

Hard Ground, Soft Heart: Opening to Spring in Any Season
A Sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
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I began to think more deeply about this sermon in the time this year when the snow fell in more than gracious plenty down from the heavens and blanketed the roads and yards. The snow fell hard, making passage difficult and causing all and sundry to dig out deeply buried cars and brush off heavy laden roofs. Dan spoke of that time last week and of the day that everything was closed and he mentioned that his wife Sharon thinks of that sort of time – when you simply can't get out even on skis – as found time. Time you had not counted on – time you had other plans for – time that was all scheduled up – most likely with work or with the searching for that work – and then the impossibility of doing whatever it was you had planned hits you and you have found time. The dense snow buries your other responsibilities and leaves you free.

Myself, I rejoiced in the snowfall because I spent my early childhood in Rochester New York and clearly remember the snow over my head and a long unbroken winter. The beauty of the winter always amazed me and the difficulties it presented to my small feet picking their way to school or the discomfort of being stuffed like a toss pillow into a snow suit to waddle while picking was more than made up for by the beauty of the snow and the heavy quiet of the streets. Rochester was a rather flat town but somehow my father always found a hill for sledding and one of the joys of winter was that moment of flying – although it was so close to the earth – I felt as though I did have wings. The winter lasted so long – it seemed eternal to my childlike sense of time – perhaps you remember such seasons. When the life of trees and grass and flowers stopped full in the grip of that long season. I had a glassed in front porch and I would venture out onto its cold gray boards and look out at the snow. The green of spring was entirely hidden for months and each spring was a miracle.

So when the snow fell hard, heavy, and deep it brought back the memory of the power of those winters – not only to delight but to obliterate thoughts of spring, summer or fall.

We have those seasons – when the ground freezes hard and even the evergreens are hidden by snow and ice. When the garden looks like a blasted wasteland. When the night falls early and even harder than the snow. That was the catch – the high price – to pay for that winter beauty with the long nights -- when the dark stalks you in the late afternoon, then catches you, and haunts you through the night – not even promising dawn in the infinite blackness. We have nights and seasons like that. Someone I know and love dearly hates the winter – she complains at the first chill wind and shivers anxiously as

the sky fades into greyness. Then all winter the little and large things that go wrong are often blamed on the winter – and life will get better as soon as the winter passes.

We all have times when faith in spring or morning seems as foolish as faith in the flying spaghetti monster – or a war to end all wars. It can be just as hard to believe in the seed in the ground – waiting for spring to release its great power – or to believe in the root resting. We have those seasons, when belief that something fair exists beyond the season seems impossible and the ground of the heart is frozen solid.

Winter in the ground of the heart has countless variations – each of us has experienced some of those variations – one or two or more of you may be passing through an inner winter right now. So I will tell you what little that I know about it. The feeling that in the center of your chest there is a hard chilly knot, where your warm and beating heart ought to be. Or the feeling that you need to take a breath – that you are slightly out of breath – but that no matter how you do take that breath – you are still short of breath and tight.... Perhaps it has felt more like you simply couldn't open your arms – or as though something was raw inside.

But whatever the feeling in your chest – it can feel -- it can feel rather like Dan Wiseman was talking about from this pulpit last week – when he talked about the movie Groundhog Day. There is a point in the movie when the lead character begins to wake up to the same day again and again – and while there is disbelief at first – finally he realizes that he is indeed stuck in that day and cannot escape. And I distinctly remember that he smashes the clock over and over again morning after morning – although it is, really, the self same clock and the self same morning. Smash. It's the sound of his frustration and anger that he is stuck.

I know that we develop habits of being – that stick for years. As I listened to Dan last week I realized that his topic was a good lead for this week's ramblings – because I, too, want to talk about that quality of frozenness in our lives – but on another level.

Because life is not easy – there's a blank truth no one teaches you in school. Sometime someone may say – life isn't fair – but none of us really gets it then. That our hearts will take a beating and that we will each experience undeserved suffering and unwarranted joy.

Because each one of us has a tender center – you can shake your head inwardly or outwardly – you may be one tough cookie – but we all know that each one of us has that tender place – just as new and fresh as if we were born yesterday. And just as innocent. It is the part of us that learns, that grows,

that hungers, loves, watches, drinks in the present, reaches for the future. Our world – our lives, however, present us with tremendous challenges and, for lack of other visible options we develop the habit of putting walls around that tender place.

Sometimes this frozenness is the result of profound trauma. We all know stories of veterans who return from combat haunted by what they've done and experienced. Scenes flash across their minds sometimes – as though they are waking again and again in the past. Unable to reach the present the future is seems hopeless. It often surprises me that we don't have a comprehensive and uniform process for helping veterans return – emotionally as well as physically. No matter the courage or optimism with which a soldier heads into battle – there is nothing that can prepare a human heart for the shock of witnessing tremendous suffering, experiencing it or causing it.

There's the case of woman that I knew – a survivor of terrible abuse who had left a part of herself behind in childhood – stuck in a moment of trauma. A part of herself that would emerge from time to time and take her out of her grown up life – get on a bicycle and ride like the wind to make a phone call to a minister she had never met and then race home again all unknown.

It can come after terrible loss – entering first as a sharp grief and then staying as a dull never ending – missing and ache.

It can come as depression – slowly stealing into someone's life – and stubbornly clinging to them. Depression, anxiety – can last for ages – sometimes a lifetime. Andrew Solomon called it the "Noonday Demon" – but these are the words that jump out at me: the worst of depression lies in a present moment that cannot escape the past it idolizes or deploras.... You cannot remember a time when you felt better, at least not clearly; and you certainly cannot imagine a future time when you will feel better." That's the winter of the heart again.

These are not landscapes that belong to some other geography – and never our own. We, ourselves, can find ourselves in that low, cold, and rock hard place.

