

First Universalist Yarmouth, ME
Worship Service, Sept 27th, 2020
Sermon: “Practice is Power,” by Rev. Hillary Collins-Gilpatrick

Opening Words

Our opening reading is a poem by activist, healer, and as she puts it, justice doula, Micky ScottBey Jones. The poem is entitled, “Invitation to Brave Space.”

Invitation to Brave Space

Together we will create *brave space*.
Because there is no such thing as a “safe space” —
We exist in the real world.
We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.
In this space
We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world,
We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,
We call each other to more truth and love.
We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.
We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know.
We will not be perfect.
This space will not be perfect.
It will not always be what we wish it to be.
But
It will *be our brave space together,*
and
We will work on it side by side.

Reading

Our reading this morning is an excerpt from Lama Rod Owen's book *Love and Rage: The Path of Liberation Through Anger*. Lama Rod is a Buddhist teacher and social justice warrior. *Love and Rage*, his latest publication is about how we can metabolize our anger and harness it for the cause of transformative justice.

Lama Rod writes –

“We have to understand that at some point we have to develop an attitude of needing to love everything, especially what is unlovable. Everything has to be loved if you're interested in getting free.

I'm talking about freedom from duality. I'm talking about freedom from binary thinking. I'm talking about freedom from always being triggered. I'm talking about freedom from the ways in which I'm deeply attached to ego, freedom from always performing for other people, freedom from always living outside of my body. That kind of freedom, coming back into wholeness, coming back into privileging what I need.

I am not saying that my needs are better than those of other people, but rather that my needs deserve to be in consideration as I am considering other people's needs. If we don't have that spaciousness, if we're not taking care of the hurt, then we're going to be very limited in the choices that we make.”

Sermon

Love and Rage, Lama Rod Owens most recent publication came out in July. We pre-ordered it, and I've been struggling with it since the day it arrived in the mail.

Lama Rod Owens, or Lama Rod as most students call him, is an authorized Buddhist teacher in the Tibetan Kagyu tradition, and is considered one of the most important voices in Buddhism today. To upset this distinguished status, or in my view totally enhance it, Lama Rod describes himself as a Black, queer, cisgender, male-identified, fat, mixed-class, Buddhist teacher, yoga teacher, trash-talking Southerner.

If you're not familiar with Lama Rod, do check him out. We are blessed to share this incarnation with him.

The premise of *Love & Rage* is simple: "We must learn to love our pain in order to set it free."

Simple right?

"We must learn to love our pain in order to set it free."

Oof. Ok, let's break it down.

So, Lama Rod's definition of pain is layered.

Our pain is our despair, our grief, our disappointment, our shame, all that uncomfortable stuff, and all of these pains stem from our "wounds." Our wounds are those root places of hurt in our lives. They are the traumas we've incurred and perpetrated.

As Lama Rod is a justice activist, *Love & Rage* is a book about how he came into relationship with the anger and the pain that stems from the wounds that he, his community, and his ancestors have incurred from the systems of racism, misogyny, and homophobia that rule our country.

As I read, *Love & Rage*, I find that yes, I have wounds from those oppressive systems too, but I also have wounds from my complicity in those systems.

It's ugly, uncomfortable stuff.

No wonder I just stay with my pain most of the time, my despair and fear, my numbness. I don't want to get into that stuff. Most of the time I just stick with my anger and resist going anywhere deep.

Love & Rage teaches that all of our anger arises from the pain we feel from our wounds. Anger isn't necessarily a bad thing, it's just a wild thing and it needs space to be felt and used in productive ways.

To Lama Rod, anger is an "indicator that something is off," it is pointing us to a place where we hurt. He describes it as a "precious and beautiful thing."

When we don't notice our anger or when we just stay with our anger - we don't feel our pain,
and when we don't feel our pain - we never recognize our wounds, and our anger throws tantrums and causes us to react in erratic, oppressive, and depressive ways that just cause more suffering.

Until we can resist the urge to let our anger be the antidote to our pain, we are going to suffer and we are going to cause others to suffer, and then all the stuff that is inflaming our wound is just going to get worse.

As a Mainer, I feel a useful metaphor to explain this concept of our anger, our pain, and our wound is to consider a poison ivy rash:

Itches so bad, right, so bad. All we want to do is scratch it! But then we scratch it and ugh! It just gets worse! And itchier! And it really ruins our week!

What if, instead of immediately scratching it like a maniac, we pause and notice the itch, and listen to it - it's telling us, oh hey! We've got a situation going on here! We need some love and care - we need some calamine lotion, - and maybe just a little scratch - but be careful with the scratching! Actually - what's the goal of scratching right now? Is it helpful to the cause of healing?

The scratching is our anger, the itch is our pain, and both point to a case of poison ivy, our wound.

Sure, getting in touch with our feelings and delineating what's what, is tricky stuff, but it's not too hard to wrap our brains around. It's well understood at this point that misdirected anger can lead to depression, violence, addiction, fear, oppression of others - all sorts of awful stuff.

