

The Antidote of Fear

*Sermon by Rev. Sara LaWall, delivered at the Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Howard Thurman's singing of angels continues like this, "There must always be some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful. Something that gathers up in itself all the freshets of experience from the drab and commonplace areas of living and glows in one bright light of penetrating beauty and meaning, then passes."

Have you ever experienced one of those moments of penetrating beauty? Perhaps noticing the full moon (it is truly captivating when you can see it huge, full, and bright setting in the early morning hours—like it did just this morning)—and your breath catches. In soaking in its penetrating beauty, have you ever stopped long enough to experience that deep feeling of peace and connection with the whole world?

I have learned to pay attention to these moments—these freshets of experience—allowing myself to pause and open up to that sense of connection and absence of fear, however momentary it may be. I have learned these moments are life's way of teaching me something of reminding me of all that connects us, all that binds us up in "this inescapable network of mutuality," as Dr. Martin Luther King so eloquently wrote.

In her memoir, *Speaking of Faith*, author and NPR host of "On Being," Krista Tippett (who will be this year's Ware Lecturer at our annual General Assembly in June), speaks of the religious background of her life teaching her that belovedness is woven into the very fabric of life. She writes, "Erudite analyses, for all their merits, rarely take note of the power of a sense of belovedness as an antidote to fear. Hear that phrase again, **Belovedness as an antidote to fear.**"

I understand belovedness as that deep feeling of interconnection, that we are not alone in this world—the moon's light isn't shining just for me, isn't holding only **me** up. It is doing so for the whole world.

Belovedness is not the same as beloved community. Belovedness is the root of it, it is the power we access in order to create beloved community. We all need beloved community and our churches strive to be that very thing, but sometimes we get in our own way and our beloved communities become our beloved clubs. Sometimes our communities become cliquish and though we preach the gospel of inclusion, we do not always walk the talk. I think it is because we hold on to a lot of fear. Fear of change, fear of the unknown, fear of difference, fear of loss . . . fear of our own power. Fear that we are not worthy of belovedness for ourselves.

The power of belovedness is an antidote to fear.

Fr. Greg Boyle is one of the most amazing contemporary practitioners of belovedness. He is a Jesuit priest in south central Los Angeles whose life's work has been ministering to gang

members—a ministry that turned into Homeboy Industries. In his book, *Tatoos on the Heart*, he tells the story of being at yet another young man’s funeral. His name was Chico.

Chico was one of the homeboys, working a steady job, trying so hard to make a change. He was innocently gunned down in front of his house. In a moment in the funeral home when Fr. Greg is having a moment of deep emotion and tears over yet another loss, he’s interrupted by the mortician. He whispers, “Now that was one terrific kid.” The mortician responds, in a too loud, too incredulous voice, “HE WAS?!”

Father Greg writes this, expressing the core of his Catholic theology, “If there is a fundamental challenge within these stories, it is simply to change our lurking suspicion that some lives matter less than other lives. ‘Behold the one beholding you and smiling.’ It is precisely because we have such an overactive disapproval gland that we tend to create God in our *own* image. It is truly hard for us to see the truth that disapproval does not seem to be part of God’s DNA. God is just too busy loving us to have any time for disappointment.”

I love this story and I am simultaneously pained by it. I have been the mortician. I have stood in judgment of another person’s worthiness based on just one small part of their story. I have succumbed to cultural norms and stereotypes that tell me, a young Hispanic man in South Los Angeles equals gang banger equals criminal equals unworthy. I have allowed my overactive disapproval gland to run amok at times—to harden my heart and to keep me separate from the bounty of belovedness.

So I keep that metaphor of the overactive disapproval gland in the forefront of my mind to remind me that I can turn it off when it activates and instead choose to cultivate my ability to be more like Fr. Greg’s description of God—too busy loving others to have any time for disappointment.

Imagine if we walked through life with everyone channeling that sensibility, that belovedness. The moon’s light isn’t shining just for me, isn’t only holding me up. It is doing so for the whole world. **‘Behold the one beholding you and smiling.’**

But what about the fear? Fear so easily creeps into our being and there is certainly much in this world to cause fear. But the thing about belovedness is that it does not supplant the fear, remember it is a power, it is the power that allows us to walk into the fear.

It was the power of belovedness, 51 years ago, that called civil rights activists to walk across the Edmund Pettus bridge not once, but three times, facing heinous police brutality and vitriolic hatred.

In wrestling with this relationship between fear and belovedness, I’ve been thinking about how that moment in history, in Selma, shaped us as a nation, as a religious tradition and our newly merged Unitarian Universalist Association. I’ve been thinking about the ways in which the issues of Selma show up today; how Selma is now. I’ve been thinking about the hundreds and thousands of others—people of faith who answered Dr. King’s call and showed up in Selma. Hundreds of us, clergy and laity alike. Could something like that still happen today?

