

“Growing in the Cold and Dark” a sermon on soul
Rev. Brian J. Kiely December 13, 2009
Unitarian Church of Edmonton

Story: Jacob and the Angel – a loose – and brief retelling of Genesis 25: 19- 33:11 with a focus on 32:23-33

Max Coots opened this morning’s reading with the words:

*No one says much good of Winter,
Except as something that exaggerates the Spring reprieve;
Spring, people seem to understand.*

Truer words were never spoken. Look at the flood of advertising trying to entice us to escape winter and fly somewhere warm. Look at the way we cover over the deepening darkness of pre-Solstice December by stringing bright lights and diving headlong into the busy-ness of the ‘holiday spirit’. In a time when a part of the animal population is settling in for hibernation, we are only getting more active, our schedules more full.

“No one says much good of Winter...”

My sermon today explores the gifts of winter. Some of it will be personal, some will be built on the ideas of others, like Max, like our meditation poet Nathalie Brunet, some of it on our story. But this sermon has been influenced most heavily by Thomas Moore, the former monk and current psychotherapist and lecturer.

Years ago I studied his best seller ‘Care of the Soul’ deeply, for I had been asked to teach a course on it. His ideas changed me profoundly, or perhaps they gave language to something I already knew. It’s funny. In all the 300 or so pages, he never actually defines ‘soul’. Instead he uses images and metaphors to place his concept of soul into the structure of an ailing world.

Last month I had the pleasure of attending two long lectures by Moore at the UU Ministers Convocation in Ottawa. Although the shape of his message has changed a bit in 20 years, the core remains the same: We are our own worst enemies, mostly because we actively participate in a culture that is addicted to lightness, to the positive, to good things. The negative, the failing, the weakness are things to be shoved away, ignored, locked in a closet while we immediately run back into the light.

Moore argues that such behaviour ignores the soul. For him soul is a thing that permeates all of life, but it grows the most in the cold, in the dark, in the underground of the winter. By ignoring life’s reversals, by chasing the light all the time we stop caring for the soul, and so it can shrivel. As a psychotherapist he holds that whatever pain we suffer, it is only magnified when we try to ignore it.

The soul presents itself in a variety of colours, including all the shades of gray, blue and black. To care for the soul, we must observe the full range of all its colorings, and resist temptation to approve only of white, red and orange – the brilliant colours. The ‘bright’ idea of colourizing old black and white movies is consistent with our culture’s general rejection of the dark and the gray. In a society that is defended against the tragic sense of life, depression will appear as an enemy, an unredeemable malady; yet in such a society, devoted to light, depression, in compensation, will be unusually strong. –Moore

My recently deceased brother-in-law Sam Lal studied the brain as psychiatrist and as a biochemist. It is not a great overstatement to say that when we use phrases like 'a chemical imbalance in the brain' it is due in part to Sam's pioneering work in bringing chemistry into psychiatry nearly 40 years ago.

And as a specialist in schizophrenia, Sam was well aware of something only slowly gaining notice in the general public. Many argue that the use of 'light' recreational drugs and moderate alcohol is not dangerous. For most people that might be true. However science is proving that such drugs can have a devastating impact on those with a genetic predisposition to schizophrenia and some other mental illnesses. In other words, for some people the quest for staying in the light actually pushes them deeper into a darkness from which many cannot easily escape.

But this is not a sermon about drugs. I only mention this to draw a parallel. Many of us, and back in school days this certainly included me, used the chemical elements of 'partying' to make the world brighter and less grey. We were doing nothing more than chasing the bright colours as Moore suggests, of chasing the eternal Spring and Summer warmth and light.

Well, that's fine. Spring and Summer are indeed wonderful. This last week of frigid temperatures certainly made me think longingly about places like Hawaii and Arizona.

But you know, there is a part of me that loves the winter, too. Last Saturday, Children's Choir rehearsals saw me driving quite a lot when the roads were still barely passable. I was rather prideful at the way I steered our van around the streets. I like knowing that I can go out if I have to and drive with confidence. I believe that I won't get stuck, and that I can probably get myself unstuck if I am wrong about the first assumption, and get my children there and back safely.

Yup, I could have stayed home and looked up warm vacation deals on the Internet. I could have tried to deny that winter was happening. But the fact is I am a child of a wintry world emotionally as well as physically. I need the challenge of the cold and snow in my life at least for some part of the year. I need the fallow time of frozen growth. I need the challenge of despair and failure.

As Max Coats says of the farmer, snow is the poor man's fertilizer, the poor soul's fertilizer. It imposes rest and provides ample time for reflection and restoration if we will only allow it.

If I have learned anything in my 54 years it is that letting in the pain and the sadness is much healthier than denying it. I have watched too many people hold back their tears, deny the grief and the pain that appears in their lives for whatever reason. I watch as they plaster their suffering over with busyness and effort, or hide from it in drugs and alcohol and food and even exercise. There are so many ways to mask suffering. The problem with these strategies is that **THEY JUST TAKE SO MUCH WORK!!!** Hiding from the dark night of the soul takes constant exhausting effort, just look at how hard Jacob had to work in our story. It becomes its own addiction. Would it not be better to just sit with the pain awhile, befriend it for a time, hold it close and cry over it and yell over it and suffer with it...and then let it go. My daughter Elora loves to plaster herself with bandaids for no reason. But she hates to take them off. She gets anxious about how much removing the bandaid is going to hurt. She can start crying about it long before ever touching the thing. And when she does start to peel it, it

is with painful slowness and even more cries and tears. She has yet to learn that great lesson my mother taught me. The pain of one quick rip is over in an instant and the tears gone a moment later.

