

## **Mother of Love, Daughter of Truth**

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

February 3, 2019

### **STORY**

A town hall meeting to address the boy who continually cries wolf.

### **READING**

The Whistler, by Mary Oliver

*(a reading on trusting the element of surprise . . .)*

All of a sudden she began to whistle. By all of a sudden I mean that for more than thirty years she had not whistled. It was thrilling. At first I wondered, who was in the house, what stranger? I was upstairs reading, and she was downstairs. As from the throat of a wild and cheerful bird, not caught but visiting, the sounds warbled and slid and doubled back and larked and soared.

Finally I said, Is that you? Is that you whistling? Yes, she said. I used to whistle, a long time ago. Now I see I can still whistle. And cadence after cadence she strolled through the house, whistling.

I know her so well, I think. I thought. Elbow and ankle. Mood and desire. Anguish and frolic. Anger too. And the devotions. And for all that, do we even begin to know each other? Who is this I've been living with for thirty years?

This clear, dark, lovely whistler?

### **PRAYER/MEDITATION**

Our prayer this morning comes to us from Jan Richardson, who speaks as one whose trust in life has been frayed following the death of her husband. As each of us juggle our own joys and sorrows, may we be mindful of the cares of our hearts.

## **Blessing for the Brokenhearted**

Let us agree  
for now  
that we will not say  
the breaking  
makes us stronger  
or that it is better  
to have this pain  
than to have done  
without this love.

Let us promise  
we will not  
tell ourselves  
time will heal  
the wound,  
when every day  
our waking  
opens it anew.

Perhaps for now  
it can be enough  
to simply marvel  
at the mystery  
of how a heart  
so broken  
can go on beating,  
as if it were made  
for precisely this—

as if it knows  
the only cure for love  
is more of it,

as if it sees  
the heart's sole remedy  
for breaking  
is to love still,

as if it trusts  
that its own  
persistent pulse  
is the rhythm  
of a blessing  
we cannot  
begin to fathom  
but will save us  
nonetheless.

## READING

### **Hands Off: We Hatch Alone**

By David Anderson, from *Breakfast Epiphanies (excerpt)*

Last week a box of chicks were hatching in the kindergarten classroom of our day school. There was a long line of children outside the class waiting to get a peek at the eggs. So I got in line. It had been a while for me, too.

As they moved through the line, all the children had their hands clasped behind their backs. I inquired why. Teacher's orders: *This is how we approach mysteries that we cannot touch.* Good idea. I put my hands behind my back, too. The eggs were small and quiet in the light. One was slightly cracked, another chipped, a small shell fragment lying below. But most were perfect and still.

We watched those eggs for the next week. When one hatched, the chick was moved into a box with the other free birds. But I kept noticing the quiet eggs, the few that couldn't seem to break free. In the kitchen with a cup of coffee I asked Annette, one of the teachers, what was wrong.

"Actually," she said, "we're doing pretty good. Odds are, 25 percent just don't hatch. And of course," she said, "you can't help them do it." Remember that childhood lesson?

It's worth remembering. We talk much about our interdependence, about helping one another, and it's true – to a point. But we cannot help a single other person hatch. If the task of life is to break continually out of the shells that confine us and into freedom, that is a solitary task.

## SERMON

### **Mother of Love, Daughter of Truth**

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

So you've heard . . . the theme for February is Trust, following on the heels of Possibility in January. In Ruth Gendler's *Book of Qualities*, she suggests Trust is the mother of love, the daughter of truth—

hence, the sermon title. You have to think about that a bit. Maybe Truth is here (the eldest generation) . . . then Trust . . . and born of those two . . . Love.

I'm imagining that it MAY be that, yes, we love what we can trust to be truthful, though experience tells me it is likely that love is ALSO a bit reckless sometimes. Otherwise, poets and songwriters would be out of business, right? At least country songwriters.

Remember any of these classics?