I have a unique perspective on this congregation. Long ago I realized that we gather in what I think of as deceptive tidy rows. Cleaned up and, for the most part, ready for the world. But I know that so many are here bearing some deep winter and yearning for a spring that you, perhaps, have forgotten, or lost your faith in.

I have been in a place like that, too. Of course – it's always unique with a unique story – and tale of loss and struggle attached. It often seems a pity that people gather and know so little of one another's stories and struggles. Without knowing them we are unable to offer that warmth that might help bring an earlier spring.

But, the truth is, that each one of us has our own work cut out for us to find springtime again.

And I likely can't tell you anything about this you don't already know – but as one who has walked that cold road I know that in this land reminders and markers are useful – even to the savvy traveler. I can tell you this much – the ability to travel that road and emerge in spring time – is as much a matter of faith and spirit as of any other art or method.

Just like the seeds frozen in the small cup our sorrows our frozen places need to be held. By holding them – seeing them – we can warm the ground into which they froze and allow new growth and new life to take place. This is not the time nor the place for all the details – it would be hours long and unique for each person and I'm not skilled in this way. But I can tell you that the first, important thing is to know that there is a spring – eternal and indomitable in each person. You can see it in small examples – far less dramatic than the ones I just mentioned.

Pema Chodron, Buddhist teacher of practical wisdom described it this way: How does this work? You're going along, and your mind and heart are open. Then someone says something and you find yourself either frightened or starting to get angry. You feel the hair rising on the back of your neck, and something in you closes down. I appreciate the clarity in her description.”

What she was pointing out was that in the middle of that closed down feeling the soft spot – which is what she calls it – the soft spot – is still present – just unseen. You might only know that it's there because of the tall, harsh structures around it. Like the dense wall of briars outside the castle where sleeping beauty lay – the briars were a give away that something precious was being protected.

So when we shut down – turn off – put up a wall -- the key in that moment – is not to simply go with the closed down response. Rather, you may recognize that quality inside you – that curled up quality – is new – it is a response but it's not a permanent state of being. You have a choice – to stay curled up or to look – to observe the way in which you curled up, the timing, the strength of it. I notice this most clearly when I quarrel with my husband. I have that response of pulling back but I know that that feeling is less important and less enduring than my love for him. Remembering that is like conjuring up a slice

of the sun and finding that I am melted inside and capable of responding freshly, openly. Of course, that's any easy one.

One of my favorite essays is one by Albert Camus – called Return to Tipasa. It was written just after the war was over and Camus, who had worked in the French Resistance and seen terrible violence and suffering was in the grip of depression. He wandered for quite sometime trying to break his depression but nothing was working. Finally he returned again to the place where he had grown up. That won't make you feel better – you know they say you can't go home again. But he had an experience that was beyond going home. He had to climb through barbed wire and found himself in ruins – ancient Roman ruins – far older than the newly ruined cities of Europe. What an image. To get to these ruins he has to carefully make his way through the barbed wire fence and then he finds himself amid broken columns, the light playing over the white ruins as it had for hundreds and hundreds of years – through lives and deaths, wars. Enduring – ruined and yet beautiful. Camus wrote “I had always known that the ruins of Tipasa were younger than our new constructions or our bomb damage. There the world began over again every day in an ever new light. O light! This is the cry of all the characters of ancient drama brought face to face with their fate.”

And in that moment –as he is surprised by beauty and shocked by the endurance of the ruins, he finds himself in some sort of communion with those who have lived and loved and suffered in all epochs of history – he is alone and yet not alone. His depression lifts as he is pierced through his inner walls – and the soft spot where all his tenderness and joy resided was revealed. He wrote: “In the middle of winter I at last discovered that there was in me an invincible summer.”

Somehow in that moment of standing between the past and the present – in the clear reminder of the passage of time, the fragility of human life, and the endurance of history – Camus was redeemed. Saved for life – by embracing the ruined nature and the beauty of life all together. Camus wrote: “if one forgoes a part of what is, one must forgo being oneself; one must forgo living or loving otherwise than by proxy. There is thus a will to live without rejecting anything of life, which is the virtue I honor most in this world... few epochs require as much as ours that one should be equal to the best as to the worst... to shirk nothing and to keep faithfully a double memory. Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever may be the difficulties of the undertaking, I should like never to be unfaithful either to one or to the others.”

I am grateful to Camus for his words. They speak of the most challenging path in life – to stand in the present – not denying the past – but not dwelling in it, looking to the future without grasping for it and to look into the present and dedicate oneself fully to it. It is faithfulness to life. Pema Chodron says that

moment of discovery and awakening is like a flash of lightening in dark that breaks through the absorption of the moment. She says: .. it wakes you up ... and Suddenly the world is very large.”

It is not enough simply to trust in the coming spring – though that is important – our feelings – like the seasons -- change in time -- One of the keys to moving through the winter in the moment is to remember that, as we feel that hard ground and find ourselves daunted by the idea of emerging from it – so are countless others also finding themselves struggling in just that way. The mustard seed. We come here to find comfort in the presence of others – but we are, in truth always joined to all of humanity – in times of joy and times of sorrow.

Perhaps, sitting here now you might take a moment to be aware that all the people around you have experienced deep winters and seen their hopes buried in deep drifts. Each one of you has been heroic in your lives in ways that join you to every other hero – past or present. And perhaps, when you find yourself on a day when the snow is high and the green shoots are hidden deep out of sight you will remember that you are not alone in this harsh season.

So our human life but dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade to eternity. Our warmth alone cannot thaw out another person It can be hard to be held and observed and not forgotten and yet not frozen in time. We must be strong to love winter. There is a strength that winter demands of us. Stories and struggles they are heroes.