

A Unique Outcome
Sermon topic bought at the 2008 spring auction by Ellen Silva
By Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
UU Church of Minnetonka
October 19, 2008

First Reading:

THANKS, ROBERT FROST

By David Ray

Do you have hope for the future?
someone asked Robert Frost, toward the end.
Yes, and even for the past, he replied,
that it will turn out to have been all right
for what it was, something we can accept,
mistakes made by the selves we had to be,
not able to be, perhaps, what we wished,
or what looking back half the time it seems
we could so easily have been, or ought...
The future, yes, and even for the past,
that it will become something we can bear.
And I too, and my children, so I hope,
will recall as not too heavy the tug
of those albatrosses I sadly placed
upon their tender necks. Hope for the past,
yes, old Frost, your words provide that courage,
and it brings strange peace that itself passes
into past, easier to bear because
you said it, rather casually, as snow
went on falling in Vermont years ago.

Second Reading:

THE BRIDGE

A Fable by Edwin Friedman

There was a man who had given much thought to what he wanted from life. He had experienced many moods and trials. He had experimented with different ways of living, and he had had his share of both success and failure. At last, he began to see clearly where he wanted to go.

Diligently, he searched for the right opportunity. Sometimes he came close, only to be pushed away. Often he applied all his strength and imagination, only to find the path hopelessly blocked. And then at last it came. But the opportunity would not wait. It would be made available only for a short time. If it were seen that he was not committed, the opportunity would not come again.

Eager to arrive, he started on his journey. With each step, he wanted to move faster; with each thought about his goal, his heart beat quicker; with each vision of what lay ahead, he found renewed vigor. Strength that had left him since his early youth returned, and desires, all kinds of desires, reawakened from their long-dormant positions.

Hurrying along, he came upon a bridge that crossed through the middle of a town. It had been built high above a river in order to protect it from the floods of spring.

He started across. Then he noticed someone coming from the opposite direction. As they moved closer, it seemed as though the other was coming to greet him. He could see clearly, however, that he did not know this other, who was dressed similarly except for something tied around his waist. When they were within hailing distance, he could see that what the other had about his waist was a rope. It was wrapped around him many times and probably, if extended, would reach a length of 30 feet.

The other began to uncurl the rope, and, just as they were coming close, the stranger said, "Pardon me, would you be so kind as to hold the end a moment?"

Surprised by this politely phrased but curious request, he agreed without a thought, reached out, and took it.

"Thank you," said the other, who then added, "two hands now, and remember, hold tight." Whereupon, the other jumped off the bridge.

Quickly, the free-falling body hurtled the distance of the rope's length, and from the bridge the man abruptly felt the pull. Instinctively, he held tight and was almost dragged over the side. He managed to brace himself against the edge, however, and after having caught his breath, looked down at the other dangling, close to oblivion.

"What are you trying to do?" he yelled.

"Just hold tight," said the other.

"This is ridiculous," the man thought and began trying to haul the other in. He could not get the leverage, however. It was as though the weight of the other person and the length of the rope had been carefully calculated in advance so that together they created a counterweight just beyond his strength to bring the other back to safety.

"Why did you do this?" the man cried.

"I am your responsibility," said the other.

"Well, I did not ask for it," the man said.

"If you let go, I am lost," repeated the other.

He began to look around for help. But there was no one. How long would he have to wait? Why did this happen to befall him now, just as he was on the verge of true success? He examined the side, searching for a place to tie the rope. Some protrusion, perhaps, or maybe a hole in the boards. But the railing was unusually uniform in shape; there were no spaces between the boards. There was no way to get rid of this newfound burden, even temporarily.

"What do you want?" he asked the other hanging below.

"Just your help," the other answered.

"How can I help? I cannot pull you in, and there is no place to tie the rope so that I can go and find someone to help me help you."

"I know that. Just hang on; that will be enough. Tie the rope around your waist; it will be easier."

Fearing that his arms could not hold out much longer, he tied the rope around his waist.

"Why did you do this?" he asked again. "Don't you see what you have done? What possible purpose could you have had in mind?"

"Just remember," said the other, "my life is in your hands."

What should he do? "If I let go, all my life I will know that I let this other die. If I stay, I risk losing my momentum toward my own long-sought-after salvation. Either way this will haunt me forever." With ironic humor he thought to die himself, instantly, to jump off the bridge while still holding on. "That would teach this fool." But he wanted to live and to live life fully. "What a choice I have to make; how shall I ever decide?"

