

THE FIGURE SKATER ON THE PUBLIC ICE (AND THE CAPTIVE IN THE WATERS BENEATH)

A Sermon Delivered at the First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist

Sunday, February 22, 2009

The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

A woman who had gone faithfully to church every Sunday suddenly stopped appearing. When the minister phoned her to ask if everything was alright with her, she replied, “Yes, but I’ve started thinking: In my life, I calculate that I’ve now heard over 3,000 sermons. But I can’t remember more than two or three of them. So maybe it’s not worth coming.” And the minister replied, “In my life, I calculate that I have now eaten over 60,000 meals. And I’m like you. I can’t recall that more than a few of them were all that memorable. But I got something nourishing out of all of them. So I’m not about to stop eating now!”

When I was 22 years old, forty years ago now, I heard one sermon I’ve never forgotten. The title was the one that I’ve borrowed this morning. It was given at this time of year. The place was the First Parish in Lexington, behind the statue of the Minuteman on the Battle Green. And the preacher was the Associate Minister, the Rev. Barbara Hollerorth, who later became my very first mentor in ministry. “The Figure Skater on the Public Ice (And the Captive in the Waters Beneath)” – the title itself made the sermon memorable!

I sat there -- having spent my teenage years enduring homilies at a Catholic parish in my Michigan hometown that might as well have come from Garrison Keillor’s mythical Father Emil, at “Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility” -- listening to a *woman* preach. And not only poetically, passionately, but, as the gospel writers say of Jesus preaching, “as one with authority, and not as the scribes and the Pharisees.”

The message was *not* one about duty; quite the contrary. I was the new student minister, and youth advisor. Barbara spoke about having had that role when she was in seminary, at the University of Chicago, in the early ‘50s, serving a rural Protestant congregation. Where one Sunday evening, after youth group, a young woman in the church youth group was being driven home by her boyfriend, who then decided to show off driving too fast,

and went off the road, and crashed. When Barbara arrived, the police and an ambulance were there. The young man, the driver, was unconscious. The young woman was alert, but with the engine of the car sitting literally in her lap. Asking the rescue workers not to bother with her, but to help her boyfriend. Who died; while she simply was paralyzed.

Or so I recall the central story. I sat there realizing, as an aspiring young preacher myself, just what Barbara was doing: giving permission to those hearing her, especially women, not to sit with the engine in their laps any longer, but rather to give voice to their pain. Saying, “I’m ready to listen. Don’t just sit there with it, trying to fake it with pirouettes on the public ice, while so much of your real experience, especially the painful parts, lies under the surface. I know. This is a safe place to share what hurts. Come tell me about it.”

Looking back forty years, I know that sermon was appropriately gendered for its time. But today I would also want to tell all of you guys out there, you “speed skaters” on the public ice – and that’s now many of you women, too! -- when you are anxious about the future, about working hard enough for your family, about getting ahead. Please trust me: I know. This is a safe place to stop, to share what’s under the surface. Tell me about it.

I spent two years working with Barbara, rather the way Lucas is now working with me. This was from 1969 to ‘71; before *Roe vs. Wade*. So when Barbara was on call for the Clergy Consultation Service on Problem Pregnancy, she got simply hundreds of calls, from women seeking spiritual guidance. Those weeks I would sometimes work with her, calling back boyfriends and husbands, counseling them to be more supportive partners, regardless of the woman’s decision about her unplanned and problematic pregnancy. Whether to raise the child, agree to an adoption, or to a difficult-to-obtain, safe abortion.

In those years, Barbara showed me what good ministry and congregational life can be. With evocative and passionate preaching; with empathic, person-centered pastoral care; with creative programming; and with patient, persistent commitment to social change in the direction of human dignity and justice. Barbara was one of the first clergy anywhere to counsel sympathetically with people about issues of gender identity. The first time I

visited this Meetinghouse here in Needham was as her junior colleague on a district training team for teachers of a breakthrough curriculum that she and her husband, Hugo, “Holly,” the curriculum editor at the UUA, had helped to develop on human sexuality. Roberta Nelson, then the religious educator here, was on that team, too.

Barbara also drew me into developing intergenerational retreat weekends, twice a year. Often with over 200 parents and children participating. Retreats with great themes like “The Celebration of the Beauty of the Night” -- held one autumn weekend, complete with a bonfire, hayride, star-gazing, late bedtime stories, and a midnight supper for the adults, after the young ones were safely tucked in: *Goodnight, Moon!* Creativity that, like her preaching and pastoral care, I’ve never forgotten

Her years in Lexington were in a tumultuous time: Vietnam; the women’s movement. And Barbara did not much care for parish politics. She soon left to become a pastoral psychotherapist. When I was ordained, in Knoxville, the church I visited last week, Barbara delivered the “charge to the minister.” And preached the morning sermon, pointedly called “Liberal Religion and the One Man Show.” It was about a friend of hers, a woman artist, who had been invited to have a “one man show,” and had first laughed, then declined. Barbara never thought the church should be a one-man, or woman show.

Starting 25 years ago or so, she herself took up photography, with a great eye. And then found the perfect place to practice her art: the city of Venice. She and Holly saved their pennies and had some 17, off-season stays there, in a modest *pensione*. Where every view seemed related to the work she was doing as a psychotherapist. Helping people to look around the corner. Where they might catch sight of something, old, familiar, but never quite seen that way before: a bridge from here to there that you can’t quite seem to get to from here; a lot of water that has passed under those bridges; softer, reflected light that illumines the way forward; just around the next corner. This was even true, when, like the painter Monet, Barbara began to lose her visual acuity, and could only see rather impressionistically. Still, she took beautiful photographs. And helped people.

