

Fragile and Bold

A sermon by Molly Housh

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“Do you experience yourself as fragile?”

This was the fifth question I was asked at a committee interview along the ordination process. I was taken aback. Me? Fragile? I prickled at the question. I am a strong woman. I am a feminist. I am independent and competent. These are the things I thought. Were they asking me this because I am young, and a woman?

Well, looking back, of course, the question probably had more to do with the fact that at question number three, I had begun to cry. I don't even remember what question three was, but it opened the floodgates.

And I couldn't stop. The original tears were joined by tears of embarrassment, then of frustration with myself, then of resignation. As I remember it, through the whole rest of the interview, tears streamed down my face as I answered question after question. I sat in another room, still crying, as the committee deliberated, and the tears continued as the committee

congratulated me for passing on to the next step in the process. I shook their hands, smiling and crying.

All I could think for the rest of the day was this, “Maybe I *am* fragile. Am I? Am I about to snap in two at the least little gust of wind, all while I’m fooling myself that I’m strong and brave?”

That same day, I headed off to work at my third day as a hospital chaplain. That day, and in the following months, I sat with people who were dying and stayed with families who were losing their loved ones: spouses losing spouses, parents losing children, and children losing parents. Some suddenly, some slowly and painfully. As I sat with these people and listened to them and held their own strength back up for them to see. As I witnessed their incredible love and resilience. As I sat still for them, a rock amid the streams of chaos and fear. As my heart broke a little bit over and over and healed again and again, I found the answer I hadn’t had for my committee.

When they asked me if I experienced myself as fragile I should have answered them. “No. I experience *life* as fragile. I experience myself and those around me as unfathomably brave.”

But actually, it’s appropriate that this question of fragility came up at an ordination interview, because it’s a big part of my calling: my turn to the

ministry is in some way a response to the tenuous nature of life, which, for one reason or another, I have always felt acutely. It's why religion is where I'm pulled and not somewhere else.

Bold courage in the face of fragile life is nearly impossible and yet it is something each of us finds and employs every single day. That is why I'm here; because here in this Unitarian Universalist congregation, what we do is something very special; because courage is contagious and because we *can* encounter the impossible.

I've been immersed lately in work on my divinity school thesis, which basically asks the question: What holds Unitarian Universalists together as a diverse religious community? Some of the most interesting statements I've read in my research have had to do with one word in that question... Religious. It would seem that some scholars outside our ranks do not consider us to be religious people. These past weeks I have read articles calling UU congregations cults, ethical societies, and, my favorite 'talking clubs of philosophers.' The 'cult' accusation, I realized as I read further in that particular article, was written by a fundamentalist theologian at a small college in Alabama. So I could let that one go.

But the ethical societies and talking clubs stuck with me. I sat there in the library doing some intellectual wrestling with those, because really we *are* a people driven to live our moral values in the world. And we *are* a people on that everlasting ‘responsible search for truth and meaning.’ But philosophy and ethics alone do not a religion make. And it’s *religion* that I’ve made my business. So what am I doing here, I wondered.

Riffing on Wendell Berry, I confess that I would not be a religious person except that I have been alive, in love in the mortal world. Or a person of faith except that I have been bewildered and afraid.

Therefore, I am not a Unitarian Universalist because I want to spend all of my time talking about the nature of the universe (though I do enjoy that). And I am not a Unitarian Universalist because I need to be affirmed in my own moral or political leanings (because, really, I know I’m right ;). I am a Unitarian Universalist because I am deeply sustained by this community in living a courageous life. Even knowing that I will face loss of all kinds; even knowing the magnitude of injustice in the world; even knowing that sheerly by being alive, I am teetering at the edge of chaos. Even so, I am made bold in my living by my religion.

It is true that we are sometimes a heady bunch and that we often find the language of ethics and philosophy easiest and most comfortable to us. And certainly ethics and philosophy are an important part of a religious community that is committed to the pursuit of justice and the use of reason. Our principles are a demanding moral code and a lofty set of guiding, well, principles. But they are not what make us religious. In the true spirit of the free-church tradition, *we* are what make us religious. Not our stated principles or ethics, and not our philosophical views, but the way that we, the people of this church find ways to live together and to keep swimming in waters that may be calm, but may just as well be stormy and tempestuous. We make what we do religion by encountering the unspeakable, by our very boldness in that act, and by the deep ties of our presence together.

