

Sermon 1 19 2014 Running Toward Resilience

Here in our temperate rain forest home it is easy to imagine metaphors of water- it is everywhere in our urban water scape, green fern fronds curling around stop sign poles, an emerald gown of lichen draping from high branches in the yard. The memory of water pulsing through plant life so exuberant, so thriving that it competes with itself for access to the sky.

But water means something else in the desert- it is a cypher, enigmatic, powerful, more like hidden treasure to the small body of people who live in the northeastern corner of Arizona. Perhaps like me, you thought that the sandy dirt of the desert was one color-tan. But in the photos of Chinle, a town of 4,500 in the isolated middle of the Navajo Nation, I see that the sandy earth is actually brick red, mustard, a charcoal black, with flecks of gold twinkling the sun's plentiful light. The colors change as the stretched cirrus clouds fly overhead, clouds that Shaun Martin appraises as he runs 30, 40, even 50 miles at a time. If the clouds are moving quickly he will break his runners stride, pick up handfuls of gold-flecked sand, and press their warmth to his chest- he wants the cloud's blessing, for like him they are traversing long distances.

Shaun Martin also wants the blessing of that cipher, water- he prays to be like a stream, smooth and relaxed when the time is right, and when needed, to be forceful, powerful. Shaun hops across the streams, under the sparse cottonwood trees, and through the deep white sands of Chinle Wash, where 150 years ago his defeated Navajo ancestors began a forced march out of their homeland. For Shaun, running is a part of being Navajo- before Spanish immigrants brought horses the Navajo hunted deer by running them to exhaustion. Scouts

sought out water in the vast desert by running for days, groups ran into the mountains on multi-day treks to gather salt from remote lakes. In fact the seasons were created by running- in the Navajo creation story White-Shell Woman ran toward the horizon until she was transformed into Changing Woman. That moment is recreated in tribal life, with girls who have just gotten their first menses celebrated at Kinnalda, with the girl running as far as she can across the desert- the farther she goes, the more she will achieve in life.

Changing Woman is not just a historical legend- Shaun tells the high school track and cross country students he coaches the Navajo story of Changing Woman's twin sons, whom she bore to defeat monsters that were plaguing the tribe. The twins ran long distances with holy people, learning and growing stronger, until they were powerful enough to destroy the evil creatures. The students learn that they are running today not just to win races, but to defeat the evils again plaguing their tribe- alcoholism, drugs, poverty, domestic violence, and unemployment. Those evils are real. Unemployment in the Navajo nation is more than 40 percent, the median household income is \$20,000. Drugs and alcohol lead to many accidents, which are the town's leading cause of death. One of his runners lost his mother recently, she drunkenly drove into a deep ditch. Another lives with his grandparents, his warring parents have split, and running is his break from overseeing his siblings homework and chores. They all hope for scholarships, money for college that isn't coming from any other source. The first in the family to go to a university, the first to graduate from high school. Shaun's coaching is centered on this- running will give you opportunities, it will give you a way out of a life of laboring in the coal mine that is the town's central employer. One boy runs with the dream of a scholarship to the University of

Wisconsin in his mind's eye. Why Wisconsin? Because it is far from the desert. Wherever it is, it is far away.

Shaun's bigger goal is to build resilience. His student athletes run through incredible heat, training all through the Arizona desert summer, they run through sore calves and tight IT bands. They run even though playing video games would be easier, even though smoking pot behind the convenience store would bring more immediate relief from a world of hopelessness. They spend hours on a school bus to get to a track meet and run for five minutes. They delay gratification. They build discipline. And this sustained effort does pay off- all ten of Shaun's seniors graduate, all ten receive college scholarships for their achievements in the classroom and in athletics.

Is it running that builds resilience? Is it physical pursuit that leads us, like White Shell Woman, to learn to regulate our seasons, our emotions? Like the mythic twins, do marathon distances lead us to defeat our tribe's demons? No, it's not about the running. But as philosophical souls such as Friedrich Nietzsche and American Idol-winner Kelly Clarkson remind us, what doesn't kill us makes us stronger.

