

**Sunday 26 February 2012**

## **What Can They Do to You?**

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**Nora Unitarian Universalist Church**

“We sing of golden mornings, of sparkling seas, of prairies, valleys, mountains, and stately forest trees/we sing of hopes undaunted/the roses waiting beneath deep-piled snow/the earth’s great splendor, whose beauty round us glows.” Our hymn this morning. It was a great hymn on Friday, when I was commuting into Minneapolis in the sunshine. A great hymn on Saturday, warm and pleasant in the morning, when I put my baby in a backpack and took him and my little daughter out for a walk through the neighborhood.

But the uplifting, unrelentingly cheery optimism is just not how I feel all the time. And especially on a cold Sunday morning like this, when you look at the calendar and there is still a long slog through cold and darkness, and snow and mud, and sometimes those hopes don’t stay undaunted. They get pretty daunted pretty quick.

So at this time of year, I listen to a lot of New England folk music. I grew up in Boston, I grew up listening to this. Singers like Gordon Bok, or Stan Rogers sing about life in northern New England and the maritime provinces of Canada, of fisherman on a rough and unforgiving sea and of farmers scratching out a living on a tough and bare land.

Teri my wife, pokes fun at this whole genre of music sometimes, because she says the lyrics of all the songs basically go like this:

Good times are gone and will never come back.  
There are no fish left and the future is black.  
Our entire way of life is now gone.  
We’re old and weary, the days are so long.

Even though the parody is a bit extreme, that is the general theme of a great many songs. And you have to admit is more or less the opposite of “we sing the hearts courageous, the youthful eager mind/we sing of hopes undaunted, of friendly ways and kind.”

But in amidst the stark facts of fishermen who never come home and mills that are forever closed there is also a gentle perseverance. A beautiful, simple call to just endure on through, to keep showing up. And that’s a message I listen for in this cold season. There’s a song by Gordon Bok whose chorus concludes, simply:

If I had a thing to give you, I would tell you one more time that the world is always turning  
toward the morning.

Survive to see it.

The singer wrote, explaining the origin of the song:

One of the things that provoked this song was a letter last  
November from a friend who had had a very difficult year and was  
looking for the courage to keep on plowing into it. Those times,  
you lift your eyes unto the hills, as they say, but the hills [of  
Northern New England] in November can be about as much comfort as

a cold crowbar. You have to look ahead a bit, then, and realize that all the hills and trees and flowers will still be there come Spring, usually more permanent than your troubles. And if your courage occasionally fails, that's okay, too: nobody expects you to be as strong (or as old) as the land.

If I had a thing to give you, I would tell you one more time that the world is always turning toward the morning.

That song, that sense has been playing through my mind as I've watched video testimonials from the online project, It Gets Better.

After a series of suicides by gay teens who had been harassed, bullied and beaten up – kids, 13 year olds, 14, 15 – the writer and columnist Dan Savage started It Gets Better (<http://www.itgetsbetterproject.com/>), a way of speaking directly to other kids in the same situation, contemplating if they can survive it.

He wrote this, by way of explanation:

Billy Lucas was just 15 when he hanged himself in a barn on his grandmother's property. He reportedly endured intense bullying at the hands of his classmates—classmates who called him a fag and told him to kill himself. His mother found his body.

Nine out of 10 gay teenagers experience bullying and harassment at school, and gay teens are four times likelier to attempt suicide. Many LGBT kids who do kill themselves live in rural areas, exurbs, and suburban areas, places with no gay organizations or services for queer kids.

... I wish I could have talked to this kid for five minutes. I wish I could have told Billy that *it gets better*. I wish I could have told him that, however bad things were, however isolated and alone he was, *it gets better*.

But gay adults aren't allowed to talk to these kids. Schools and churches don't bring us in to talk to teenagers who are being bullied. Many of these kids have homophobic parents who believe that they can prevent their gay children from growing up to be gay—or from ever coming out—by depriving them of information, resources, and positive role models.

