

## Climbing Down from the Tree

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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When Rosie first gave me the book *Peach and Blue*, I read it with two completely different brains. One was my adult minister brain which was evaluating the message for how appropriate it might be for an Easter service. But the other brain was my seven-year-old fully emotional brain which screamed, “No! Don’t jump down from the tree; you’ll die!” This same brain sniffled in horror at facing the reality of Peach’s last tender moments on the bench her friend. How could we look death so squarely in the face and be glad of the choice to accept it? My minister brain sighed.

Ministry is about nothing if not being able to look the hard stuff in the face, maybe not always to be glad about it, but at least not running in the other direction. After all, the only prayer I learned in seminary was “Please, God, don’t let me run.” Religion in general, calls us to be present to the hard stuff – to death and dying, to pain and violence and all the worst that we humans can do to each other – because its aims of transformation—of making us ever more human, of offering comfort and sustaining us—necessarily mean encountering the things which daunt us. Indeed Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church defined religion as “our human response to the dual reality of being alive and knowing that we are going to die. How we make meaning of our lives knowing our time is finite.”

And this is the Easter story, walking through dark days of violence and death to something new. And so I let my minister brain sigh and my seven-year-old brain sit in the sadness. Rosie and I talked it over, looked at each other and said, “So, why *do* we spend our lives, like Peach, exploring and welcoming new experiences and learning about the world knowing that we’re just going to die?”

One answer is offered by William Faulkner in the quote printed at the top of your order of service this morning. If life is a choice between experiencing the pain or nothing, we humans regularly choose the pain. The accumulated experiences of life entail pain and necessitate loss yet most of us choose that over nothing because experience and knowledge and wisdom, while it can be hard bought, also offer joy. Because death of the spirit is worse than death of the body. Because we have the capacity to do something with it all other than just accumulate. And by accumulate I don’t mean stuff but knowledge, wisdom and experience.

In our story this morning, it was the *accumulation* that was the final goal of Peach’s leap from the tree. There is, for many of us, great joy and wonder to be had in experiencing the world, in stretching beyond our own little branch. But I would offer that accumulation may not be an end in itself, that making use of what we accumulate offers equal and often greater rewards. Just as we have the opportunity to use the material goods we accumulate to enhance life, so we can use our more intangible goods to further our lives and the lives

of others.

Who here hasn't benefitted from someone else who passed along their knowledge, the wisdom of hard won lessons, the joy and zest of experiencing new things, an understanding of what lies beyond our own limited sphere? Who here has not been the beneficiary of kindness, compassion, or acceptance built through stretching beyond known limits?

Hinduism describes four stages of life, the four ashramas. In the first stage we are students learning about the world and learning a trade. In the second stage we are householders earning a living, marrying and raising families, accumulating property to support that family. In the fourth stage we set aside matters of the household, handing over control to the next generation. We retire from professions and turn our attention to matters of the spirit. In the fourth and final stage we renounce things of the world in order to pursue spiritual liberation. This is the stage of the sannyasin, a Sanskrit word which means "to put down everything," to leave it behind. It does not mean that the sannyasin abandons the world and other people, but recognizing one's true identity with the atman, the holy unity of all things, there is no need to grasp after things or experiences or people.

As one guru writes, "you are in delight, and you can share, and you can give in love. This is the difference. If you put your energy into greed, it never comes back; if you put your energy into love, it comes back a thousand-fold. If you put your energy into anger, it never comes back. It leaves you empty, exhausted, spent. If you use your energy in compassion, it comes back a thousand-fold."

I don't think we have to reach the last stages of life to get this lesson, but this is the role of the sannyasin, to give out love and compassion, to be model for others. Not all sannyasins are teachers or gurus, though some are. All, however, are examples of living with joy.

Ram Dass, author of the well known book *Be Here Now*, describes the example such people set in his new book *Be Love Now*. He writes:

*When in the role of a guide such a being is a sat guru. A true guru who beckons from the destination farther up the mountain. The living presence of such gurus, the example of their being shines like a light on the path.*

*They touch us not only through what they can share, but also through what they cannot share, what they themselves have become.*<sup>1</sup>

So here's the thing. If it is the very essence of who we are that reaches to other people and provides example, we *all*, each and every one of us, have this possibility, to light the way for others. It is about offering ourselves, milled through our own unique experiences, to the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Dass, Ram, *Be Love Now*, Harper Collins, 2010, p100.

We can do this at whatever stage of life we happen to be in though we build the capacity over time. As Ram Dass writes:

*We start to see each experience as a teaching to be brought into awareness and loved until we are free from being captivated by the experience. As we begin to awaken, experiences lead to reflection and contemplation. Then as we become more aware, experiences become a fire of purification, a burning ground of the ego, grist for the mill of developing consciousness, food enabling the developing soul to break free of its bonds.<sup>2</sup>*

And so what we accumulate in knowledge, in wisdom and in experience go to shape who we are not only for our own *moksha*, our spiritual liberation, but to help others toward their liberation. What we accumulate makes us who we are. Our experiences shape our worldview and our understanding of the world around us creates connection, empathy and compassion.

There is a wonderful example of this from Grand Rapids, Michigan. On the tenth anniversary of 9/11, this community deeply rooted in conservative Calvinist Christianity inaugurated the Year of Interfaith Understanding as a way to honor and make something new of that national experience. They held weekly small group dinners bringing together families of different faiths. The art museum held a special exhibit of Salvatore Dali's prints of the 12 tribes of Israel. A study of religion in America was held. The newspaper published weekly columns on interfaith understanding and the symphony performed a Stephen Paulus oratorio commemorating the Holocaust. Over 250 events were held. But mostly people just talked to people about their hopes and fears and experiences and dreams.

Some of you may know Judy Valente who works at GLT. In her piece about the Grand Rapids interfaith year for PBS Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, she holds up as one of the most remarkable examples of interfaith cooperation an imam preaching in a Christian church. That might be big stuff in Grand Rapids, but for Unitarian Universalists there is something of the "what's the big deal?" about that. It's pretty much how we operate all the time. But it is not how things operate everywhere. Here's the big deal: One young man whose family participated in weekly dinners with a family of another faith said, "I used to think that Jewish people were evil... I just took a U-turn. It's so astonishing to me that I could feel totally different about someone I used to hate."

That's a big deal, to reduce the amount hatred in the world. It perfectly summarizes for me why we accumulate experiences, why we are (or should be) willing to climb down from our own trees to see what else is out there in the world for ourselves. Because it can shape our hearts towards love and cooperation rather than toward hatred.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 24

And so, even knowing we are going to die in the end, we engage in living, in experiencing what life has to offer with its joys and its hurts, because it makes us the people we are and allows us to offer something back out into the world. And the wider our horizons the more likely they are to encompass love. It is as Parker Palmer writes.

*Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the very heart of my identity, not the standards by which I must live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.*

And thus Peach comes down from the tree knowing that, even though it is short, this life is hers and she must follow its call to wider understanding.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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