

One Flawed Knot
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Two Readings for the Congregational Story time

Artist's Vitality - By Martha Graham

There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action. There is only one of you in all time. Your expression is unique, but if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium; and be lost. If you block it the world will not have your expression. It is not your business to determine how good your expression is, nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep your expression yours clearly and directly. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. What you have to do is keep open and aware directly to the urges that motivate you. No artist is pleased. There is no satisfaction whatever at any time. No artist is ever satisfied. There is only a divine dis-satisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than others.

What I Like and Don't Like

by Philip Schultz

I like to say hello and goodbye.
I like to hug but not shake hands.
I prefer to wave or nod. I enjoy
the company of strangers pushed
together in elevators or subways.
I like talking to cab drivers
but not receptionists. I like
not knowing what to say.
I like talking to people I know
but care nothing about. I like
inviting anyone anywhere.
I like hearing my opinions
tumble out of my mouth
like toddlers tied together
while crossing the street,
trusting they won't be squashed
by fate. I like greeting-card clichés
but not dressing up or down.
I like being appropriate
but not all the time.
I could continue with more examples
but I'd rather give too few
than too many. The thought
of no one listening anymore—
I like that least of all.

A Reading for the Sermon

The Blessings of Age

Barbara Rohde

One hears so much about the calamities of growing old that at sixty I began to make a list of the things that I like about my advancing years. My younger friends suggested that I was merely playing at Pollyana. My older friends gently pointed out that my list might grow shorter as my life grows longer. Still, I made my list.

At the head of my list was this remarkable discovery: I was beginning to find the foibles of my friends and relatives endearing.

I could understand how, after observing the real tragedies of life for two-thirds of a century, one would become more tolerant of minor irritations. In a world filled with suffering of the hungry and homeless and the victims of violence, the cap left off the toothpaste tube does not loom very large.

But my fondness for these foibles came as a surprise to me. I suppose I finally have come to understand that when one loves, one loves the whole person, a person defined by foibles as well as strengths. Of course, there is still the flash of irritation, but these days when we say, "Isn't that just like him," more often than not, we say it with affection, with the same pleasure of recognition as when the letter in the mailbox is addressed in familiar handwriting.

Perhaps every long [relationship] follows five stages: 1) Darling, you are perfect; 2) Good grief! You seem to have a few foibles; 3) Let me help you get rid of your foibles so you will indeed be perfect; 4) Okay, I love you in spite of your foibles; 5) I can't believe this has happened. I sometimes love you because of your foibles.

I recently made the wonderful discovery that "foible" originally meant the weak part of a sword, from the center to the tip, while "forte" referred to the sword's stronger part. That says something to me about accepting our weaknesses while holding on to our strengths. Who would want to go out to meet a dragon with only half a sword?

One Flawed Knot
A Sermon
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On this pedestal is a brown clay pot that usually sits on a table in my church office. This pot was hand-made by a friend of mine many years ago. She shaped it on a potter's wheel, then painted it, glazed it, and fired it in a kiln. But the clay pot did not emerge as planned. My friend had mistakenly made the clay walls on one side of the pot a little too thin, and the heat of the kiln was just too much. So when my friend removed the pot from the kiln, she discovered that one entire side had collapsed over sideways on itself like a dirty washrag hanging on spigot.

My friend brought the pot home, intending to throw it out along with other broken pieces, and then go back to the studio to throw more pots, creating new designs with the knowledge she had acquired about thin clay walls. But this pot caught my attention and I asked if I could have it. She shrugged her shoulders and gladly handed it over.

I've never used the pot to hold flowers, though it could easily do that. I've never used it to hold water or anything else either, though it still could easily function in many practical ways. Instead, I display this pot on my shelf as a piece of art, as a thing of beauty. I like that I don't "use" it for anything. I like the glaze and the feel of the hardened clay. I like how it sits there, with one lop-sided wall flopping over on to itself. I like how I am engaged by the cemented folds, irritated and wanting to bend up the edges back to their original shape while simultaneously reveling in the beauty of the deformed twists and hardened clay curves.

