

Sermon: Tools in My Spiritual Toolbox Poetry as a Spiritual Practice

First Wednesday

White sage smoke combs through my hair, my nostrils, my mind,
gentle fingers teasing out tangles,
then swirling around, around, around my body.
I have a body, it need not be numb.
I need not be asleep.

Ashes, penitence, from the edges of the sage bundle across my forehead:
May I do no harm;
May I become aware of the harm I have done;
May I heal the world.

Out into overcast blackness, not even stars,
and one step outside my door, Owl speaks.
Owl speaks and blesses my path
and the very small dog rushes to protect me from between my feet.

The walking is so dark that I stumble at the edges of the path before turning
myself rightly.

The path offers me choices.
I turn east, toward sunrise.

We walk now with the faintest hint of seeing, of charcoal grey where there is
snow, instead of blackness.

My shoulders are bent, as though with care and age.
My shoulders are bent with care.
Bend, aye, but do not break, little birch, for the world has need of you.

I set aside distraction;
I embrace awareness.
I set aside distraction;
I embrace awareness.
I set aside distraction;
I embrace awareness.

Is that not the Song of Lent? I will ask my dear ones.

Grey - a promise of sunrise.

I turn and pull grey like a cloak over my shoulders and bear it back home, streaming behind me.

Thoreau said that the Tool in the Transcendentalists' Spiritual Toolbox was communion with nature

Emerson said it was contemplation

We have learned over time that a very important one is Self care. So I walk the dogs and commune, and contemplate, then write. If you'd like to sign up for Morning meditations like that one, let me know - they're being delivered by email throughout Lent.

Tool in my Spiritual Toolbox: asking Bob Riccio to read "I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky" - and listen to that rolling bass voice. Seriously, Bob, if you wanted to record the phone book, that would be just fine by me.

The Problem

I reassured Patience that I would cover for her, put together and deliver a sermon on her behalf this morning. I have kept this bag packed with sermon prompts for about seven years in case of such a situation, ready to turn it into a service on "Tools in the Spiritual Toolbox". This bag full of items is from one of the children's RE curricula.

Not a bad plan at all.

And then I realized that since the election day, this congregation has addressed such a question more than once in the Sunday service, and that even though I didn't get chance to hear those services, I had better go deeper.

One Sunday not too long ago, Eleanor Coffey commented on a speaker she had heard. "Nice, placating generalities about nothing. People are being rounded up and deported, don't give me nice, placating generalities."

So - Tool Number One in my spiritual toolbox: Eleanor Coffey. Hold my feet to the fire when the fire gets hot, Eleanor. This one is for you.

Privilege

Helen Boyd writes: “privilege is a concept used in identity studies to identify those who benefit from a hierarchical system.

i don't have privilege as an author. i have status as an author. i have privilege as an educated person, because i got one, & it was both possible & probable that i could.

privilege is a really specific term when used in this context - it doesn't mean any benefit of any kind that the culture bestows on you. it means the invisible benefits that people get simply by being on the more powerful side of a binary (black/white, rich/poor, cis/trans, etc.)”

I've heard it put another way by John Scalzi: Privilege is an easy setting on the video game of life. Cancer can happen, poverty can happen, every obstacle is still there. But the basic wake-up-and-go setting is easy.

I read and thought about privilege and felt myself very liberal and enlightened. I am, after all, a woman, so I must understand lack-of-privilege, right? Look at the fact that women's Sunday go-to-meeting clothes have no pockets! We're not supposed to carry money or car keys or other tools of agency...

But being a woman in our culture is the water I swim in. It's pretty hard to distinguish from the way life just is, or any struggles or triumphs I might have because of my nationality, my education, my individual differences.

Then about four years ago, Grace and I came out. The story of our journey as a trans family is long and complicated, but - thank you, Darcie Riccio, for encouraging me to address it.

Tool in the Spiritual Toolbox: Darcie Riccio.

I can focus down on one variable which opened my eyes. I now get to mention my wife in casual conversation. Like any good scientist, I observe what happened when one simple variable changed.

Tool in the Spiritual Toolbox: Science.

In 1999, a woman with whom I was acquainted introduced her friend to me. It turned out that this friend was her partner, beloved, co-parent, wife though the world denied them a piece of paperwork, and I didn't understand why she would say "friend" only about the most important person in her world.

So, it's 2015, and someone says 'You must be so proud of your partner', and I reply that I am certainly proud of my wife. "Oh, so you say "wife"?" "Yes, we're legally married." And her eyes light up and she remembers the SCOTUS ruling and is so happy for us being able to be like normal people.

So, it's 2016, and someone says, "I know... someone... in your situation." Good for you.

So, it's 2017, and I mention my wife in front of my class at the Community College. It is the first day of class, and I'm just going to mention my wife in passing and get that onto the table. My students are hardworking parents, young adults, retired people, folks bootstrapping themselves by furthering their education and I have nothing but respect for their striving. But I make no assumptions about the worldliness and sophistication of my students from Claremont, Alstead, Unity, Goshen; I'm going to give them what they need right away to decide if they don't feel OK in my classroom and want to switch sections.

