

Sermon: Radical Forgiveness 2/16/2014

I knew that my ministerial internship, the two years that I spent as a student minister in a suburban Boston congregation, would lead me to learn many new things. I didn't know that hanging drywall would be one of them. A group from the congregation was traveling to New Orleans to rebuild a home near an urban Unitarian Universalist church. We could sleep at the church, work all day, explore New Orleans by night- what wasn't to love? Until I found out- do you know how heavy drywall is? How awkward it is to carry it up a ladder, to hoist it over your head?

The house was small, a shot-gun style, a long, narrow rectangle. The home's frame was intact, a dark skeleton, all bones, but the house needed dry walling, needed its flesh filled in. The skeleton wasn't enough to keep the wind out, or the big, hairy spiders that boldly crawled out of the wall and up my arm as I stood on top of a ladder.

The family of four, a grandmother caring for three small children who lost their parents, needed more than a skeleton for a home- their life had been hollowed out enough. A grandmother had lost a son and daughter in law, the children had lost both of their parents- the youngest couldn't even remember them. We wanted something in their lives, even if it was just their tiny house- to be whole.

The cracks had to be covered over, so we went to the hardware superstore and bought roles of insulation, huge and fluffy pink like cotton candy, Barbie-dream house colored insulation. After a few long days of effort the installation was all in the walls, stuffed into and over every crevasse in the wooden frame. The kids ran over after school to see a house transformed from

skeleton to pink poof of softness. They loved their walls, they called it their hairy, pink house, but it turns out that all that insulation needs to be covered over too.

So back to the hardware superstore for drywall, huge things, nearly as tall as me and wider than my arm span. These sheets of drywall didn't initially seem that heavy but magically increased their weight as we hefted them into the U-Haul truck, then hefted them out of the U-Haul and up the stairs into the little skeleton house. I wasn't used to this kind of labor, of really any labor that involved lifting more than a hardback book, and looking around the house, all 500 square feet of it, I couldn't image how we would hoist all those sheets of drywall into place. But soon I was holding a sheet as still as I could, which evidently wasn't very still, as a fellow volunteer tried to nail-gun it into place. The drywall went up like puzzle pieces clicking into place, if the puzzle was huge and awkward and it had huge gaps between pieces. Have you ever hung drywall? Not the most fun of jobs, and instead of the smooth surface I expected when we were finished we ended up with gaps and cracks, which still had to be covered over. Really? Another layer? Can't we just put up wallpaper or something, call it a day?

Nope, the drywall had to be masked, long strips of cloth wetted with paste, smoothed over the cracks, smoothed again. The skeleton house lost all but its bones in Katrina's waters- it needed many layers of repair. Pink fluff, drywall, masking.

Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster that turned into a human disaster when it was mishandled, again and again, by local, state, and national authorities. It exposed a lot of ugly racism in this country that we generally try to ignore. It was natural disaster that tipped off a human disaster.

But what about when it is the other way around? I want to tell you a story about forgiveness and disasters that is so wild but so true. Fifteen years ago a wild fire blazed near a coastal town in northern California. 12,000 acres of wilderness were completely decimated- timeworn trees, ferns, underbrush, and all the critters who couldn't run or fly fast enough- dead. Just shy of fifty homes burned to the ground, more would have if helicopters hadn't dropped gallon upon gallon of water unto the fire. A natural disaster that impacted every single person in town.

The thing is it wasn't entirely a natural disaster. Soon after the blaze was extinguished four teenaged boys turned themselves in at the police department. They were so sorry. They had camped, illegally, high on the mountain ridge, and had cooked over a campfire. But they smothered the flames in dirt, and not an ember was visible when they left! Still, a few red hot sparks burned underneath the dirt, and soon the wind carried them to dry brush, and then the whole forest was ablaze.

Whoops. I did plenty of dumb things as a teenager, but as far as I know I never inadvertently burned down forty-some houses and 12,000 acres of dense forest. This is a small, coastal town, there is no anonymity, soon the whole town knew it was those boys. Those four boys. What were they thinking? How could they? They boy's parents put their houses up for sale, they began looking for jobs elsewhere. What else could they do? There was nothing to do but leave, head's hung in shame.

