

Unitarian Society of Hartford
Sunday June 24, 2007
The Many Faces of Power
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Good morning. My name is Rebecca Bryan and I am honored to be standing up here this morning. Thank you.

I also want to thank Fred Louis, my worship associate who has made this process a joy. It is a blessing to be supported and to support. Thank you Fred.

I want to dedicate this sermon to my mother who has given me the opportunity through our relationship to find the path to true power.

Indulge me for a moment while I share with you how I got to be standing up here today. Several months ago, BJ asked me if I would be willing to do a sermon related to a UUSC (Unitarian Universalist Service Committee) Justworks camp that I was scheduled to take (thanks to the inspiration of Joan Kemble). The trip was called "Return To The Earth," and it involved traveling to Clinton Oklahoma to work on the restoration of sacred burial grounds of Native Americans. It was very exciting.

For several reasons I did not end up going on that trip. However, BJ did not let me off of the hook. She said, and I quote, that "she sensed I had to something to share with the congregation." Bewildered as to what in the world that might be, I agreed to still deliver a sermon.

Fast forward to a Saturday morning maybe six weeks ago when I received an email from Amy Hines telling me that I had approximately one hour to get her my sermon title and a short description about it (I was obviously negligent in getting this to her on time). "Oh my God," I thought to myself, - I have no idea what I'm going to talk about (Even though BJ seemed to think I did).

So I did what I often do in times of great distress. I went outside and mowed my lawn. I came back inside and wrote Amy a response saying that I was going to talk about the many faces of power.

The many faces of power! What was I thinking? I can't even tell you the turmoil I have gone through over the last six weeks contemplating this issue. But as I began to calm down, I reminded myself of a theory that I have which is that we are often asked to teach that which we need to learn the most.

Needless to say I've been dancing with power a lot over the last many weeks.

However, as this dance went on, it became clear to me that this was a dance I had been dancing all of my life.

I was raised by an abusive mother who I now know was mentally ill and a severe alcoholic. This is not something that you understand as a child and the wounds ran deep in my soul.

I often think about it as though I spent the first twenty years of my life trying to survive, which I did amazingly well, and the second twenty years of my life finding my way back to a place I call home – which I now know is inside of me.

It has not been an easy journey. But what has underpinned it all has been the issue of power; my mother's power, my own power, the power of others around me, the power of grief, perspective, and ultimately the power of love.

There have been many people who have been witnesses to my path of recovery. Many of those people I am looking at right now.

Thank you.

As a child, I knew instinctively that everything in life had power. I believed and still do that there is amazing power in nature, in things seen and unseen.

Who hasn't experienced the power of nature, the rhythmic peace that comes from listening to the sound of waves against the shore; the hope of a bright sunny day or of perfect fall air?

It is awesome to contemplate the power of our ecosystem, of our bodies, and of life, power that is for the most part out of our control.

I have tried my best to raise my two children with that same knowledge. I remember the day my daughter Ginger came home from nursery school crying because a girl in her class told her that plants were not alive and didn't have any feelings. This was Ginger's first introduction to the fact that not everyone thought like we did.

But power doesn't stop with nature. The power that I am talking about is also the power of words, thoughts, actions and deeds.

Every word, every thought, every choice we make of how we spend our time or how we respond to a situation or treat other people has power. We may never know the impact of that power.

How many of us haven't been deeply affected by the words or actions of another person, and that person never even knew it.

I was going to be a veterinarian until the age of 14 when my mother told me I wasn't nearly smart enough - a passing comment. Not at all out of the norm for her. But a comment that changed the course of my life. Everything has power.

There are many times that power is beautiful but there are probably equally as many times when it is not. So how do we reconcile the abuses of power that are rampant in our world today?

In my own reckoning, I have come to believe that we have to start with ourselves. Elie Wiesel said:

Ultimately, the only power to which man should aspire is that which he exercises over himself.

Speaking as a survivor, Elie said of the holocaust:

They were going to die. They knew it, and their last words were, I love you. Even in great pain, their last words were of love... People who could have saved themselves and they ran back in to save others instead. If humanity is capable of that, how can I lose hope in humanity?

One of the most important things that we can do in recognizing our power is to also become aware of the power of **our intention**.

The results of my childhood left wounds that penetrated my entire perspective of the world. I operated from an assumption that everyone's intention mirrored that of my mother's - which was to hurt. It has taken years for me to begin to believe that is not so.

