

Readings:

It is where we are wounded that God speaks to us. W.H. Auden

Lyrics from the song “For Real” by Bob Franke, verses 2-3

My father never put his parachute on in the Pacific back in World War II
He said he'd rather go down in familiar flames than get lost in that endless blue.
And some of that blue got into my eyes, and we never stopped fighting that war,
Until I first understood about endlessness, and I loved him like never before.

There's a hole in the middle of the prettiest life, so the lawyers and the prophets say.
Not your father nor your mother nor your lover's ever going to make it go away.
And there's too much darkness in an endless night to be afraid of the way we feel.
Let's be kind to each other, not forever, but for real.

It's lucky that my daughter got her mother's nose, and just a little of her father's eyes.
And we've got just enough love, that when the longing takes me, well, it takes me by surprise.
And I remember that longing from my highway days, though I never could give it a name.
It's lucky I discovered in the nick of time that the woman and the child aren't to blame

For the hole in the middle of a pretty good life, I only face it 'cause it's here to stay.
Not my father nor my mother nor my daughter nor my lover nor the highway made it go away.
And there's too much darkness in an endless night to be ashamed of the way I feel.
I'll be kind to my loved ones, not forever, but for real.

Bob Franke

Gospel reading from Luke, chapter 5, from the translation, The Message:

²⁷⁻²⁸ After this he went out and saw a man named Levi at his work collecting taxes. Jesus said, “Come along with me.” And he did—walked away from everything and went with him.

²⁹⁻³⁰ Levi gave a large dinner at his home for Jesus. Everybody was there, tax men and other disreputable characters as guests at the dinner. The Pharisees and their religion scholars came to his disciples greatly offended. “What is he doing eating and drinking with crooks and ‘sinners’?”

³¹⁻³² Jesus heard about it and spoke up, “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting outsiders, not insiders—an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out.”

Luke 5:27-32: *The Message*

Broken and Blessed

I’ve been working with other Friends for over two years now to create a new spiritual deepening program. Feeling clearly called to create something, but not clear at all of what that needed to be, the three of us gathered in the first discernment and planning retreat and settled into extended worship with the wide open question as to what we were specifically called to do with this program. After two hours of worship which was so powerful it blew us away, we compared notes as to what had come to each of us. For each one of us, it was the same, that the places where we carried life’s wounds were also the places where we encounter God—that those places are right next to each other, or even intertwined. We spent the rest of the weekend testing if that was really to be the focus for a year-long program. It was pretty daunting. I mean, who wants to sign up for that? But the leading was clear, and we settled into the work of giving that shape.

And while none of us seeks out experiences of grief, loss, and hurt from others, we have all had them. I don’t believe that there is especial virtue in going to those places we all carry. Nor do I believe those are the only ways in which we can have direct experience of God’s reality and presence. (Gratitude and awe come immediately to mind.) And I certainly don’t hold with the idea that suffering is somehow desirable, or part of “God’s plan.” What I do know, is that when I am in touch with those places, that I am at my most tender, vulnerable, and open. And in that condition, the barrier between me and the Divine grows thin. It is there that I have a greater sense of God’s presence. It is there that I know God’s love. It is there that I see most clearly the truth about how I am living my life, and where that is wanting. It is also in that vulnerability that I am most available to those I love. My defenses are gone, and I can receive and share in the gift of their love.

And I know from personal experience as well as from working with addicts and alcoholics, that when we paper over those hurt places, our life by necessity becomes shallow, and brittle. We lose the richness of our full experience, and in that poverty, reach out to fill that “hole in a pretty good life” with things that don’t ultimately satisfy.

Growing up, my parents didn't have the wherewithal to impart to their children a sense of being loveable and valuable. They lacked that in themselves, and couldn't give what they didn't have to me and my brothers. That left me with a pretty sizeable hole, one which I have sought to fill with achievement, perfectionism, tortured relationships, and overwork. A hole that has left me constantly trying to prove my worth to myself

When I can keep that hole out in front of me where I can see it, I can mostly avoid doing harm to myself or others because of it. If I let it slip into the background, it can wreak a lot of havoc. And if I am deeply in touch with that hole, it takes me to a place where I find myself as broken in the most positive of ways- knowing my brokenness, I find humility, a sense of kinship with all humanity, and a freedom from needing to prove myself in some way.

When we brought our vision of that year-long program to the School of the Spirit board, they dubbed the condition we were inviting participants into as "broken and blessed"-an awareness that each of us is both, at the same time. They saw what we were being shown is a mirror of the human condition, a mirror that, if denied, keeps us from a full and deep spirituality, connection to God, and to each other.