Chasing the bright and the light and avoiding imagined pain is a lot like running from that bandaid removal. As wonderful as the light is, some of us chase it for fear of the cold darkness. We are anxious about the monsters that may lurk in the shadows. We are so afraid of being hurt by surfaced memories that we choose deliberate, cumulative and on-going suffering to that one relatively quick rip. The pain of letting the wall of grief crumble and overtake us is far easier than pretending it does not exist for years and years and years.

This week Teilya and I had to let go of our dream of buying a home that would also be a birth center fell apart. The reasons are unimportant and have more to do with tight capital in a global economic downturn than they have to do with us or our dream. It is enough to say we can't go ahead for now.

“So how are you doing?”

Not so good. Committing to a dream is a wonderful thing. The adrenaline rush of chasing it was a charge. The support from so many people was a never to be forgotten gift.

Having that version of the dream die just as the snow is falling in such a dump kind of sucked, really. It's an even bigger burst of winter on the soul. It's even kind of embarrassing. Teilya and I were looking around the home we have loved for eight years, the very house where in the best moments of our lives our two daughters were born. We were standing in the very room of their birth overwhelmed with a feeling – however temporary – of oh, we still have to live here.

That's just good, honest wintry grief speaking. Neither one of us tried to talk the other out of the feeling. That's one reason why I love my wife so much. She understands the need to feel grief...or as she puts it so succinctly and elegantly, “I'm grumpy!”

No explanation is needed. No words are needed. Only some listening and maybe a hug and space to feel and work through the pain are needed. We know it will pass more quickly than if we try to pretend we're fine about this and it's on to the next venture.

No, pain demands its hurt. Winter demands its slowing and its fallowness. The day demands its night. The body demands its rest. Life demands its deaths, big and small.

Now, a little disclaimer. I fully acknowledge and admit that some diseases of the mind and body are far more serious than others. I fully concede that some people suffer from chronic depressions and other illnesses caused in part by the 'chemical imbalances' of which my brother-in-law spoke. What those people need is far beyond what someone like I can offer in something so facile as a sermon. You can't grieve your way out of all illnesses, just like you can't think a broken leg or a leaky heart valve back to health with positive thinking. People in those situations need real care and help like the kind Dr. Sam used to provide. I only wish that all who needed such help could get it when they need it. But access to health care is another sermon.

But the rest of us, maybe the majority of us, are not in that category. For most of us the set-backs are more temporary and situational or even seasonal. And maybe we

can benefit from taking the time to consider embracing winter.

In a society that is defended against the tragic sense of life, depression will appear as an enemy, an unredeemable malady; yet in such a society, devoted to light, depression, in compensation, will be unusually strong. –Moore

The answer, I think Moore would agree, is to sit with the sadness in soulful contemplation until we are ready to rise whole again – changed perhaps – but whole again. Many of us, I believe, can benefit from grabbing hold of that depression, naming it, admitting it, even giving it a hug. Simon and Garfunkle wrote “Hello darkness my old friend. I’ve come to talk with you again.” I believe that is a wonderfully healthy idea, but then I think I was brought up that way.

I believe, deep in my soul, that whatever equanimity and balance I have in my life comes in part from being an Irish Catholic kid who went to dozens of open casket funerals as a child. From an early age I got to watch my elders grieve. It was a laboratory. Some wept, some were stoic, some even stayed away and some found ways to laugh or get drunk, - usually in the funeral home basement. There was lots of light and warmth and joy in my childhood, but once or twice a year there was also death and darkness. And if you’re an Irish Catholic of the 50s and 60s that meant three day wakes. There was no denying death, or loss, or pain.

The best lesson was that it wasn’t so bad. If nothing else you got to see family you did not otherwise see, and in the case of a little kid, you got to stay up late! Early in this service I told my favourite Bible story about Jacob wrestling with the angel. I have used that story before in a sermon. It has power. Like most of the Hebrew stories it offers a life lesson without embellishment. It is up to us to find the meaning for ourselves. Different people find different meanings. For me, it is a story about deciding to stop running after the light, deciding to own the dark and the past, both what has been done to us and what we have done.

And like Jacob, we can’t do that soul work without being changed by it, aged by it, scarred by it. I deliberately did not tell you the end of the story. Jacob crosses the river fully expecting to be killed by his brother. Instead he is welcomed with a warm embrace and deep love. You see, Esau just wanted his brother back in his life, whole and sound. In hiding from his inner winter, Jacob had built a bigger problem than existed.

Doing the underground soul work of winter is not easy. As with Jacob, it leaves a permanent mark, a scar, but isn’t that better than ongoing pain and anguish?

This week’s Criminal Minds episode ended with Rossi, the Joe Mantegna character saying, “Scars are the things that tell us where we have been, not where we are going.”

Suffering ends if we embrace it. The Winter becomes Spring, becomes Summer.

Even winter in ourselves may be the poor soul’s fertilizer and spring within can come only if winter has come first.