Resilience is our theme for January, and in my mind it is a dual-trait in that it is both nature and nurture. We are born with the DNA to stumble, fall, and stay on the ground, or to stumble, fall, and get back up. However we can also build resilience. Last week we talked about stoking our resilience through the Buddhist practice of detachment, embracing the moments of our short lives without clinging to them, without unrealistically expecting them to last forever. Today I want us to consider an additional path- the Hero's Journey, as scholar of mythology Joseph

Campbell called it. Shaun's students embody this Hero's Journey that challenges them to great hardship, which they can accept or decline. The heroes aren't forced into their test. The runners volunteer for the sore calves and long bus trips, knowing that the cost is great but so is the reward. If the hero overcomes their challenge they earn a great personal boon, but also can bless their own communities. Is anyone familiar with the Hero's Journey? What other stories are based on this idea?

Perhaps the most popular is that of Jesus of Nazareth, central figure of the Christian religion. Jesus again and again chooses the path of most resistance, preaching after Roman authorities have made clear that to do so will lead to his death. Spending forty solitary days and nights alone in the desert, to face his demons internal and external, and prepare for his crucifixion.

The Buddha follows a similar narrative, as does Osiris, Moses, Prometheus, the characters' in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the *Star Wars* films, *Spiderman*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, the *Hunger Games*...there is something about hardship that builds our resilience, but we have to choose to take on the hardship. And from that difficult journey come life-changing insights and rewards. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger, especially if we run toward the journey, if we chose the journey.

But do we choose the journey? Sometimes I feel more like Bilbo Baggins at the beginning of *The Hobbit*, saying, 'No thanks, no adventure for me, I am quite fine with my everyday life.' No thanks is a problematic answer though if we are Unitarian Universalists. We are a part of a historical faith founded on our right- our responsibility- to undertake the spiritual journey, to

volunteer for the hardship of searching for meaning without a denominational creed to tell us what we believe in. We are spiritual seekers, not Bilbo Baggins's.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith finds meaning in seven principles, and the third principle reads "Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." We encourage our spiritual companions in this congregation to embrace their journey, to take on the sore calves in exchange for greater spiritual vistas. We accept that we aren't all in the same place but cheer each other on anyway.

So how is your spiritual journey going? What does a spiritual quest here at Shoreline Unitarian Universalist look like? Many of us are on the quest as part of a monthly chalice circle, meeting in small groups to discuss the monthly theme, and to search for truth together. Others have undertaken the challenge of Build Your Own Theology, a pre-church gathering to systematically consider the meaning of life, death, and the universe...as well as have some laughs. These groups are open to you. Lots of us lead Religious Exploration classes with our church's kids, and if that doesn't seem like a hero's journey, you weren't in the room when a seven-year-old asked why we have to die.

How about you? How is your spiritual journey? Perhaps like Bilbo Baggins you would rather skip the group journey, maybe you need a Thoreau-style independent undertaking. It can be hard to know where to start- come and see me and we will figure it out. Your path may lead through the woods or through service to our world. Don't skip the quest because you don't know where to start- we will find the way, together.

Here in our rain forest home we may not run thirty miles across the desert in search of Truth with a capital T. Ultra marathons aren't the only way to spiritual insight, thank goodness. But however you seek don't hesitate to break your stride and stop, scoop up handfuls of gold-flecked sand, press their warmth to your chest and ask the clouds for their blessing, pray to be like a stream, smooth and relaxed when the time is right, and when needed, to be forceful, powerful. Resistance is built on this journey, this quest that is rarely easy but is so much richer than staying home, safe. Take the journey. Find your stride. You are a Unitarian Universalist- this is what we do. From Francis David to Albert Einstein, this is what we do. Chose the journey.