Why are we waiting for permission to talk to these kids? We have the ability to talk directly to them right now. We don't have to wait for permission to let them know that it gets better. We can reach these kids.

So he recorded a video, he and his partner, and put it on YouTube, to tell those youth what he wanted to hear when he was in middle school, in high school: that it gets better. It gets better when you get out of a hateful house, or church or school. It gets better. That you will find someone you love, that you can be a parent if you want to, that you will have deep friendships. That you can be who you are and have always been. That it gets better.

He started a YouTube channel online, where that video is now joined by more than forty thousand others, thousands of videos of GLBT adults and some allies: single and couples, young and old, every race, parents and childless, they tell their own stories of being bullied, and that it gets better.

I spent a whole morning watching these, mesmerized, moved. I watched engineers at Google tell their stories, together, I watched from a dad holding his one year old son on his lap, feeding the little guy a croissant to keep him quiet, while the dad told his story. I watched Gene Robinson, the first open gay Episcopal bishop, offering the assurance that God loves you, just as you are, beyond your wildest imagination. One after another they told their stories, which were the same story. It was bad. It gets better.

And what they are saying, what they are all saying is: hang on. Live. Stay in. Don't leave, don't check out, don't give up. Stay. Survive.

Survive.

Not one of those videos tried to say that everything's fine. They said: survive.

Not one person said: "oh, come on, it's not really that bad." No, they said: "it really is bad." Survive anyway.

It is a fierce message. Loving, tender, but fierce. With eyes wide open and no illusions whatsoever about the difficulty. None.

Survive.

Ellen Bass says it, she says:

The thing is to love life, to love it even  
when you have no stomach for it  
and everything you've held dear  
crumbles like burnt paper in your hands,  
your throat filled with the silt of it.  
When grief sits with you, its tropical heat  
thickening the air, heavy as water  
more fit for gills than lungs;  
when grief weights you like your own flesh  
only more of it, an obesity of grief,  
you think, *How can a body withstand this?*  
Then you hold life like a face  
between your palms, a plain face,  
no charming smile, no violet eyes,  
and you say, yes, I will take you  
I will love you, again.

This is at the heart of things: to look life steadily, calmly in the eye, not to run away, not to minimize it, not to make yourself numb to it. To look steadily into the great ugliness, the suffering, the loss, and choose love, choose life. Not happiness at every moment, but love and life. We are not a pray without

ceasing for our own happiness church. We are a pray without ceasing to feel love and compassion church. The thing is to choose life, to choose it and keep choosing it, again and again, even if you don't know why, if even you're not sure that things will ever get better, even if the present moment seems unendurable.

I met a man who went through fourteen treatments for alcoholism. Fourteen. Maybe a few less or more. Inpatient, outpatient, short term long term, all around the country. It never stuck. And then, number fourteen. It stuck, he was years sober, then married, then a father. And I think: first, he survived. That's astonishing in itself. Alcoholism, like so many addictions, eating disorders, drugs, these are terminal diseases. But fourteen times. As much as the mysterious something that made the fourteenth time stick, what amazes me is attempts 2-13. or even more specifically, like attempts 7-13. He kept coming back, trying, again, knowing it was the right place to be, the right thing to do, even though time and again it didn't work. He knew he couldn't do it alone.

To know that, just by itself, is countercultural. To believe that you can't do whatever you want all by yourself, it's practically un-American!

We have this odd, cowboy ideal of goin' it alone. Or a peculiarly Minnesotan memory of a great-grandfather bringing in crops for eighteen hours a day the whole month long. Or a great-grandmother raising a dozen kids on her own. There's a mythic proportion to those people who did it all by themselves.

I think this is totally bogus. I walked through the cemetery out back this morning and it tells a different story: not isolation, but family, community, dedication to each other. They made it just like we do: by telling each other their stories, by listening, by loving each other and this world. By not trying to do it alone. By surviving long enough for things to change, to get better. By laughing together and worshipping and singing and mourning together.