I believe that philosophy is the elegant practice of describing the universe and its functioning. I believe that ethics is the prophetic practice of suggesting how to best treat each other and the world. And I believe that religion starts in where the ability to find words leaves off.

Not that all religious people must be mystics, attempting to commune with an indescribable ultimate. What I mean is that sometimes life stops us short. Sometimes we are speechless. Sometimes only poetry and stories will do and even they are not enough. What I mean is that life contains things

unspeakably beautiful and unspeakably heartbreaking and unspeakably terrible. Religion demands that we stay with these things, that we stop with the blathering on and the constructs, and that we let these things pierce us, like an arrow in our souls.

Religion requires that we seek understanding without removing ourselves from that which we seek to understand. Philosophy requires abstraction in order to describe, religion demands that we remain immersed in the muck and the glory and find what wisdom we can in the living.

There's a joke that came to me by way of essayist David Foster Wallace about two young fish, who are swimming along when an older fish swims by. "Morning boys," says the old fish as he passes by. "How's the water today?" As the old fish swims out of sight, the two younger fish look at each other, confused, and one of them says to the other: "What the hell is water?!"

This is religion, to live every day within the terrible beautiful life that defies words and to remember every moment that this is it. Right here. Right now. To swim along immersed in it and to remind ourselves: this is water. This is water. This is the unspeakable that is nearer to us than our breath. As Wendell Berry reminds us: "The way of love leads all ways to life beyond words, silent and secret." This reality beyond words is the reality in which we

live and move and have our being. And religion calls us stay with it and to know it.

And guess what, ordination committee of times past?? Staying with it... allowing ourselves to encounter the unspeakably beautiful and sorrowful and terrible... requires us to open our hearts and our minds and our gills and to be vulnerable, and yes, I'm gonna say it.... Fragile.

But if religion requires fragility of us, it also requires incredible courage; the courage to be vulnerable, *and* the courage to step forth into the unknown, where we're vulnerable whether or not we choose it. Where we're not promised anything, but where we can usually expect some joy and some suffering. Process theologian Catherine Keller, who wrote the excerpt that we heard earlier says this: "Those who know suffering come closer to a truth about creation: the future is open: alarmingly or promisingly. The way is not laid out in advance. Creation itself is in process. Our own way forward has not yet been charted. There may be no trail before us at all. Sometimes one can only move forward in faith: that is, in courage and confidence, not in a delusional certainty. [...]" 'Hope,' says the theologian Karl Barth, [...]"comes 'in the act of taking the next step'" (Keller 9)..

Keller's statement captures why I think that it is those things that give us courage that make what we do religion and not something else. Because the future is open: alarmingly or promisingly. Promisingly *and* alarmingly. We will step forth, because life moves always on, and we may encounter more pain, more disappointment, more despair. But we live courageously when we walk in pursuit of more love, more joy, and more peace with faith that its out there. With faith that we'll find it.

Keller's little fish from our reading can swim right on through the storms and the waves, because she's practiced during the calm waters and because she was made for water, made for swimming. Religion at its best helps us practice courage in the still waters, buoys us up in the storms, and reminds us when bravery is hard to come by, that it's already there. We were made for this earth, made for our living.

Yes, we were made for our living, but not alone for our living. Courage is contagious, and so we need each other. We need each other to hold our own strength up for us to see. We need each other to bear witness to human love and resilience.

Repeating the words of Albert Schweitzer so apt for our chalice lightings:
At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another

person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.

We are here in community together because religion is something that happens best among us and between us, when we live out our faith that love can win the day. We sit together in this sanctuary not just to hear a few among us speak or sing, but to feel the deep truth that we are not alone. We can feel it in the heat and presence of the bodies around us. We can pass between us that common flame of the human spirit, the flame of courage, which may flicker but which, when held between us, will not burn out. That is a flame we can carry forth.

It was a happy coincidence when I saw the words the choir would be singing today, because they're just right, here.... When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within. That is religion. When from the stories of our living rings a song both brave and free. That is religion. And when our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way. We step forth a people of faith.

Sometimes we'll have peace like a river. More often, we are bound to have pain like an arrow. But I tell you that together we *will* have courage and love and strength like a mountain in our souls.