I wanted to talk more about imperfection today because I was not quite satisfied after completing my most recent church newsletter article. In that article, I wrote about house hunting and house-finding. I felt my writing was imperfect, that I had not explored all I wanted to say. Believe it or not, sometimes I find it difficult in a 500-word essay to say everything I want to say! Sometimes it is hard to say everything I want to say in an entire sermon. Sometimes I go home on Sunday afternoons, wishing I had made more accurate articulations with a bit more depth or a bit more twist of nuance. But as Robert Frost wrote, "there are miles to go before I sleep." Reality intrudes on our dream lives and wish lists, and we are required to get our work done as best we can in the time available.

In the newsletter article, I wrote about how my wife Heidi and I recently found a house, and plan to have the closing on February 26th. The house is in Hopkins, about eight miles from here. Here's what I wrote in the newsletter:

"We love the house. This is the first home for both of us. After living in seven different apartments in the past six-and-a-half years of our relationship, we will now have decent closet space, a beautiful kitchen with lots of counter and cabinet space, a separate room we can use as our office, room for children, lots of other storage space, and a yard. It is amazing how good this feels: to finally have a home, to finally feel settled, to finally have a sense of permanence and commitment to one place.

“Of course, we do not like a few things about our new house. It has a very small main floor bathroom, and there are no coat closets by the front or back door. But this is the way of things. It is rare, if not impossible, to find everything we want in one house, in one town, in one person, in one relationship, in one job, in one religion, in one community. So, to live as well as we can, we find in things the pieces that give us the greatest joy with the least amount of disappointment, and plunge in with a sense of commitment.

“I can’t help but think about this in the context of a spiritual life, and the life of an individual living in relationship with a larger religious community. We spend our lives in search of a perfect physical, spiritual or emotional home. The truth is we are not likely to find it. But on our good days, we recognize and accept that the universe throws imperfect things into our world and into our lives, and that we too are made with our own flaws. When we are at our best, we may even understand that our imperfection and beauty are all wrapped up together.

“From my own experience, when I recognize my own flaws it is easier to move through the world with a sense of appreciative humility and be more forgiving. As we – you and me, and you with each other – move forward together these next few years, as we work with architects, with the City of Wayzata, and with each other to construct our new church building and spiritual home, I pray that we hold on to our vision of perfection while at the same time acknowledge our flaws. It will take a lot of hard work, extraordinary patience, deep commitment, and an active practice of continual compassionate forgiveness with one another.

“Imperfection. Beauty. Both, wrapped up together. This is the way of things.”

It wasn’t until later in the week when someone wrote me an email reflection on my article that I realized what was missing. The email was very positive, but also reminded me that another ingredient in the mix of living with imperfection, a quality that makes a bridge between an object and its flaws, is the quality of love.

When we begin a relationship – with another person, an object like a house, or a community – perhaps we begin it with a sense that we are taking a little bit of bad so we can have the bigger piece of good. As we mature in our relationships though, and as Barbara Rohde suggests, we choose to love not in spite of another’s foibles, but *because* of the foibles. After sharing that “foible” originally meant the weak part of a sword from the center to the tip, Rohde writes, “That says something to me about accepting our weaknesses while holding on to our strengths. Who would want to go out to meet a dragon with only half a sword?”

Rohde doesn’t elaborate, but I’ve contemplated what that “something” might be about “accepting our weaknesses while holding on to our strengths.” When I was younger, especially in high school and in my twenties, I was always waiting for love to find me. I waited for the movie ideal of “falling in love.” I waited for someone to knock my socks off. I waited to be hit with a ton of bricks. I waited to be swept off my feet. But all I did was go through several girlfriends, grow older with waiting, and feel progressively more hurt that the universe did not bestow upon me the love I saw so many other people around me experiencing. It took me many years to discover that loving is a choice.

We certainly feel an affinity for some people and things more than others, but an act of true love also involves making a conscious choice. The universe presents itself to us as it is – black holes and falling stars, moss-covered waterfalls and boiling volcanoes, loving parents with addictive tendencies, old friends who have affairs, kind and generous neighbors who yell at their

kids, external lives of competence and joy riding side-by-side with internal lives of anger, shame and fear. Entering into true love and living in a healthy relationship involves moving through this field with a combination of savvy and vulnerability. It takes some savvy to know when and how it is emotionally safe to be vulnerable, and takes some awareness about knowing when others feel safe with you. I believe this is part of the “something” Barbara Rohde was talking about. It is one thing to take a whole, complete sword into battle, knowing that it has both weaknesses and strengths. But it takes familiarity with those strengths and weaknesses, and savvy about how to use each part of the sword in order for the sword to be effective.

