

Changing the Story

preached by the Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland, February 5, 2012

Gloria Gaynor's song "I Will Survive" is part of our cultural lexicon. I am sure that most of you, whether you admit it or not, know at least some of the words. Gaynor begins the first verse, "First I was afraid / I was petrified / Kept thinking I could never live / without you by my side." It is the second verse that is the most famous:

Go on now go walk out the door
just turn around now
'cause you're not welcome anymore
weren't you the one who tried to hurt me with goodbye
you think I'd crumble
you think I'd lay down and die
Oh no, not I
I will survive
as long as I know how to love
I know I will stay alive...

The song is popular because its narrative transforms rejection to survival and, ultimately, triumph. Through the course of the song the narrator shifts from someone who is "petrified" to someone who knows that she will survive the trauma of lost love. The song turns a sense of defeat and failure into one of victory.

This is a religious message. Religious narratives are replete with stories of people turning defeat into victory. Throughout the ancient world there were myths of gods who died and came back to life. The most famous is the story of Jesus who triumphed over ignominious crucifixion. Jesus was not alone. Gods from the Greeks Adonis and Dionysus to the Sumerian Tammuz and the Egyptian Osiris all died and then conquered death.

The endurance of such stories across culture and religion suggests that part of the human condition is having to transform traumatic experiences into life giving ones. This is a power that we have. We are, after all, narrative creatures. It is like the Gospel of John says, "In the beginning was the word." We create the reality we inhabit through language, by telling stories about ourselves and our world. In the face of trauma, we can shift the narrative of our lives to survival.

This is certainly what the disciples of Jesus did after his execution. Jesus was supposed to have been the Messiah. His advent was to have brought about the reign of God on the Earth and the vanquishing of the unholy Roman empire. Instead his life ended in martyrdom.

Despite his death his followers were able to shift the narrative. They changed the story from trauma to transformation. Jesus was not dead. Their God was more powerful than the might of Rome; someday he would come back and sweep aside the terrestrial powers and principalities. Ultimately, changing the story around Jesus's death allowed his followers to not only survive the devastating experience of his death but to thrive. Their ability to shift the narrative is the reason why Christianity

today is the most widespread religion in the world. If they had not been able to change the story from traumatic execution to triumphant resurrection Jesus would have remained one of the many messianic also rans of the ancient world.

Changing the story around trauma is how we survive it. It is an act of resilience. Many of you know that this year we are experimenting with themed based ministry, in which each month we organize our worship services and adult religious education around a particular theme. The theme for February is resilience.

When we are resilient we refuse to be ground down by pains and traumas we face as they pile on year after year. Instead of being ground down by the oppressive forces in the world, and the gradual decay of our bodies, resilience is marshaling our inner strength to keep going forward. It is embodying the spirit of Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise":

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Resilience is a good theme for Black History Month. Exploring how to change stories about the traumas in our lives is a fine way to start the month. I first learned about reframing the narrative around trauma in a seminary class on the African American religious experience. We were discussing slavery when one my classmates said the word "slaves." My professor, Melissa Harris-Perry, corrected her by saying, "I don't think it is good to say that word in reference to people who suffered under slavery. Instead, I would encourage you to say enslaved persons. They were people who were enslaved. To name them as slaves is to reduce them to the condition of their bondage rather than lift up their humanity. It is to continue to let the plantation owners define them."

Harris-Perry's point was that we are people first. The experiences we have, the political status assigned to us by the state, and the pains, joys and traumas in our lives are secondary to our identity and worth as persons. Being comes first. The labels come afterwards. The stories we tell about ourselves and others should reflect this.

A psychologist I know told me that one of the things he tries to do with his patients is to get them to stop identifying with their illness. There are, he says, two paradigms for thinking about mental illness. People either are their mental illness or they have a mental illness; someone is a paranoid schizophrenic or they are a person with paranoid schizophrenia. In the first case the person is defined by their illness. In second, the person has an illness but the illness is not who they are.

The same is true with trauma. We either let it define us or we place it in the realm of experiences that we have had, things that are part of, but not the sum of, who we are. To recast trauma we have to share our stories with someone. And we have to feel that we have been heard.

Audre Lorde wrote, "Your silence will not protect you." The first step in moving from trauma to survival is breaking the silence. Breaking the silence builds community and it names trauma for what it is. If the trauma we face is abuse then breaking the silence can help us put an end to the

abuse. Abusers frequently thrive off of the silence of their victims. That is why so many say to those they victimize, “tell no one.”

Silence does not offer protection. Staying silent does not give us the chance to reframe the narrative around trauma. Only speaking, or putting our traumas into words and images, can do that. This can be a terrifying experience. Of it Lorde wrote, “I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.”