As those boys packed moving boxes the town held a picnic to honor the firefighters who put their lives in so much danger to protect the community. Everyone was there. The president of the board of firefighters made a speech and after praising his team he started on another topic.

He said that in ancient time's individuals who damaged the community were sent outside of the town's walls, to live without protections, without their friendships and families. The firefighter said he heard that the families of the four boys were thinking of moving away. He wanted them to stay. He wanted the town to make it clear to them that they were wanted- needed- in this community. Afterward his speech people who had lost their homes in the fire came up to say they agreed with the firefighter, they wanted the boys and their families to stay inside the walls of protection, in the circle of friendship.

Soon talk in town turned from criticizing those boys to all the crazy, dumb things people remembered doing as teenagers. People bonded over their stories of wild, risky behavior, laughing for hours over high school hijinks. The boys were forgiven, the families were forgiving. The town moved forward. Homes were rebuilt- pink fluffy insulation, covered by drywall, covered with masking. The masking was smoothed out, and then smoothed again. The wind was kept out, the spiders kept at bay.

Our communities, our towns, and especially our church families, are just skeleton houses, trying to keep out the wind and the big, hairy spiders. Trying to protect each other, care for one another, inside our walls. Occasionally a disaster happens. Harsh words peel away the fluffy insulation, wear at the drywall, strip off the masking. Human made or natural, we are set aflame by fires started accidentally or on purpose, and we burn down to the barest bones of our relationships.

Then what we do is up to us-do we stuff fluffy, pink insulation into the cracks? Do we hold up sheets of drywall so our fellow builder can staple-gun it into place? It is our choice- apply new

insulation or chose isolation? Should those boys be sent outside of the town walls to live in isolation? Or could the town's bonds be patched over, reinforced, repaired?

Forgiveness is a commitment, a commitment to staying and doing the difficult, sweaty work of patching things up. Forgiveness means yes, this is worth fixing, this is worth the labor, the sore muscles, the long days.

This month our theme is Forgiveness, so for all of February we will explore the dimensions of this difficult task- forgiving. Forgiveness often sounds to me like a Valentine's Day sentiment- a hearts and flowers sentiment, abstract and easy. But true forgiveness is work, it is a labor of love. Forgiving those boys wasn't a one-time feat, it was a choice, a commitment made over and over to forgive.

In Unitarian Universalism we strive to live by Seven Principles, seven ideals that stretch us to live more ethical, abundant lives. The second principle is: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Choosing the work of forgiveness can be the most powerful way to show compassion.

But I want to be clear- the commitment of forgiveness isn't always the right thing. It can be a heroic choice that bonds the community, like in our coastal California town. But if you are in a relationship that is violent, that makes you afraid, that degrades you- don't patch it up. Come talk to me, we will find a path out, a path to safety and wholeness. Your rebuilding will happen, when you are in place that can truly keep out the cold wind. The second principle's commitment to justice and compassion applies to you here- abusive treatment is unjust, toxic relationships destroy equity, and both are a deep violation of our promise to strive to be

compassionate. Sometimes the best choice is to show yourself compassion, and decide not to forgive.

Other times, when fires are accidental, when harsh words are said in haste, when friendship is forgotten, repair can happen, but it isn't easy. It takes a commitment to the hard work of rebuilding. Can you soothe it out, together, and then smooth it out again?

A town burned by a few of its own young people committed to rebuild, together. Decided to patch over the cracks in their community, to do the effortful work of covering those walls and starting again, together. Forgiveness isn't just a nice word, a reminder of something we should do. It is tough work, it is sweaty labor stuffing in insulation and nailing down drywall. Those boys in California, they learned that forgiveness can be radical enough to encompass even the most destructive of acts.

As we reflect on forgiveness this month let's think about the skeleton houses in our lives, the places where a lack of forgiveness has worn away the drywall, torn out the insulation. Is your skeleton house repairable? Are you up to the hard work of forgiveness? Are you strong enough to rebuild, to smooth and then smooth again? Can you forgive?