I respond to one young man introducing himself as a criminal justice major, hoping for a career in law enforcement. "Awesome, thank you for aiming for public service. My wife is a retired officer." Perhaps I was a tenth of a decibel louder than usual.

Pause.

And one voice speaks up from the corner, perhaps one decibel louder than usual. "Hey, I have two moms." And our eyes meet in understanding, we're out and we're out together, and let the chips fall.

Fast forward four weeks and I'm chatting with a fellow UU from another congregation, someone who really wants to jump-start their Welcoming Congregation knowledge and activities and education. And I mention my wife and I get (uncomfortable pause) "oh."

I can relate a hundred stories of that little curled lip or polite pause or lifted eyebrow 'how nice for you that you can be like a normal person' which is no less a slap in the face than the dozen times I've been called something which indicates sexual violence.

So I mention my wife. Proudly. As often as I can. And I brace for impact. They might switch sections, they might pause and clutch their pearls for comfort, they might call me something I will not repeat, they might threaten something I will not repeat. They might smile in solidarity. They might smile, grateful that I trust them, that I am part of the diversity which every biologist will affirm is necessary for the strength of the community. They might sigh in relief and know that they are welcome here with more than lip service.

But I brace for impact, because the danger I am not prepared for is the danger that will get me. I anticipate it, I brace for it, I devote a small packet of metabolism, of fight-or-flight response - which has a cost in long-term health - and eventually I stand down.

Death of a thousand paper cuts. But now I see the new water that I swim in.

And I'm white. I'm so educated that I can go on for hours about Early Modern English inflectional morphology without breaking a sweat. I'm so Protestant that I can be Wiccan with impunity. My Anglo-Saxon immigrant ancestors were destroying this continent two centuries before Someone's German immigrant ancestors could even find the boat.

I am so lucky. I have one one-thousandth of the experience of a terrified, terrorized, marginalized person in this country. A thousand paper cuts per hour, and throw in some bombings of your house of worship.

Well, I have privilege. And I am going to swing it like a broadsword. I am going to look educated and dignified and Ivy League. I'm going to wear my pearls and I am going to speak the language I was raised in, and I am going to walk past the gatekeepers because I look like Us.

I don't know how to do this, and I am scared.

But - let me be very un-PC - *noblesse oblige*. That doesn't mean that the nobility get to have it easy. It means that the nobility - the privileged - are obliged. It means that some white ancestor of mine won some remote battle and the price of

victory is my obligation now to fight for the vulnerable. The price of my education is my obligation now to speak for those without a voice, to be eloquent on behalf of the folks who are learning English as a second language.

You'd better mind how you talk, you'd better mind what you talkin' about, you got to give account in the judgement, You better mind."

Tool in my Spiritual Toolbox: Privilege

I don't know how to do this, and I am scared.

But I am also angry, betrayed by happenings in the country that I would die for.

Tool in my Spiritual Toolbox: anger, which keeps me hot, sharp

HB 478

So, the NH House will consider Bill 478 on Wednesday.

It is a bill which will add gender identity to the anti-discrimination law.

It will define the difference between a trans woman and a man trying to get into the women's room by wearing lipstick and allow law enforcement to arrest the latter for criminal mischief at the very least.

It is important to me,
So this is where I'm wading in.

Grace and I attended our very first committee hearing two weeks ago on this bill. Privilege means that we have previously not been involved at this level for our survival. Among dozens and dozens of folks speaking up for kindness and inclusivity and trans rights there were scared people saying hurtful things, and there were professional, paid liars there specifically to manipulate people into fearfully obeying the whitest, most white-haired, most nattily dressed, materially successful, bigoted legislator in the room.

And my resolve crumbled to shaking nausea.

I was all rage and pain and fear and what the hell do I do? What can I possibly say? My whole neurology approached panic - and I have very few chances to get this right - and I am not throwing away my shot.

When the toddler is tantruming out of control, get down on your knees and crawl with her. Left hand, right knee. When the Preschooler, the schoolchild, is so overwhelmed that their neurons threaten to shut down, get down on your hands and knees and crawl. Right hand, left knee. Back to basics. More than once as a college student fighting against inner demons, I dropped to my hands and knees to crawl. Back to basics. Allow the system to re-boot. Left hand, right knee. Drink water. Take a walk. Chop wood. Carry water.

Tool in the Toolbox: Go back to basics

What are the basics? What is the first lesson? What is the first, most basic lesson of Universalism? What is my foundation?

Would you like to meet for coffee?

Tool in the Toolbox: Internet

Tool in the Toolbox: I can write a letter Queen Victoria would be proud of.

And the replies started pouring in. “I’m with you”, “I’m proud to support this bill”... and then “Yes. I would like to hear what you have to say. I would like to understand this better. I can meet you in Lebanon, in New London, in Concord...”

Margaret Fuller said that the founding Spiritual Tool of the Transcendentalists was Conversation.

Conversation.
Let’s talk.

I don’t know how to do this and I am scared. But I have an ace in the hole.

Tool in the Spiritual Toolbox: All of you

Challenge me. Coach me. Dare me. Bring me soup. Spell me when I’m tired. But put that sword right back in my hand. And I promise I’ll do the same for you.