Sometimes breaking the silence can mean the ending of denial. And that, in turn, means having to face the trauma again, even if only as a memory or as a story. But as Robert Frost said, “the best way out is always through.” If we do not break the silence then we cannot change the narrative and we cannot address the trauma.

This past week I was reminded of just how important breaking the silence is. I was with a colleague when she got some terrible news. The sister of one of her parishioners had been murdered by her ex-boyfriend.

After my colleague heard about the murder, and spoke with her parishioner, we had a conversation about violence against women. It is endemic in our society. The widely reported statistic is that one in three women has been raped. I suspect that the actual number is even higher. The majority of my close women friends have survived rape. When I mentioned this to my colleague she told me that she could not think of a single female friend of hers who had not been at least groped in public.

Yet this is something barely mentioned in the public discourse or in popular culture. No candidate for President has made ending violence against women part of his political platform. The issue only seems to enter into the realm of electoral politics when race baiting is involved.

This will only change if and when the silence around violence is broken. The violence has already happened, the trauma has already been experienced. As Lorde said, “I remind myself all the time now that if I were to have been born mute, or had maintained an oath of silence my whole life long for safety, I would still have suffered...”

Violence against women is not the only trauma that silence needs to be broken around. In an essay on surviving our society’s violence, the Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Parker describes our world as post-apocalyptic. She writes, “We are living in a postslavery, post-Holocaust, post-Vietnam, post-Hiroshima world. We are living in the aftermath of collective violence that has been severe, massive, and traumatic. The scars from slavery, genocide, and meaningless war mark our bodies.”

Naming such a world for what it allows us begin the process of healing. It is only by knowing what is broken that we can begin to fix it. Describing the violence that we have individually and collectively survived has other functions as well. It gives us the opportunity to recast our narrative around survival. And it reminds us that we do not suffer alone.

The liberal religious community is well suited for this work. In a liberal religious community we can share our stories of survival. We can witness each other’s pain. And that can help us heal from

traumas we have experienced. We can say to each other, as Marilyn Sewell encourages us to, “I don’t know your pain, but I know pain.”

That admission can spark empathy. And it can help us to recast one of central narratives around trauma. That narrative is that when we suffer, we suffer alone. That narrative does not have to be true. Whatever our pain, whatever trauma we have survived, others have survived something similar. They may not know our precise pain but they might know something similar.

Creating space for this type of sharing is what Thandeka writes of in her piece “The Legacy of Caring.” In that responsive reading she calls us to face the pain and trauma in our lives and then hand to others “the legacy of caring.” A legacy is something that we pass from one generation to the next. In a religious community it is our rituals and our theology. For contemporary Unitarian Universalists it is the affirmation that each person is important. For our Universalist ancestors it was the belief that God loved everyone, regardless of their flaws.

Cultivating that legacy of caring involves work that may seem counterintuitive. It requires us to create a place for silence in our lives. Creating such a place may seem at odds with the very notion of breaking the silence around trauma. It is not for it is in silence that we the ability to go inside ourselves and begin the work of recasting our stories.

Silence, not the silencing of trauma but the simple absence of sound, is something lacking in our digital age. We are bombarded with music, advertisements, cell phones and images. The opportunity to sit without words is rare enough that I have had members of the congregation tell me that our two minute silent meditation is only silent time they get all week.

Parker Palmer, a Quaker educator, writes about the importance of silence for finding our souls. He writes, “the soul is... shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush... If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance.”

The soul is a mysterious and laden word. Its precise etymology is unknown. For many religious people it is the part of us that continues on after our death. I think of the soul as a combination of our essence and our story. It is our being and it is the narrative we form about ourselves, our sense of who we truly are.

That narrative and that sense of being can be recast by silence. When we experience trauma silence gives us a space to simply be. In that space we can begin to find words and ways to sort through our emotions and process what we have experienced. In silence we can also hear someone else speak. And when we speak into silence we can be heard.

Silence is necessary for our survival. Cultivating silence in our lives can help us break the silence around trauma. Silence offers us space for creativity, reflection and creating new narratives. Without it, it is difficult, if not impossible, to change the story.

And so, let us end this sermon with two things. First, a time of silence, and then a breaking of the silence. Let us sit with the silence and then let us cast it aside by naming the traumas in our lives and in our world we have survived.

War,
Poverty,
Rape,
Violence Against Women,
Violence Against Children,
Racism.

And now, I invite you to repeat after me:

We have survived,
We will survive,
They shall be overcome.

Amen.