And with teachers like Brene Brown out there, mindfulness gone mainstream, rows of books on self care, and so on, many of us are actively working on noticing our feelings, feeling our feelings, and calming down as best we can so we can function through this brutal era of history

or just get through a Monday morning.

BUT - here's where Lama Rod complicates it all. He doesn't offer a remedy to our pain. From what I gather from *Love & Rage*, he's pretty clear that our pain, and all those uncomfortable layers, are always going to be here.

"We must learn to love our pain to set it free," He writes, Not "learn to love our pain so we're free of it."

Our wounds are part of us. We're going to have poison ivy forever. Suffering exists.

But - we can learn to live in a way that doesn't constantly inflame our wounds and the wounds of others.

"We must learn to love our pain to set it free."

So - What does setting our pain free mean?

Well. It means giving it some space.

Rather than noticing it and saying hello to it and asking it to go away now - it means going in and saying, hey, I love you, I guess we're in this together, huh? So, what's up with you today?

"We must learn to love even our broken hearts," Lama Rod writes, "That doesn't mean that we celebrate or are happy with the experience of discomfort. I have had to learn to invite my broken heart to dine with me at the table."

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First U, lately, during our talks of despair, yours, mine, I often hear one of these three statements - "I can't wait till things are back to normal," "The election can't get here fast enough," and "I don't want to think about it anymore."

Does anyone notice a theme in these statements - I notice several themes. I hear pain and discomfort, I hear anger, I hear impatience and avoidance, and I will say I don't hear anyone inviting their despair to dinner.

And I just want to add here, that though I'm doing the ministerial thing and trying to be conscious of these statements and not say them in your presence - please know that I get home from church, eat a chocolate bar, and shout these words, every day, multiple times.

And so - this is where that spiritual resilience piece comes in, the need for that brave, imperfect space - that brave, imperfect space that we create - together.

This is where we have to develop an attitude of needing to love everything, especially what's un-loveable. Because my friends, and I'm going to invite a little despair up to the pulpit with me right now, our wound is not going anywhere.

No matter if a normalcy is ever achieved,
no matter who wins the election,
no matter what you can and can't handle thinking about –
your pain and the pain rampant in our country isn't going anywhere.
A covid vaccine, Joe Biden, and the end of doom scrolling aren't going to make everything great again.

And, do not get me wrong, here, this is not a call to apathy,
We must eradicate this virus, vote, and be careful how much negativity we take in –
For our well being and for the well being of many, many people in situations far more dire than ours.

Pain is a tool, it's an opportunity for healing. Not a reason to despair. We have to love it. It is a piece of us. Pain is a part of your one wild and precious life. Confront this truth, set it free.

"The great activism needed today, Lama Rod writes, "entails bridging our personal grieving with the grieving of our communities."

"Taking care of our pain softens our hurt as we do the work of empathizing with ourselves.

Empathizing with ourselves makes it easier to empathize with others.

This empathy," he concludes, "is the root of the love and compassion that will begin to disrupt the systems that create harm."

Simple right?

Ha - Remember last week when I told RBG she needn't worry about us cause we got this? -

Yeah, and now this week I'm up here yammering on about how you're going to have poison ivy forever, but you still need to love everything?

Aren't you glad you called me as your minister?

We're having so much fun this fall!

So ok, love everything. Where to start.

Well, to quote that pithy Buddhist slogan -
Start where you are.

When issued the task of loving everything, especially that which is unlovable, I feel it's best to start with what you love.

Love what's easy to love - and love the hell out of it.

Just love it.

Say to it, or to him, or her, or them, or whatever pronoun this being or object that you love prefers or deserves, say "I love you."

Go through your days looking for the beings and things you love and when you find them - Love them!

And when you're in that place of loving what you love, and looking for all the things you love.

Notice what you don't love.

And get curious why you don't love it.

Why does your love hit a boundary in that place? What feeling does it rub up against?

If that un-loveable thing or being makes you angry, pause and notice what painful spot your precious beautiful anger is directing your attention toward.

Give that pain some space.

Feel that part of yourself and acknowledge it exists.

Then return to the moment at hand - and what there is to love in it.

And carry on.

The point of this work is to know who we are beyond our anger and pain. When we know what our wounds are, we know when we are able to act and be of collective use, and we know when we need to sit something out, when we must rest, seek help, and care for ourselves.

Avoiding our wounds will only lead to burn-out, despair, and anger that only inflames our pain and the pain of others.

It's good to know who we are.

It's good to remember our love,

It's good to remember our wounds.

Naturally, by practicing this spiritual work, we begin to understand that and others have love and wounds too. That we're all alive working through our pain, trying to be of use.

It's not simple, I'm just going to say it. It's not simple at all.

Slowly, slowly, we will work on building up our spiritual resilience to hold it all. Be gentle with yourselves. You're not alone in this necessary work.

I'm walking right alongside you in it all, loving things, not loving things, and wondering why.

Together with our broken hearts, endlessly overflowing with love and precious, beautiful anger - we can create a brave space. A space that disrupts the system that creates harm.

We've got this.

Start where you are.

Get to know your wound.

Get to know your love.

Practice makes power.

Let's create a brave space.

Let it be so.