love> Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds, pp. 9-10.

winning or dominating a constant opponent, I think we could actually imagine liberation from constant oppression. We would suddenly be seeing everything we do, everyone we meet, not through the tactical eyes of war, but through eyes of love.

We would see that there's no such thing as a blank canvas, an empty land or a new idea – but everywhere there is complex, ancient, fertile ground full of potential....

We would understand that the strength of our movement is in the strength of our relationships, which could only be measured by their depth. Scaling up would mean going deeper, being more vulnerable and more empathetic....

I am listening now with all my senses, as if the universe might just exist to teach me more about love. *(pause)*

**MESSAGE**                      *Do Not Let the World Make You Hard ~ Rev. Stoneberg*

A performer friend of mine used to do a show in which he spoke of the most Minnesotan thing he'd ever heard at the Minnesota State Fair. It was: "I ain't gonna pay a whole dollar for a corn dog that's mostly dough." Scandinavians are notoriously practical to the point of stinginess, and it's a part of my ingrained heritage against which I chafe.

Earlier this week, I went out to breakfast with a book, as is my occasional practice. However compelling the reading material, I am often distracted by conversations at other tables. This week was no exception.

A couple came in and sat at a table near me; as they looked at the menus, it was clear there was a problem. There was nothing on the menu that was the right combination of breakfast items at what they considered a fair price. A lot of questions were asked of the server, and it was stated, matter-of-factly, that the prices were simply too high for what they would get. While it was not a loud conversation, it seemed to be upsetting for the wait staff, as several got involved, and a tense kind of energy filled the room. Ultimately the couple paid for the coffee they'd already been served (with a \$50 bill), and then sat in near silence to drink it.

I was annoyed and more than a little judgmental. They looked like they could afford a \$6.99 breakfast special, and so I assumed them to be miserly...pinched-of-spirit, focused on scarcity, and therefore, unhappy. Not only that. They were spilling their unhappiness onto me; see, I was a little grumpy because I couldn't focus on my book. And as I already said, judgment had invaded my very being, and I didn't like how it felt. Like Big Wolf, in our story, I had abided their presence, but I was not very welcoming, or large of spirit.

But eventually, I pushed just a little corner of my blanket, my compassion, toward them. Just a little. I decided I should buy breakfast for them. I realized that rather than just sitting in judgment and annoyance, maybe I could help them be surprised by abundance or even joy. I decided I would ask the waitperson to bring them the breakfasts they had wanted, but then I second-guessed myself. What if, given their pickiness, the waitperson would know just the right thing to bring and then the wrong thing would upset them even more. I worried about them figuring out it was me who was the benefactor, and I debated whether I should get up and speak to a waitperson out of their earshot. And while I was trying to figure all that out, the couple got up and left.

Darn. A missed opportunity to express my open-hearted-ness and to share some love.

But not a missed opportunity to open my heart a bit, and to practice some compassion. You see, even in this ordinary, not very important moment, there was a slight shift in my heart. From hard...judgmental, resentful, peeved...to something softer...curious, open, generous.

The inspiration for today's service was the quote found on the front of the order of service. The whole quote reads, "Be soft. Do not let the world make you hard. Do not let pain make you hate. Do not let bitterness steal your sweetness. Take pride that even though the rest of the world may disagree, you still find it to be a beautiful place." It is attributed to Kurt Vonnegut, but I've found that this is questionable; they may instead be the words of writer Iain Thomas.<sup>3</sup>

Whoever said it, I was inspired by it. Be soft. Do not let the world make you hard.

When I sat down yesterday to put my thoughts to paper, I realized that I had assumed that this was going to be a sermon about love. Some bit of shorthand in my brain had jumped directly from 'soft' to 'love', and I was rather surprised to see that the word 'love' was nowhere in this quote. And so I had to step back and wonder about the human qualities of soft vs. hard.

The quote conflates hardness with hatred, bitterness, and an inability to see beauty. I assume you understand what hardness is, and that like me, you recognize what it feels like in your body, and in your spirit. For me, to be hard is to feel closed up, tense and fearful, sure of the Truth, pinched and possessive...hard. It eats up our energy, divides us, makes us despondent, and maybe even breeds contempt and violence. See if right now you can re-create that hard feeling in your body...

Painful, right? Let's not hold onto that, because we also know, and can access, what softness feels like...openness, acceptance, possibility, flexibility, safety, full of life...receptive...soft. A softness that gives us the energy to reach out and connect, that gives us hope, that allows compassion to grow. Now make yourself soft. Breathe.

A fine exercise in this relatively safe and secluded space. But the challenge is out there in the world: do not let the world make you hard.

Now, I'm going to assume that you believe staying soft to be an admirable goal. Maybe you don't. Maybe you have good reason to be hard out of self-protection. Maybe you have experienced ways in which being a fierce warrior is effective. All of these this can be true and valuable at the same time. It's not either or. A quote from the late writer and activist Barbara Deming captures this: <sup>4</sup>

"With one hand we say to one who is angry, or to an oppressor, or to an unjust system, 'Stop what you are doing. I refuse to honor the role you are choosing to play. I refuse to obey you. I refuse to cooperate with your demands. I refuse to build the walls and the bombs. I refuse to pay for the guns. With this hand I will even interfere with the wrong

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.domestiphobia.net/2012/11/15/lets-get-something-straight-i-do-mind/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/revolutionary-love/>

you are doing. I want to disrupt the easy pattern of your life.'

[And] then the advocate of nonviolence raises the other hand. It is raised outstretched – maybe with love and sympathy – maybe not – but always outstretched... With this hand we say, 'I won't let go of you or cast you out of the human race. I have faith that you can make a better choice [than] you are making now, and I'll be here when you are ready. Like it or not, we are part of one another.'"