We've got to dispel the myth that the right way to live is to tough things out all by ourselves.

This mindset shows up in weird, unexpected places.

I remember, I took a logic class in college. It was horrible. (have you ever had a class, where from the very first day, you just say: I do not understand any of this.) I failed it, withdrew. But, I had to take the class to graduate, because I was a philosophy major; it was required.

So a year later I took it again. I was going to do it all by myself. And I worked. I worked and worked and worked. I spent days in the library. I skipped the extra help sessions because I told myself -- I was self-contained, self-possessed, entirely able to do whatever I chose to do, whatever I set my mind to, all on my own, all by myself.

But I'm not that person. None of us are.

Mostly, at the time, I was scared to admit I needed help, scared to admit I didn't know what to do, scared I couldn't do it on my own. And finally desperation drove me out of isolation and I arrived at a help session to find a teacher who was absolutely delighted to see me. Who was rooting for my success. And a half-dozen other students, just like me -- regular, ordinary people who found the topic really challenging --

because it was really challenging. And they were all rooting for me. And I was for them. And we passed it together.

Look, passing a college class is not exactly a do or die moment. My safety, my health, my family weren't threatened.

(I was telling my problems – complaining, really -- to a friend a few years ago and he listened to me for a while, listened to it all, and finally said, said: man, man, you've got some high-class problems. You got problems, but high class problems.)

But that way of thinking, of acting, of being separated shows up in little ways in our lives and in big ways too. It's in high class problems and in the deepest problems. It's there in the person who decides that starving themselves is a good way to control a world that feels uncontrollable. Or the person who decides that cheating on their partner is a good solution to feeling miserable in their relationship. Or the person who never, ever, lets anyone see them hurting, and tearing themselves apart from the inside out.

The point is, whether the problems you're facing are high-class or fundamental, life and death, there is a force of aloneness like a living thing, like a demon on your shoulder. It tells you the only way to be secure, the only way to be stable is to keep doing what you're doing. It tells you: you have to stay closed off, you have to stay closed in. It tells you that no one will understand who you are. No one will like you, no one will connect with you, you should take care of your own problems yourself.

Friends, I do not believe in demons that sit on our shoulders. I don't believe in evil spirits. But that sense of isolation, that voice which tells you never to drop the mask, never to reveal what's truly happening, that tells you no one else is safe. That is as close to the demonic as it gets. It cuts you off from being alive. It cuts you off from being whole. It tries to cut you off from hope. And it does this by trying to cut us off from each other.

That's part of what broke my heart open listening to the stories and lives shared in the It Gets Better videos. They broke down all sense of isolation. And it's what church can do: to tell our stories to each other, to hear them, to be not alone, this is holy work for us to do.

Marge Piercy asks the question:

What can they do  
to you? Whatever they want.  
They can set you up, they can  
bust you, they can break [you].

How can you stop  
them? Alone, you can fight,  
you can refuse, you can  
take what revenge you can  
but they roll over you.

Two people can keep each other  
sane, can give support, conviction, love...  
Three people are a delegation, a committee...  
With four you can play bridge and start  
an organization.

It goes on one at a time,  
it starts when you care  
to act...  
it starts when you say We  
and know who you mean, and each  
day you mean one more.

We're talking about resilience and community. And it would be nice to end with some big finale, send you out singing of hopes undaunted, of friendly ways and kind – some fireworks where we all walk out of here pumped up. And ready to go. "Let's be resilient."

But I don't think that's really how it works. Not for very long, anyways.

As near as I can tell, we're making the path by walking together. Surviving, catching glimpses of holiness, or grace. And trying our best to keep doing all that again and again and again, carrying each other. Sometime losing courage, but sooner or later taking life once again in hand -- life: plain, uncharming -- and saying yes I will love you again. We will survive long enough together for it to get better. That is holy work. And that is enough.