As time went by, still no one came. The critical moment of decision was drawing near. To show his commitment to his own goals, he would have to continue on his journey now. It was already almost too late to arrive in time. But what a terrible choice to have to make.

A new thought occurred to him. While he could not pull this other up solely by his own efforts, if the other would shorten the rope from his end by curling it around his waist again and again, together they could do it. Actually, the other could do it by himself, so long as he, standing on the bridge, kept it still and steady.

“Now listen,” he shouted down. “I think I know how to save you.” And he explained his plan.

But the other wasn’t interested.

“You mean you won’t help? But I told you I cannot pull you up myself, and I don’t think I can hang on much longer either.”

“You must try,” the other shouted back in tears. “If you fail, I die.”

The point of decision arrived. What should he do? “My life or this other’s?” And then a new idea. A revelation. So new, in fact, it seemed heretical, so alien was it to his traditional way of thinking.

“I want you to listen carefully,” he said, “because I mean what I am about to say. I will not accept the position of choice for your life, only for my own; the position of choice for your own life I hereby give back to you.”

“What do you mean?” the other asked, afraid.

“I mean, simply, it’s up to you. You decide which way this ends. I will become the counterweight. You do the pulling and bring yourself up. I will even tug a little from here.” He began unwinding the rope from around his waist and braced himself anew against the side.

“You cannot mean what you say,” the other shrieked. “You would not be so selfish. I am your responsibility. What could be so important that you would let someone die? Do not do this to me.”

He waited a moment. There was no change in the tension of the rope. “I accept your choice,” he said, at last, and freed his hands.

Sermon:

A Unique Outcome

Sermon topic bought at the 2008 spring auction by Ellen Silva

By Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

UU Church of Minnetonka

October 19, 2008

In his fable called “The Bridge,” Rabbi Edwin Friedman uses a bridge as the setting for a relationship between two characters. Though the two characters in the story don’t even know each other, or barely know each other, this fable describes situations that many of us find our selves in over and over again, but often with a different ending and even more disturbing ending – that of holding on to the rope indefinitely.

Last week I shared this story of “The Bridge” with Ellen Silva. At the church auction last spring, Ellen was the highest bidder for my offer of a sermon, and she asked me to preach about the relationship between children and their parents. Specifically, Ellen wanted to tell me the story of her relationship with her mother Eloise, and then in a sermon, take it any direction I wanted from there. Ellen gave me a few boundaries, but said she was OK with me sharing anything with you that she told me about her relationship with her mother. After hearing Ellen’s story, I shared Friedman’s fable of “The Bridge” with her. When I was finished, she sat there open-mouthed. “That’s exactly what I felt,” she told me, and thought it would be exactly the right reading for this sermon.

Since I am offering a sermon for the auction once again this year, and since the auction is coming up on November 1st, I thought this could be a pretty good opportunity to advertise. Advertise the auction, I mean! We'll have to wait until my offer of a sermon goes up on the auction block before we discover the *true* monetary value of my brilliant creativity and astonishing insight...

Well, Ellen and I met once at the beginning of the summer and a second time just a week ago to talk about her story and what I might say about it. As I listened to her, what emerged was a completely biased, subjective, skewed and one-sided story...which of course, is only what it could be. That is all it ever is when we hear someone talk about another member of their family! I believe Ellen completely when I hear her story, and her painful feelings about her mom as a result of their relationship, but I also know there is more to the story I will never know. There is more to the story than Ellen will ever know, and I believe there is more to this story than even Eloise knows.

Stories of pain and abuse come from long and convoluted lineages. Statistics show that children who grow up in abusive households tend to grow up to be abusive adults, and children who grow up in alcoholic households tend to grow up to be alcoholics. But these patterns are not always our own. They come from a long time ago, before we were even born, and from even before our parents were born. If we do not engage in deep soul work, those patterns and stories sometimes run over us like a Mac Truck before we even have a chance to see anything coming.

Though I never met Eloise, based on the stories I heard from Ellen, I assume Eloise had a fairly painful childhood. But just because we know someone was raised with a lot of pain doesn't make it any easier to live with them. And in some cases, if we are growing up as a vulnerable child with those people, we may feel even more angry or hurt because we wonder, if our mother or father grew up with so much pain, why they then perpetuate the pain on us.