And so today I want to consider that outstretched hand...the soft one...the welcoming one. The one that responds to, and counterbalances, the hardness.

Do not let the world make you hard. Do not let it make you so hard that you lose your sweetness, and your compassion, and your ability to see beauty.

Remaining soft is an act of faith; it's difficult to express WHY we should do this...why stay soft...why be open...and probably the most compelling thing for me is that I don't see a viable alternative. I don't like how it FEELS to be hard. I don't like the energy it perpetuates. I can't imagine that meeting hate with hate and violence with violence will lead us to peace. I completely support taking a firm stance against bullying and oppression and hate crimes...and somewhere in that stance must also be the hand of love, the hand of understanding, the hand of reconciliation.

Indeed, the world can be a difficult place. While we might not believe in a fiery afterlife that awaits to punish us for our waywardness, hell has not disappeared, for it is here on earth. We see it every day in the news, and in our Facebook and Twitter feeds, in the faces of the homeless, in the awful suffering of the ill and dying. We can face hell on earth when events spiral against us, when we are betrayed by family and friends, and when mental illness overtakes us. Life's hardships can be unrelenting, and can force us into corners where we cower in fear and mistrust.

We all encounter what can be a very hard and painful world. And the question is, how will we respond to that?

When facing adversity, which one are you: potato, egg or coffee bean?<sup>5</sup> That's the name of a video once shared with me on FB. It demonstrates that when each of these three things encounters pain and hardship...represented by boiling water...they respond in different ways. The potato enters the water hard and comes out soft. The egg enters the water soft (behind the shell) and comes out hard. The coffee bean enters the water and changes it into something else. The video ends with, "In life, things happen around us, things happen to us, but what truly matters is what happens within us."

This video says that when the potato becomes soft it is weakened, so the metaphor breaks down against today's advice to remain soft. But the question of what happens within us remains pertinent. When we're put in boiling water, what happens within us?

It's completely natural to get hard, right? Scar tissue is tough and sinewy, our muscles go stiff when we're cold, our breath gets stuck when we're afraid. So it stands to reason that choosing

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/JayShettyIW/videos/1767703950210729/>

another response takes real intention. It's counter-somatic. It goes against what feels natural. So it requires an active choice to move toward trust and hope rather than fear and hatred, and even then is not a very easy choice to live into.

The Roches, a sister-duo, sing a great song called "Anyway"<sup>6</sup>. Do you know it? The lyrics say:

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered; forgive them anyway.  
If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; be kind anyway.  
What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight; build anyway.  
Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough; give the world the best you've got anyway.

Keep trying. When you fall into despair, don't stay there for too long.

I haven't read this book, but after reading this quote, I want to. Rev. Kate Braestrup, in her book, *Marriage and other Acts of Civility* apparently tells of a woman who, when she learned that in addition to being a law enforcement chaplain and a writer, Rev. Kate is the mother of six children, asked 'How do you do it all?' Rev. Kate's answer? 'I do quite a lot of it badly.'

And then she goes on to say that the point of being human is to get better (and better)...at love. To practice at getting better and better at offering an outstretched arm. To get better and better at staying open-hearted. Because if we are to move our world toward goodness, we simply need to keep practicing. We have to keep saying yes to life and to love. Like Big Wolf, we have to keep looking for connections of meaning, and trusting that Little Wolf will show up again.

I would hope that being a part of this community can support you in this. This faith calls us to hold both truth and hope...a newspaper in one hand, and the power of revolutionary love in the other. We cannot let the hardness of life speak for itself without also lifting up the beauty of life.

There are few poets in all time, in my opinion, who have been able to really capture the gift and the beauty of life. Along with you and so many others, we are grieving the death this week of Mary Oliver, a writer whose words have become part of the fabric of Unitarian Universalism. In oh so many ways, her words have become my scripture, and in closing, I offer the 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza of her poem, Evidence:

There are many ways to perish, or to flourish.  
How old pain, for example, can stall us at the threshold of function....  
Still friends, consider stone, that is without the fret of gravity, and water that is without anxiety.  
And the pine trees that never forget their recipe for renewal.  
And the female wood duck who is looking this way and that way for her children. And the snapping turtle who is looking this way and that way also. This is the world.  
And consider, always, every day, the determination of the grass to grow despite the unending obstacles.

May we always, in every day, grow in compassion despite the unending obstacles.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.roches.com/lyrics/zerochurch.html>

So be it.

**READING**

~ Rev Gretchen Haley

Though you have been warned  
And given plenty of explanations  
Reasons to do otherwise  
You have persisted  
To claim a life of joy, and justice  
To carve out this time  
This space for the renewal  
Of your own heart  
Despite all the reasons, the resistance  
Fighting for your attention, luring you towards fear  
You persist  
To practice gratitude  
For this day, this life  
That has been given  
This chance to begin again  
And so let us [continue to] gather  
That we might  
Offer one another courage, strength  
Healing, hope  
And this promise to  
Persist in kindness,  
Persevere in compassion  
And  
Prevail in a life that is for more than ourselves

**\*CLOSING WORDS** *Share Your Glorious Light with the World*<sup>7</sup> ~ James Morison

Within each of our hearts there is a most glorious light.  
Go forth, and let its spark help you understand what troubles both you and others;  
Go forth, and let its light of reason be a guide in your decisions;  
Go forth, and bring its ray of hope to those in need of help in both body and spirit, that  
they may find healing;  
Go forth, and fan the flames of passion to help heal our world;  
Go forth, and spread the warm glow of love, pushing back the darkness of the world;  
Go forth, and share your glorious light with the world.

Amen.

**EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME**

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/benediction/share-your-glorious-light-world>