By this time you may be wondering: but why is he telling me all this, about this woman who was his mentor in ministry? Well, for two reasons, I'd say. I went to see Barbara about two weeks ago. She and Holly are now staying the home in Central Massachusetts where their daughter lives with her husband. Their daughter is a nurse, and Barbara is now on hospice care. I went to tell her that I would never have entered the ministry at all if it had not been for her good example and mentoring. If she had not showed me that ministry is all about allowing people who have parts of themselves under the surface of their lives to feel safe enough to stop skating and start talking; about building community where people can feel safe enough to be authentically human; about being real yourself. One person, if possible -- not someone so inwardly divided, in any case, that you don't really communicate well with the part of yourself that you don't always let others see or know about. And we all have such parts.

I went to tell her that the reason I have now tried to share myself, as honestly as possible, with some thirty student ministers that I have mentored over the years, is that I can never pay back all that she gave to me. All I can do is to try to pass it on. Imperfectly. And that what I most appreciate, looking back, is the way in which she seemed to say, in everything that she did as a minister, that none of us should just give and give alone. That is the way to private despair, to a sense of separation. Rather the task of good ministry, paradoxically, is rather, as one wise minister once put it, "to abolish the laity." To say to you, and you, and you, and you: "You know, you have gifts to share as well. You are a minister, as much as I am. Perhaps in a different way; and that's quite fine. But you have things within you, under the surface, to contribute, creatively to the world that we share. Don't sit there with engine in your lap. Or keep skating on the surface. Don't fake it. You're human. You're vulnerable. You're mortal. So am I. So?"

We all have something to contribute. We are in this great cycle and dance of life together. Let's find the beauty in it. It's there, around every corner. Tell your story where it's safe to do so. Be one person, and not a divided self. Because then, and only then, can you be of real use to other human beings. A presence. One who, even when you are gone, will not be forgotten. One who will have passed along something enduring, human, and real.

A final story: A member of the church once noticed that a friend of hers had stopped attending. She went over to see him. The friend was clearly ill, grieving and depressed. They sat in front of the fire together. The depressed man didn't say anything. He just sighed. The visitor didn't say anything either. She just took the fireplace tongs, pulled an ember from the fire, and placed it on the hearth, alone. There it soon grew gray and cold. Then he took the tongs again, and moved it back closer to the center of the fire, where the ember quickly began to glow again. Then she thanked his host for the tea they'd shared, and said goodbye. The next Sunday, the friend was back at his place in the church again. Friends, we're all ministers, one to another. Because we're human, we need one another. Let us never forget that. Amen, and amen.

*Hymn 299

Wake, Now My Senses

Thomas Mikelson

Benediction

From the pamphlet,
Unitarian Universalist Views of Death and Immortality

One of my earliest memories is of seeing my older sister playing with friends out on the lawn, of running to join her over the grass, and of finding her, on her longer legs, disappearing over the hill. She wasn't running away from me. Involved in the play of her own life, she had just simply gone away. And life, at that moment, at the age of three, was finding myself standing alone, in the still heat of a summer day, lonely and unexpectedly bereaved.

One of my happiest memories is of another day when I found my sister. She was sitting at a picnic table down the hill at the end of an orchard owned by the woman with whom she studied the piano. I often went to meet her there at the end of her lesson. I remember running down the slope through the plush apple smell and the long, shady corridor of trees. I remember the joy of seeing her. I remember feeling I had found her.

These moments of life and death occurred in what we call “life.” They also hint to me of moments that may occur in “death.” The sharp distinction we make between life and death may be artificial.

The only experience we have of death is within the context of our lives. But all the living that we do, after very early childhood, is within the context of our death. So whether the clues we get are clues about the meaning of death within the context of our living, or whether they are clues about the meaning of our lives within the context of our dying, it is impossible to say. And so I think that they probably are both.

It is sometimes said that we are born as strangers into the world and that we leave it when we die. But in all probability we do not come into the world at all. Rather, we come out of it, in the same way that a leaf comes out of the tree or a baby from its mother's body. We emerge from deep within its range of possibilities, and when die we do not so much stop living as take on a different form. So the leaf does not fall out of the world when it leaves the tree. It has a different way and place to be within it.

Certainly, death is separation. But birth is, too. Out of the union of egg and sperm comes an individual existence, distinct from everything else. A solitary being in awareness, time, and space is born. Then death—the return to earth—becomes release from aloneness, shelter from responsibility, and return to continuity and union, from which we emerged for a brief time.

The times we are “really living” in life seem to fluctuate between times of heightened individual awareness and when we are able to “lose” ourselves in work or love. Life is a particular blend of being separate and merged. It seems very possible to me that death, too, is a particular blend of solitude and union.

In death, we not only continue but begin to live in a new way in the memory and experience and action of our friends. We become “stable” enough at last to become more firmly and definitively integrated into the meaning of their lives. This is not necessarily a comforting thought. And so perhaps it is not only a statement about the meaning of death, but a statement that can motivate and change our lives.

What is death, in the light of this?

It is losing and finding one’s sister, perhaps. As surely as any of us is alive, we know it is standing alone and lonely on the burial day. It is change and separation, and their loss and grief. But may it not also be disappearing from others’ view as we play out the meaning of our own lives?

When we lose someone we love, we say, “I am alive and he is dead.” But we know from our own experience that something in us seems to have died; and we don’t know what it means, that he is dead. We only know that he is no longer with us in the same way.

May not death mean being in the world in new ways? May not death be change and separation and the possibilities of these?

In making us aware of these, death, at the very least, heightens our awareness of our life. Having so little time to live, we respond to the urge to develop our own consciousness to its greatest reach before we die. Yet, feeling our separation, we search out our brothers and sisters while there is time to be united in our afternoons of apple trees and music.