We all know and honor Martin Luther King's courage, commitment and sacrifice. But I've been wondering about all the others. Our UCC cousins in faith have their own Selma story. Jesse Jackson Sr. and fellow seminarians at Chicago Theological School heard that call, deciding to take a bus to Selma in 1965 against the advice of their Seminary President, who suggested they remain students of the movement, not participants in it.

Well that is not how belovedness works my friends. Belovedness requires us to get on the bus. It requires mutuality and reciprocity. **If I am beloved, then so are you. If you are beloved, then so am I.** Period. And it is my job to be that in the world. Dr. King knew this and expressed this concept at every turn. He knew the power of belovedness so deeply his vision became a beacon for others.

Others like Viola Liuzzo, a Unitarian Universalist lay woman, from Detroit, who showed up in Selma after Bloody Sunday, answering Dr. King's call. She left her home in Detroit, her husband and five children to go to Selma. There she worked behind-the-scenes. She did not make the subsequent marches across the bridge. She made lunches. She helped with logistics for each of the March attempts. She drove folks between Selma and Montgomery.

It was on one of those drives, taking a young African-American man back to Selma that she was killed by several Klan members who pursued her car on the highway. Although she was murdered and we now claim her as one of our UU martyrs, her story is not widely known. Thankfully, during the 50th anniversary commemoration in Selma, her story was lifted up and her family honored and loved by those who gathered.

But back in 1965, after her death, she was vilified by many for being a bad mother and leaving her family—leaving behind the societal role given to women of her era. People called her choice selfish, putting her needs before her family. Many could not understand why she would take such a risk to travel into the middle of upheaval and violence.

Viola followed her heart, she followed her soul, she followed a vision of a world that was so dazzling, so powerful, the thought of "grave risk" and "personal sacrifice" were obscured by the dream of possibility, by the difference she felt her presence would make. Instead of risk, I think she heard and felt the power of belovedness, expressed by Dr. King, calling to her so loudly, she could not ignore it.

The Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed, revered African-American historian and author in our association, spoke these words last year on the 50th anniversary of Selma: "In the context of deep relationship, risk is always secondary to relationship. When we are compelled by love, no risk is too large." Belovedness is about relationship—about our deep connection to our shared humanity. To reactivate the call to Selma we must reactivate that depth of human connection. Selma now is as much about love as it is about violence and oppression.

I know we cannot all be the Martin Luther Kings and Viola Liuzzos or even the Fr. Greg Boyles of the world. But hear the line from the hymn we just sang:

"If you cannot sing like angels, if you cannot speak before thousands, you can give from deep within you. You can change the world with your love."

We believe in this vision of belovedness for the world—it is woven into the very fabric of our religious lives, it is a core tenant of our diverse theologies.

This power of belovedness calls us to action, to live out our faith in the world, and we are each called in unique and different ways. Our commitment to belovedness shows up when we work at Interfaith Sanctuary, when we collect food and clothing for families in need and musical instruments for children who have never had the opportunity to play.

It shows up in simple ways too, when we sit with someone in the hospital, when we transform this space for a memorial service, when we cook meals and offer rides to those our community.

And Belovedness shows up in loud and complicated ways, when we visit prisoners, acknowledging inherent worth and dignity in all its complexity; when we welcome refugees at their airport or in witness at the capitol, holding up a vision that all can be welcome within our borders; when a privileged, white woman holds a sign at a rally that reads, “Black Lives Matter.” Belovedness shows up when we sue the state of Idaho to demand marriage equality sending the message that all love matters.

When we tap into the power of belovedness we are forced to look outward, to draw the circle wide, to think about the other, to walk into the fear.

This is the love that says yes we can. Yes we can create a beloved community for all. Yes we can be the change we wish to see in the world. This is the love that is calling your name. Hush. Listen.

The Sufi poet Hafiz gives us these words:

Out
Of a great need
We are all holding hands
And climbing
Not loving is letting go
Listen
The terrain around here
Is
Far too
Dangerous
For
that

We are all holding hands and climbing. Reach out, the power of belovedness is in you. Be an antidote to fear. May it be so. Amen.

SILENCE

HYMN: #121 We'll Build a Land

BENEDICTION:

May we hear the call to belovedness
Letting it flow through you and out into the world
Lead with love
Fight on with love
Love the hell out of the world
The moral arc of the universe is lone
And it does bend toward justice
But not without our help
We must lay our hands on that arc and push

We extinguish the flame of our chalice but carry with us the
flame of belovedness that lies within us all
Walk into the fear
Knowing you are not alone.

Go in peace.