

"Take a Bow"
Reverend Alison Hyder
November 11, 2007
The Universalist Meeting House of Provincetown

Opening Words: by Penny Hackett-Evans

Each of us brings a separate truth here.
We bring the truth of our won life, our own story.
We don't come as empty vessels...
But rather we come as full people - people who have their own story and their own truth.
We seek to add to our stories.
This room is rich with truth, rich with experience.
All manner of people are here: needy...joyful...frightened...anxious...bored...
We all bring our truth with us.
May we recognize the truth and the story of everyone's life.
And may we hear and honor the truths that we all bring as we gather together...
Together we have truths.
Together we have a story.
Together we have a community.

MEDITATION: from Hafiz,

No one can keep us from carrying God
Wherever we go.
 No one can rob the Holy's Name from our hearts
 as we try to relinquish our fears and at last stand - victorious.
We do not have to leave the One in the mosque
or church alone at night.
 We do not have to be jealous of tales of saints ...
We do not have to be envious of our spirits' ability
which can sometimes touch God in a dream.
 Our yearning eyes, our warm-needing bodies,
 can all be drenched in contentment and light.
No one anywhere can keep us from carrying the Beloved wherever we go.
 No one can rob God's precious Name
 from the rhythm of my heart - steps and breath.

READING: by Doris Grumbach, from *Coming Into the End Zone*

I know well that the need for recognition is addictive. Oxford University Press sent me recently a brilliant study of the subject called The Frenzy of Renown by Leo Braudy. It begins with Alexander the Great, 'the first famous person.' Braudy examines ambition and the desire for fame throughout history. Rome was a society entirely motivated by the urge for fame. His section on Jesus is subtitled 'The publicity of inner worth,' the section on Augustine, 'Christianity and the fame of the Spirit.' The chapter on Dante's fascination with reputation is superb.

Braudy continues through history, to the arrival of the book 'as a prime new place of fame:' Dante, John Milton, Benjamin Franklin, Jean Jacques Rousseau, James Boswell (who desired fame through Samuel Johnson), Lord Byron,

Napoleon, Thomas Chatterton, John Keats. He explores the twentieth century, the century of the press-agented performer, photography, and the seductive, democratic possibility of fame for everyone.

Here and there are sentences I have marked: 'Many see fame because they believe it confers a reality that they lack. Unfortunately, when they become famous themselves, they usually discover that their sense of unreality has only increased.'

And: 'Success needs more success to validate itself, and nothing can finally salve the feeling of incompleteness.'

And: "the urge for fame,' once recent aspirant has said, is 'the dirty secret.'"

An extraordinarily interesting book.

SERMON: "Take a Bow" Rev. Alison Hyder

Out near the tip of Long Point, on top of a small dune, there is a wooden cross. It commemorates Charles Darby, a Provincetown washashore and artist. Darby first came to town in the 30s, and fell immediately under the spell. He was part of the gang of artists - Sal Del Deo, John Whorf, and the like - who called themselves the Beachcombers. But this delightful circle was broken up by World War 2. Charles Darby was stationed in England, part of the bomber corps. He wrote this letter to John Whorf from an airstrip on September 14, 1944:

I've been busy working most of the time. I still think of Provincetown and coming back there some day but god knows when I will. It can't last much longer over here but I don't have a hope of coming back when this one is over - and I hate like hell to think of two more such years somewhere else. So help me if I ever get out of this I'll never set foot in a god damn bloody airplane again.

I read in the Advocate about the 'Combers having a Ball - but never heard how it was. Good, I hope. By god, John, you don't know what I'd give to be back there sometimes - fall afternoon, chili cooking on the stove and fine new bottle of whiskey standing by - perhaps a pale ray of late sun shining through it. A week ago we collected some fine souvenir [sic] and drank it every bit up - first time I ever drank champagne out of a canteen cup - everybody got fine and tight and it did remind me of those days at the [West End Racing] club. It took a magnum to cheer me up when I thought about it. I shore [sic] did cheer up good though. Best of everything to you John and all. - Charles

Darby did not get out of the war. He saw his friends shot down, fuselage burning, lost from sight. And then it was him. The letter was still en route when Charles Darby was killed in action. On November 4, his father sent a telegram to John Whorf: MY SON DIED ON THE 17TH SOMEWHERE OVER HOLLAND. Later, the father wrote how much Charles had been pulled to Provincetown, the quaintness, the bright sunlight and water, the sweeps of the lonely sand dunes with the wild sand roses. But most of all Charles talked about his friends. And so the Beachcombers honored a father's request, and built a cross out of old railroad ties. They dedicated it on the lawn of the Art Association, and later moved it to Long Point. Its small plaque reads,

CHARLES DARBY
GALLANT SOLDIER
KILLED IN ACTION
OCTOBER 17, 1944

[from *My Provincetown* by Amy Whorf McGuigan]

It's got a flag attached to the cross that drapes in the sand like a model's robe, in folds over the dune. And it is as close to a grave that this soldier has - home to the spirit of a man who sacrificed his dreams to duty with sturdy cheerfulness and pride. Who is to say what we lost? Darby's paintings were well-received. His style was modern, sometimes cubist (at least, the piece I found on a webpage was) and he's part of several notable collections. And he illustrated a children's book called *The Leaky Whale*, published posthumously in 1946. It's still available at the Truro Library. He was skilled and self-confident, and he used it all in the air battle of WW2.