I recently bumped up against the truth of what they were seeing, taking it out of the abstract and into deeply personal territory. A few weeks ago, Barbara and I buried Gabe, our beloved dog of more than seventeen years. Gabe was one of my best friends, a constant companion when I was home, from my various travels.

He died in early March, when the ground was still frozen. We were clear that we wanted to bury his body in one of the places on our land which he loved. It was important to Barbara that she be a part of digging his grave, and she was about to have surgery. So we put his body in our chest freezer until we could both be a part of that last goodbye. We'd therefore had two months of time to encounter what a hole he had left in our lives, and to grieve the loss of a dear friend.

Seeing his body again was both hard and good, opening up the place of grief anew. Through our tears we lowered him into the hole we had dug, to rest in a flower bed with wild strawberries as the groundcover, one of his favorite snacks. It was hard to let that body go, back to the earth. I felt somewhat better about it when I saw tree roots in the soil around where we put him. His body will go on to nurture nearby trees.

For nights after that, I would find myself awake in the middle of the night, despite a hard day's physical work which had left me more than tired. I did not have a sense of what was keeping me up, or any sense of particular content, emotional or otherwise. Three or four days after we buried Gabe, I had a dream of cleaning up the place where he had always lain, removing the hair he had left behind, and I broke open, weeping. In the dream, Barbara came to console me, and I lost it entirely, opening fully to the grief of losing my good friend.

The next morning I awoke open in my spirit and very tender in my heart. Sharing the dream with Barbara, the Bob Franke song which is one of today's readings arose in me.

Later, when I opened in prayer to God, it was astonishing. It wasn't so much that I was filled with Light, it was as though I was amidst a veritable conflagration of Light, which was happening in, through, and about me. The Light was radiating out from me in explosive arrays, uncontrollable. I was awash in a firestorm of Light, like one of those over the top finales in a fireworks display.

Opening to that place of deep hurt also opened me to God in a way I'd never experienced before, and made real the sense behind the leading of "broken and blessed."

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is pushing back, hard, against quite the opposite, against the notion that spirituality is about doing it right, about following the rules, about being virtuous, about being whole and holy. The tax collector he has just invited into his fellowship would have been viewed as the absolute scum of the earth, a betrayer of his own people to the occupying Romans, one whose job it was to bankrupt widows and squeeze people for all they were worth. And Jesus models what this new movement in reformed Judaism he is teaching is all about: radical inclusion. There are no outsiders. There is no "doing it right" to become an insider. All are welcome: imperfect and broken, and still at the same time, the Beloved of God. So Jesus parties with his friends, while the Pharisees, brittle in their efforts to be holy, object bitterly.

What the Pharisees offer is what often passes for spirituality and religion-looking good, seeming virtuous, doing it right. I think we are pretty good in this community at side-stepping that pitfall. In our joys and concerns, we share our vulnerabilities- where we hurt, where we are not feeling whole, where we need help. We ask each other for help, and there are always many hands to reach out in response to those requests. We risk the vulnerability of expressing our needs, our hurts, and our failings to each other. What a blessing.

Pause

The world is practically on fire right now, and it's a valid question as to whether this inner spelunking and cleansing of old hurt is a self-indulgent and privatized way of spirituality. It is said of early Friends that "they were transformed people themselves, before they tried to transform others." It's too easy to sidestep the painful and hard work of inner transformation, and instead vault to seeking to change a world in dire need of healing. Obviously, it needs to be a both/and. And I know from working with many people that it's easy to avoid encountering the places where we are broken and powerfully compelling to spend all of our energy addressing the crying needs of a world filled with injustice, hatred, fear, and hardship.

Etty Hillesum, an Amsterdam Jew who perished in the Holocaust while buoying up and supporting others in the camps, said it better than I can:

Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself is its due, for if everyone bears his grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate. But if you do not clear a decent shelter for your sorrow, and instead reserve most of the space inside you for hatred and thoughts of revenge-from which new sorrows will be born for others-then sorrow will never cease in this world and will multiply. And if you have given sorrow the space its gentle origins demand, then you may truly say: life is beautiful and so rich. So beautiful and rich that it makes you want to believe in God.

Etty Hillesum

Benediction/Closing

May the God of Love, may the God of Belonging, who holds us in our grief, our brokenness, and our full humanity, as well as in our joy, the God who knows no outsiders and no insiders, who delights in our myriad diversity, be with you today and all days, as we seek to build a world where all of who we are and who each one is, are welcomed and accepted.