Just the other day my husband made an innocent and loving remark to me about how he loved me in different ways. I instinctively became reactive and interpreted his comment to mean that he loved me differently than I loved him (translated in my mind as less than I loved him) Fortunately we have a very honest relationship and I asked him why he would say that. He went on to explain that he was trying to communicate how MANY different ways that he loved me.

Intention - the power of intention is everything. It holds the key to the power over ourselves, the power that we consciously chose to bring into our lives and the lives of those around us.

It has become common knowledge that establishing conscious intention before beginning an activity has profound affect upon what happens. Athletes use this technique, public speakers - probably many of you do.

But how often are we unaware of our intention? How often do we repeat the same things over and over but never honestly examine our intentions behind what we are doing?

How much pain have we caused unintentionally? How much joy can we spread with a little intention?

What would happen if we committed ourselves to practicing Thich Nhat Hanh's hugging meditation even once a day. One hug... three breaths... with intention... endless power.

Or what if we started each day the way that yogis do their practice, with taking a moment before you even begin, to establish your intention for the day and then to let it go and trust the process.

Big or small, daily or situational, or even simply whenever we can remember—focusing on our intention can change everything.

There is a third element of power that has to be discussed, if we are to be honest with ourselves and that is the power of truth.

Everything has power, and intention guides that power. So where does truth come into this dance? What is truth anyway? Whose truth am I talking about? The truth I refer to is your truth. Individual truth. My truth - the truth of those sitting next to you.

Certainly we don't exist in a vacuum and we have to interact and be in relationships with many who have similar and different truths from ourselves. This is not to say that others don't have an impact on our truth. Quite the opposite, it is often the words that we happen to hear at just the right time, or the honesty of a friend that will help to crystallize our truth.

Still, how can we interact and be in relationships and bring our best selves to these relationships without knowing our truth? It is a dance, no doubt, but the first step is accepting what you know to be true. Then, and only then, can we engage in meaningful relationship.

One of my biggest challenges in this process is the issue of knowing the difference between **truth and fear**. How do we know, if what we think, believe or feel is based on fear or truth. We all know that our lives are greatly impacted by our experiences. So if we try once, say, to love, or to trust and that trust is broken, how do we know when to trust again?

My guess is that many of us have followed our truth at some times in our lives – maybe you decided to take a particular job or to move to a certain home or to have a child or not – the specifics vary.

And I also guess that there is not one of us sitting here in this Sanctuary who has not experienced pain, loss or disappointment as a result of following what we believed to be our truth.

Yet, when we are the most honest with ourselves, aren't these very same experiences, though difficult, that are some of the most transformative in our lives? Following our truth is not always easy.

It also is not always popular. One of the most difficult and scary yet liberating decisions that I had to make, if I was to be loyal to my truth, was the decision to leave my marriage three years ago.

This was not an easy decision, and though I received tremendous support, it was also not necessarily popular with all of my friends. There were people who I had been friends with for years, who could not, and still have not, come to terms with my decision. I lost some of those friendships and I still grieve their loss. I also respect that I can't change what other see as their truth.

Today, my life resonates with truth, my truth. My children have learned that love of ones self and the courage to live ones truth is worth the risk.

So today I challenge all of us to live our lives remembering that everything has power. Our decisions to be intentional and truthful have the power to change ourselves and those around us in ways that we can't even imagine.

In closing I share with you the words of author Melody Beattie:

“Discover the power of your heart”. Much of the journey has held lessons about power. Many of us have experimented with different kinds of power. At times we may have used force, brute strength. Certainly most of us have experimented with power plays – only to find that they aren't the answer either. Along the way, some of us may have gotten hard, cold, rigid, even angry – thinking that this was a way to our own power. Often these attempts don't signal power. They signal fear. True, for many of us, learning to experience, express and release our anger has been an important milestone on our path to power. But the power we're seeking is different from force, coldness, hardness, or power plays. We aren't learning to flex our muscles that way.

“Open to a new kind of power – the power of the heart. Clarity. Compassion. Gentleness. Love. Understanding. Comfort. Forgiveness.

Faith. Security with acceptance of ourselves, and all of our emotions. Trust. Commitment to loving ourselves, and to an open heart. That's the power that we're seeking. That's true power, power that lasts, power that creates the life and love we want. In those situations that call for power, we can trust that brute strength, coldness, or rage won't get us what we want. Relax. Stop flexing your muscles. Instead, open your heart. Let your power come gently. Let a new strength flow through you. Defend yourself when necessary, but avoid any actions that take you away from peace and joy. Whatever your situation, relax your body, relax your mind and trust your soul. Your heart will lead the way, not just to love, but also to power. Let it come gently. Let it come freely. Then the power you receive will be true."

So may it be.