*She Made Toothpicks Out of the Timber of My Heart*  
*He Walked Across My Heart Like It Was Texas*

Or from the other side of the dance floor:

*My Head Hurts, My Feet Stink, and I Don't Love You.*

OK – so, to be honest, I have found this Trust topic to be both engaging *and* challenging. There is a lot written about trust, and yet we know that very little of it matters when you're the one who feels betrayed; when you are the someone whose trust has been broken by someone in your family, by a friend, by coworkers, by a partner, or even the local shepherd whose job it is to protect the community's livelihood. When you've been hurt, it hardly seems to matter why . . . the idea that there may have been a reason . . . the "child" was bored, or seeking attention they weren't getting at home, or didn't have a clue how to do their job well . . . whatever. We just know we're hurt, and the proverbial sheep are gone.

Trust, we know, can be hard to build and easy to lose. I am reminded of the Sisyphus image that Yukiko offered us so clearly last week. I think I've got it . . . I think I trust . . . oh, no! It rolled back down the hill again!

So, what is it anyway? What does it mean to trust someone or something?

As a child, we might trust a parent, for example, or a teacher, primarily, I think, because the dynamic is such that a child needs things that they can't provide for themselves, and the adult – or anyone older, actually – appears the provider. Adults are ostensibly the holder of whatever truth we think exists as a child. It may not always BE true, but for a time it's what we believe.

In fact, the typical dictionary response suggests that trust is all about belief: that we have a belief – a firm belief, even – in the strength of someone or something, in their reliability.

But as we get older, we recognize our own capacity to discern truth, so we adjust our beliefs; experience teaches us that life is a bit more nuanced so that the idea of trust may have more to it.

Charles Feltman, an executive coach and author of *The Thin Book of Trust: An Essential Primer for Building Trust at Work*, takes a different approach to the dictionary. He writes primarily about work environments, where he suggests that trust “is defined as choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person’s actions.”

In other words, what we might come to understand as we experience life is that trust is a choice, rather than a straight-up belief.

Let’s imagine that in Feltman’s context – the workplace – it is about an idea: for example – do you trust that you can share an idea without its being ridiculed? Or worse, perhaps, can you trust that it won’t be stolen by someone who might claim it as their own? Do you trust the environment to be one of mutual effort? Do you trust your coworkers to be honest with you about the value of your idea? i.e., are you *choosing* to risk sharing your idea based on what they might do with it?

Trust is, Feltman suggests, a kind of “risk assessment” . . . which actually feels like a definition that might move beyond the work environment pretty easily, in the adult world, at least – that is, someone who can choose to risk something of value by making it vulnerable to another person, something like one’s heart, for example.

Right off the bat, it begs the question, of course . . . how much can my heart withstand if things don’t go as planned? And, what bank of compassion or forgiveness is available to me if or when someone falls short? If OR when someone falls short . . .

And here is the biggest challenge. It’s not likely a question of if OR when someone will fall short – a co-worker, a family member, a friend, a partner . . . the truth is that what we learn as we live awhile is that we are all imperfect: cracked, broken, full of holes, however we might describe it, so that it is more than likely we WILL disappoint in some way; we will fall short, we will break a trust. We will speak harshly when we meant to soothe. We will ignore when we intended to notice. We will forget another’s needs in deference to our own.

I don’t mean to oversimplify. There are those who have experienced more than the average breach of trust in relationships, those who may have been egregiously abused or misused by those they should have been able to count on. Anyone remotely connected to the “Me Too” movement, for example, has experienced a different level of betrayal. I don’t mean to infer any lightness on those experiences.

But even on some very fundamental level, we humans will likely be less than we had hoped we might trust ourselves to be.

Even what we might imagine as the Holy, what some of us would call God, even that Spirit will disappoint – I guarantee it.

Job knew it. He lost everything over and over again, remember?

Holocaust survivor Eli Wiesel wrote a story about putting God on trial – the rabbis in the concentration camp arguing that God was guilty. And, in fact, they found God guilty . . . right before they began their evening prayer.

But it doesn't even have to get that bad . . . it can be a much smaller betrayal we might hold Life-with-a-capital-L accountable for: losing capacity of some kind, losing a loved one . . . the plethora of challenges that we rail against having to survive, or somehow make sense of – age not least of all.