To fight a war you need courage, persistence and strength. To start one only takes fear. However aggressive it is, war is always reactionary. It's born out of delusion, paranoia, and a hunger for power. Despots need control and order because they hate change. They are afraid of diversity, of confusion and creativity and mystery. So they try to regulate more and more of the world under their own set of rules. War is the tyranny of insecurity over faith.

Odetta, the powerful protest singer, once said, "My feeling is, the better we feel about ourselves, the fewer times we have to knock somebody down in order to stand on top of their bodies and feel tall." Bullies and racists and batterers feel empty inside. They're angry. They lack the essential skill of self-affirmation.

I was lucky to be raised by loving parents who respected and liked me. They helped me to develop a healthy ego and sense of self-perspective. I amuse myself - in both senses of the term. I find myself very interesting company - if

sometimes absurd. And so over the years I have generally found ways to nurture and affirm my self-worth by testing my skills and taking on new and varied challenges. I don't need to be perfect, because I like what I've got.

I don't take this for granted. Many people have to struggle to overcome abusive or unpredictable parents, loneliness, cruelty, and fear. Children take everything in, absorb and personalize everything that happens. They blame themselves for their parents' problems, and think that they're bad. Very often, they never learn how to assess and value their strengths and abilities. They're not good enough. And they carry that shame throughout their lives. If they were lucky, they found one person - a teacher, a neighbor or an aunt - to affirm them. Often, that is all that it takes to tend a child's worth. In *Random Acts of Kindness* [edited by Daphne Rose Klingma], one woman tells the story of her salvation. She was raised in a wealthy suburb of Philadelphia, but her parents were stuck in chaotic, destructive patterns. She assumed that the undercurrents of anger and hostility were her fault. But after one particularly confusing and hurtful incident their maid took her aside to talk. Risking her job, she told the little girl that her parents were crazy, that they were acting very badly, and not at all the way good, loving parents should act toward their children. She was a good sweet girl, and none of this was her fault. The maid's words gave the young child the explanation and perspective she needed to stop blaming everything on herself. And she still blesses the courage and compassion of the woman who saw a hurting little girl, and showed her the truth. She gave the child an inner compass separate from the bitter conflict around her. And that helped the child to trust her own judgment.

We have to internalize our worth, to believe that we are worthy and good. Childhood is a time of risking and growing. It's all calculated to give us self-confidence and increasing independence as we master new abilities and grow into our body's strengths. We don't have to be perfect. In fact, we also have to handle mistakes. But we need to learn to trust ourselves if we are ever to have faith in life. We need to feel that we make a positive contribution to our world and have purpose, impact, place. And as we all know, if our gifts aren't accepted we'll force them. Beings - and not just humans - will damage and destroy when they are ignored. A bad impact is better than having no effect at all on the world we live in. At least we've done something.

And so sometimes I think that self-esteem is a more important quality than compassion, gratitude, happiness, or peace. Or, at least, I am not sure that these are fully possible without a grounding of self-respect. We must be able to affirm ourselves before we can love others. Faith and joy are based on our own ability to cope and overcome life's struggles and injustice. We can't stop to be stymied by our mistakes and every slight that slaps us down.

I think we have a responsibility to life. In part it is to other beings, to the earth and the animals dependent upon our care, and to all the people we touch and affect. We have no right to hurt others with our selfishness, ignorance, or pride. First, the healers warn, Do No Harm. But we also have a responsibility to our own souls, to the light that sustains and animates our spirits. Our actions - and our thoughts - have even more impact on our essential souls than they do on others. Every time we criticize ourselves, blame or demean or deny ourselves, we suffocate our souls and make them weak. We forget who we are. Thus the cycle continues. I believe that all of our souls are one, sharing the same cosmic force that animates the universe. Our bodies are discreet (for all practical purposes) but all life is connected. Harm one part, and everything suffers. We're just usually too numb to notice. We're playing with our toys.