According to Ellen, Eloise was harsh and insensitive. She tore other people down in order to make herself look good or feel better. She would behave in ways that fulfilled her own needs, but then lie about her behavior so she would look good in other people's eyes. Ellen shared several stories about the pain she experienced when her mother tore her down, or made fun of her, or told Ellen she was the cause of a problem. These messages built up over time, and over time, some of those external messages became so deep and camouflaged that they seemed to be Ellen's own voice mocking her. Anger and resentment built up. The only way Ellen could do anything "right" was to do it the way her mother said. But even trying to find out what was "right" was a moving target.

It was only in the last few years, and even since last January, when Ellen knew she had to make some changes in her life. Because she felt deeply inauthentic in her relationship with her mother, that made every other relationship in her life feel inauthentic. Ellen felt that the lack of authenticity she experienced with her mother cheapened every other relationship. Basically, Ellen felt as though she was living a lie.

A trigger for a change in Ellen's behavior came earlier this year when she went to visit Jenny, her younger daughter, who was teaching English in Korea. During that visit, as Ellen thought about her own mother, a switch went off in her head that made her realize she did not want to perpetuate with Jenny, or either of her daughters, the same relationship she had with Eloise. After her visit to Korea, Ellen knew she had to do something to live a more authentic life.

A form of healing work exists called "Narrative Therapy." Narrative work is a process, as the name suggests, of telling – and re-telling – our life story. Millions of events, like pinpoints of stars in the night sky, exist in our lives. From those millions of events we choose only a few, connect them together in a sequence, and then use that thin line as a definition of our entire being.

In Narrative Therapy, that thin line is called the "Dominant Story." This Dominant Story is usually condensed into one line. It can be something positive, like "I am a good driver," but more often the Dominant Story goes something like this: "Everyone around me is smart, but I am stupid and

a failure”; or “I’m too fat and I have never been able to loose weight so that proves I am a worthless person”; or “my friends are dying, I keep getting sick, the universe is against me and keeps beating me down and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

We string together the events of our lives in a narrative that proves the Dominant Story. But one of the soul-affirming qualities of Narrative work is the exploration and discovery of what’s called a “Unique Outcome.” If someone continually tells the story of how they are a failure, it is the task of the caregiver to ask questions like, “was there ever a time when you weren’t a failure?” or “was there ever a time in your life when you did something well, and you knew it?” Because we are whole people and are not, really, defined by a one-sentence description, we always find something that contradicts the Dominant Story.

So a person might respond to these questions by saying, “well, there was this one time in fourth grade when I did this science project. I went to a museum, drew all the pictures by hand for my paper, and the teacher gave me an ‘A.’ It was the only ‘A’ I ever got in grade school.” A story like that is a Unique Outcome. A follow-up question goes something like this, “Well, if you are a complete failure, then how is it possible for a ‘failure’ such as yourself to ever get an ‘A’ on anything?”

A Unique Outcome inserts a wedge into the Dominant Story. Over time, as the struggling person and the caregiver work together to discover and explore Unique Outcomes, the wedge gets driven in more deeply. Other stories of success slowly emerge. Other life events – that is, those millions of other pinpoints of light in the night sky *that already exist* – are given prominence. In the process, the person begins to see themselves as the author of their own story. The life events do not change, but the thin line connecting those life events becomes thicker and begins to include more and more events. Over time the narrative changes from “I am a failure,” to something closer to “I’ve done many things in my life that have failed, but I’ve also had some pretty amazing successes, and created some beautiful and lasting friendships.” Over time, one Unique Outcome becomes a common theme in the narrative thread, ultimately creating a new, healthier Dominant Story.

In this way, rather than being a helpless byproduct of their own story, a person evolves into an active, and proactive, agent in their own story. The person takes damaging life events and puts them into the context of their whole life, in the context of all relationships, in the context of all their failures and successes, in the context of how their life fits into the context of all the lives that came before.

In her work with her mother, this is what Ellen did. In the context of her childhood, Ellen was inserted into the middle of her mother’s story. This is the process we all go through. This is the process of all life. We are created and born into a world that was here before we were. One difference for Ellen – and a difference many of us experience – is that in her early life she was not allowed the freedom to discover and tell her own story. Part of our human task is to learn the context into which we were born, and then as we grow, to make discernments between our past context and a new context that is more uniquely our own.