How are we to understand the very idea of trust in the face of reliable disillusionment?

Brené Brown, sociologist and speaker about all kinds of things, offers an acronym for what she calls the Anatomy of Trust. She calls it BRAVING, which stands for Boundaries (knowing what healthy ones are), Reliability, Accountability, Vault (by which she means keeping confidences), Integrity (choosing courage over comfort, what's right over what's easy), Non-judgment, and Generosity (in our assumptions). If someone maintains each of these elements, they are trustworthy.

But who of us is on task with each of those things at each and every moment?

Let's just look at non-judgment, for example. And let's just think about politics, for a moment – that's a relatively risk-free environment to consider here, right? Have you felt inclined to do any judging lately? (How can we trust someone won't judge us if we just heard how harshly they judged someone else?) Come on, let's be honest – we judge all the time!

Generosity in our assumptions . . . hmmm . . . how often do we look beyond the obvious for what we're so comfortable being critical of? I listened to a report on the Governor of Virginia this morning – having a picture discovered in a medical school yearbook, one person in blackface, one in a KKK costume. I'm not defending or excusing whatever happened. I'm just pointing out our inclinations to go to that place . . . and how quickly.

Sometimes it feels that in our longing for the wholeness we each desire, or maybe because of what we have already experienced by way of breach, we build up an amazing set of expectations of each other, a list of things we can't or won't abide. By the time we decide to risk trust, we often have a list as long as our arms of what makes it worth our effort, when who among us is that perfect?

Let me ask you something else – and you don't have to answer out loud: Do you hold yourself accountable for every time you don't live up to your own expectations? What do you require of yourself when you might behave – let's just say *impatiently* with someone you really care about, someone you really love, but you just weren't quite up to that high bar that morning?

Does that make you untrustworthy?

It feels to me as though Trust, being the daughter of truth, is also all caught up in a bucket full of expectations that we may create to protect ourselves so we won't be hurt when, really, to trust is to allow oneself to BE vulnerable because we TRUST that we can manage the risk.

TO TRUST – right from the start – IS TO ALLOW ONESELF TO BE VULNERABLE in a messy, imperfect world, with messy imperfect people, even the best ones.

Remember Jan Stevenson's words this morning, as she recovers from the untimely death of her husband:

Perhaps for now  
it can be enough  
to simply marvel  
at the mystery  
of how a heart  
so broken  
can go on beating,  
as if it were made  
for precisely this—

as if it knows  
the only cure for love  
is more of it,

as if it sees  
the heart's sole remedy  
for breaking  
is to love still . . .

Maybe it is a function of HOW we are trusting; maybe it means trusting not that those you might want to trust are infallible, that you – my friend, my family, my partner, my God – will never do anything to disappoint me, or that I will never do anything to disappoint you, but that we trust our own capacity to manage that breach.

Because if we don't trust our own inner capacity to heal, and perhaps even to offer healing – even as we know the truth of our own imperfections – we're not likely to risk much. And there's not much wholeness to be found.

Maya Angelou often quoted an African proverb: Beware the naked man who is offering you his shirt. How could we possibly trust others if we don't trust ourselves?

And like the chick coming out of the egg, this discernment to trust – the choice to be that vulnerable – is our own individual work. No one can make that choice for us. As David Anderson reminded us earlier, "If the task of life is to break continually out of the shells that confine us and into freedom, that is a solitary task."

I love the song we started with today. I will be your Standing Stone; I will stand by you. I think we all want to be that presence, don't we? At some point in our lives we want to be able to offer that to another, or to many others. It's our inherent relationality. And what a gift to ourselves to be ABLE to offer it.

When we can trust that what we have to offer is strong enough for what another needs, we can risk trusting that another will accept it.

It starts here, where our truth lies, waiting to bear a trust that leads to love. Here, where the "persistent pulse is the rhythm of a blessing we cannot begin to fathom but will save us nonetheless."

May we marvel at the mystery of it all –

Amen.