But if we learn to affirm ourselves, we can reconnect to life. It seems like a kind of a paradox, but the more that we can thank ourselves, the better we feel about others. Instead of needing their compliments and adulation and basing our worth on fame or status, we applaud ourselves for a graceful move, remembering an equation or the words to a song. We no longer resent people for their success, but give thanks for life's creative urge - because we share it too. And we have enough to go around. So go on - take a bow for all the talents and assets that enrich your life. Be grateful for who you've become. This is the sense of self I felt in Charles Darby's letter. He knew his chances were bad: flight crews had short careers and he lost buddies every week. But he didn't resent the friends at home. He was glad their parties continued, and they still could wake up and smell the chili. Sure, he wanted to be with them. But not to trade places. In fact, you get the feeling that Charles was happier and more self-assured knowing that he was still part of that shining group. It was part of his psyche, and so he could cope.

I want to tell you another true story about the role and power of affirmation. Sister Jean Mroska first wrote down this memory in 1991, for *Proteus Magazine*:

He was in the first third grade class I taught at Saint Mary's School in Morris, Minnesota. All 34 of my students were dear to me, but Mark Eklund was one in a million. Very neat in appearance, but had that happy-to-be-alive attitude that made even his occasional mischievousness delightful.

Mark talked incessantly. I had to remind him again and again that talking without permission was not acceptable. What impressed me so much, though, was his sincere response every time I had to correct him for misbehaving - "Thank you for correcting me, Sister!" I didn't know what to make of it at first, but before long I became accustomed to hearing it many times a day.

... At the end of the year, I was asked to teach junior-high math. The years flew by, and before I knew it Mark was in my classroom again. ... One Friday, things just didn't feel right. We had worked hard on a new concept all week, and I sensed that the students were frowning, frustrated with themselves and edgy with one another. I had to stop this crankiness before it got out of hand. So I asked them to ... think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and write it down ... That Saturday, I wrote down the name of each student on a separate sheet of paper, and I listed what everyone else had said about that individual.

On Monday I gave each student his or her list. Before long, entire class was smiling. "Really?" I heard whispered. "I never knew that meant anything to anyone!" "I didn't know others liked me so much" No one ever mentioned those papers in class again. I never knew if they discussed them after class or with their parents, but it didn't matter. The exercise had accomplished its purpose. The students were happy with themselves and one another again. That group of students moved on. Several years later ... Mark was killed in Vietnam...

I had never seen a serviceman in a military coffin before. Mark looked so handsome, so mature. ... One by one those who loved Mark took a last walk by the coffin and sprinkled it with holy water. I was the last one to bless the coffin. As I stood there, one of the soldiers who acted as pallbearer came up to me. "Were you Mark's math teacher?" he asked. I nodded as I continued to stare at the coffin. "Mark talked about you a lot," he said.

After the funeral, most of Mark's former classmates headed to Chuck's farmhouse for lunch. Mark's mother and father were there, obviously waiting for me. "We want to show you something, his father said, taking a wallet out of his pocket. "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it." Opening the billfold, he carefully removed two worn pieces of notebook paper that had obviously been taped, folded and refolded many times. I knew without looking that the papers were the ones on which I had listed all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him. "Thank you so much for doing that," Mark's mother said. "As you can see, Mark treasured it." Mark's classmates started to gather around us. Charlie smiled rather sheepishly and said, "I still have my list. I keep it in the top drawer of my desk at home." Chuck's wife said, "Chuck asked me to put his in our wedding album." "I have mine too," Marilyn said. "It's in my diary." Then Vicki, another classmate, reached into her pocketbook, took out her wallet and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. "I carry this with me at all times," Vicki said without batting an eyelash. "I think we all saved our lists." That's when I finally sat down and cried. I cried for Mark and for all his friends who would never see him again.

Mark's death was tragic, his brief time well-spent. He died knowing who he was. Mark and all his friends kept those lists and they internalized them, reading them over and over again because they were true and they believed them. It affirmed who they were, even as they were becoming more. And that's a good start.

*This room is rich with truth, rich with experience. All manner of people are here:
needy...joyful...frightened...anxious...bored... We all bring our truth with us.*

... may we hear and honor the truths that we all bring as we gather together.....

Together we have a story. Together we have a community. [Penny Hackett-Evans]

As we sit in silence, I invite you to preen your egos some. We all need to practice affirming ourselves. Remind yourself of your favorite traits, your values, your assets, your skills. Focus in on one special gift or contribution to your community. Maybe no one else knows how much you give. Take a bow or two - or ten. You're good enough, you're smart enough, and doggone it, people like you. You deserve some thanks.

CLOSING WORDS: by Margaret Williams Braxton

Once upon a time I was
Now I am
Some day I will become

Once there was
And now there is
Soon there will be
And someday there surely shall be

Once upon a time we were
Now we are
And some day (Hallelujah!) we shall surely become

Amen Amen