It seems to me that Ellen’s work to be authentic with her mother might be akin to “coming out of the closet” for someone who is gay. Because of all the secrecy and compartmentalization it requires to live in the closet, it is emotionally painful to stay in the closet. But “coming out” also means becoming vulnerable to an abusive world that wanted to keep us in the closet in the first place.

From what little I know about coming out of the closet though, the pain of coming out of the closet, no matter what the cost, is less painful than staying in the closet. Being an authentic, whole person is more liberating and meaningful than the reality of cutting off a huge chunk of your humanity just to survive.

In Friedman's fable of "The Bridge," the main character is similarly caught between two painful choices. We could say that the story is merely a tale of human selfishness and self-preservation. We may argue that the person on the bridge could have waited a while longer for someone to come along and help him. In the fable, the person on the bridge holds the rope a long time, and makes many suggestions about how they could solve the problem. But each time, the person dangling over the edge simply responds, "You can't let go, my life is in your hands. If you fail, I die."

This fable that Edwin Friedman spins does not arise from the ether. Rabbi Friedman was clergy and a scholar for many years, writing many books about systems and systems theory. Perhaps his most famous book is called *Generation to Generation*, which is about how family systems interact with congregational systems, and how, without a great deal of intentional and systemic work, dysfunction perpetuates itself from one generation to another, oftentimes without later generations even knowing what the dysfunction is or where it came from.

Friedman created his fable, "The Bridge," out of many years of providing family counseling and congregational consults. As is the case with all fables, this one carries with it many truths. The primary lesson I take away from this fable is a lesson about setting boundaries. Of course we want to help someone who is in pain or in need. But if they refuse all offers of assistance, if they refuse all efforts to work together, if they refuse to engage in any kind of self-reflection or deeper spiritual work to look at their own lives, then there is no possible way anyone else can help them. The ironic thing about all this is that the person dangling over the bridge, the person who refuses to engage in any self-work, the person who falls into the chasm, often comes away feeling that no one cares.

Ultimately, the person on the bridge discovers that the only way through the tangled relationship is to set boundaries, and to be clear about how they will use and work with those boundaries.

"I want you to listen carefully," the main character says, "because I mean what I am about to say. I will not accept the position of choice for your life, only for my own; the position of choice for your own life I hereby give back to you." "What do you mean?" the other asks, afraid. "I mean, simply, it's up to you. You decide which way this ends."

As I heard Ellen's story, and as I re-read Edwin Friedman's fable, I found myself feeling grateful for the intentional work this congregation is doing. On November 15, at a Saturday morning workshop, this congregation will begin to work on and create a congregational behavior covenant, a covenant of right relations. Three congregational entities are jointly planning this workshop: the Worship Arts Ministry, the Committee on Ministry, and me. We are engaging in this work as a proactive effort to address unhealthy behaviors and unhealthy systems. We will begin to explore healthier interactions and healthier systems in which we may engage one another. We will begin the intentional work of saying, "the position of choice for your own life we hereby give back to you."

As I listened to Ellen Silva's story about her relationship with her mother, I knew she was acting out the part in the fable of the man on the bridge. After a lifetime of holding on to the rope for her mother who dangled over the gorge below, after years of rope burn on her hands and aching muscles, Ellen finally said "no." The risk of losing any additional closeness with her mother was far less painful than continuing to hold the rope. After years of holding on to the rope, and after years of her mother doing nothing to climb back up, Ellen finally let go. Earlier this summer, Ellen told her mother that she no longer felt any love for her.

The poet David Ray writes:

Do you have hope for the future?
someone asked Robert Frost, toward the end.
Yes, and even for the past, he replied,
that it will turn out to have been all right
for what it was, something we can accept,
mistakes made by the selves we had to be,
not able to be, perhaps, what we wished,
or what looking back half the time it seems
we could so easily have been, or ought...
The future, yes, and even for the past,
that it will become something we can bear.
And I too, and my children, so I hope,
will recall as not too heavy the tug
of those albatrosses I sadly placed
upon their tender necks...

Eloise took it much better at first than Ellen thought she would. Things got more difficult a little later, but they are still communicating. It is a relationship in progress. It is a relationship that has been forever changed because Ellen decided she would no longer allow herself to be hurt. As painful as the process has been, it has also been extremely empowering. And, it has lifted a great burden. Ellen no longer feels she is living a lie.