But as I interpret it, the metaphor of the sword in relationship to love is less about violence than it is about understanding flaws.

When I was a hospital chaplain for a year at Methodist Hospital in St. Louis Park, I was charged with being responsible for two areas: the fifth floor – a floor that housed a potpourri of patients with a variety of illnesses and addictions – and the cardiac unit. Some of the deepest and most meaningful interactions I had were with patients who were less concerned about their illness than they were about how their illness – or possibly their impending death – might affect their families and those they loved.

In the first three months I was there, one woman on my floor had been in and out several times because of her alcoholism. Each time she came in I visited with her, and she shared her feelings of deep shame and regret for not being a better wife and for not being a better mother to her children. Each time I left her room I felt both hopeful and inadequate. Each time we met she would talk about all the things she would do differently when she got out of the hospital this time, and then, inevitably I would see her name on the hospital roster a few weeks later.

In my first few months there, I wondered how I was supposed to help her and all those other people on my floors with all their problems. As I rode the shuttle bus with doctors and nurses and social workers from the parking lot to the hospital each morning, I wondered why I was even needed in the hospital since I could not fix people and make things right like those other professionals did.

I went into a downward spiral. I did not want to visit patients because I felt I could not do anything to help them. This brought up old issues for me about not being as good as my brother, about not living the life that my mother always wanted for me, about all the ways I knew I was inadequate. It took continued engagement in my work and many months of regular mentorship from my supervisor to find a way through that jungle. I slowly began to realize that the process I was going through was similar to the process many patients went through. More than that, I realized it was a process similar to what other “healthy” people go through as well, even doctors, nurses and social workers.

The universe presents its whole self to us – in the stars and planets, in other people, and inside our selves. The human heart has an almost infinite capability for cruelty, violence, and destruction. Sometimes it seems as though we carry around little heavy demons on our shoulders, in our skulls, or on our hearts, and we pay attention to those demons as though only they are what defines who we are, as though we prefer to be trapped in that definition and life.

But I know another side as well. I know the human heart also has an almost infinite capacity for compassion, forgiveness, and grace. And we cannot be other than what we are. A sunflower cannot be an oak tree, and an oak tree cannot be a vine of morning glories. My choice then is not to be something I am not, but to learn and understand more deeply the “foibles” and “fortes” – the gifts and limitations – of my own being. The work of ministry then, the practice of love – work in which it is possible for all of us to engage on many levels – does not involve

“fixing” anyone, making them into something they are not. Rather, the work of ministry – the practice of love – involves a willingness to be present in the company of tension, and a capacity for seeing things and people, and our selves, not for what we could be, but for what we are right now, in this moment.

About a year ago I went to a concert by the local folk musician, Peter Mayer. He had written a new song about Japanese bowls and about a traditional Japanese method of restoring cracked and broken ceramics. I was so moved by his song that later I researched a little more what Peter Mayer had described. This traditional method of ceramic repair dates back somewhere between 600 and 1000 years, and is called *kin-tsugi*, which translates literally as, “joint with gold.” This method of repair involves using an organic lacquer called *urushi* mixed with gold to bind the broken pieces together. So when these ancient bowls broke, people did not throw them out or use some form of mere practical repair. Rather, they had an artisan repair the bowl using gold to fill the cracks. When I went online and saw pictures, some bowls had only one or two shards bound back together, and others had many branching cracks repaired with gold and polished. In some cases, it seemed as though the bowl was actually stronger once the repair was made with gold. On one website they said that this form of repair follows a Japanese philosophy of “enjoying the new view without hiding the flaw.”

Like the weavers of ancient Persian rugs who always tied one flawed knot in their beautiful designs as a reminder that nothing is perfect, the Japanese artists also knew that beauty comes not in the form of perfection, but in cracks and failures, in mistakes and brokenness.

In the photographs I saw online, I like the designs and the glaze on many of the bowls and pots. I like how they sit there, perched on a tabletop with a lopsided gold stripe careening from one lip to the other. I like how I am engaged by the cemented cracks, slightly dissatisfied and wanting to paint over the blemishes back to the original design while simultaneously reveling in the beauty of the deformed and polished ceramic fragments and shards. I like that the broken places are mended with gold, and that often those mended cracks make the bowl stronger.