

**Theodore Parker Church**  
**Soothing the Demon's Pain**  
**October 25, 2020**

The Samhain holiday – what our Halloween festival is loosely based on - has become something quite different in contemporary times, less a celebration of the harvest and the season than an encounter with the spooky things we imagine haunt us. This week we'll look a bit at the demons that might haunt our respective imaginations and consider what might calm them down.

**Opening Words**

**Your Broken Heart...** \*\*     *Rev. Angela Herrera*

Don't leave your broken heart at the door;  
Bring it to the altar of life. Don't leave your anger behind;  
it has high standards  
and the world needs vision.  
Bring them with you, and your joy  
And your passion. Bring your loving,  
And your courage and your conviction.  
Bring your need for healing,  
And your powers to heal.  
There is work to do  
And you have all that you need to do it right here in this room.

**1st Homily**                      **Making Bad Art**                      Nancy Wilber

Demon stories. Ghost stories. I've got mine. They're not real or true, but I believe in them and act accordingly. One haunts my kitchen. I had a couple failed pie crusts. So, now my story – this story, at least - is that I can't make pie crusts.

How many of you have some stories, some ghosts like that that haunt you? (I'm too this, I'm too that. I can't do this. I'm afraid of that.) They do haunt us.

And some of them, unlike the pie crust story, feel more like great big heavy books than short stories. They've been burdening us down much of our lives. The same stories, same words, we hear them running through our heads. Even though they may hold barely a tiny portion of the

truth, if any at all, they control a lot of what we choose, what we do or stop ourselves from doing.

At the end of August, Mary Ann and I together lugged a box of books out onto our porch. Then we added some more extra heavy ones. Each of us picked up a book, put it in a backpack, and began to walk, masked, on a hot day. It was a ritual of release.

Conscious of some of my big stories but still needing to get to know them--these ghosts-- I leave my house on the August day with my book in my backpack. I walk down the road to a more natural area with fir trees and ferns and a few wildflowers, smelling fresh. I pass a tiny rivulet of slowly running water from the morning's rain. I climb about 30 long steps to an outdoor patio and pause for the overview it gives me of the place where I live. All through the walk, I try to let my story inhabit me, feel how it hurt me and others. How it constrains and imprisons me.

Imagine walking consciously with your story, a heavy weight on your back, feeling its impact.

I did that walk 5 more times, with 5 more stories, adding books to my bag each time. The bag got almost too heavy for me. I started finding it harder to breathe through that mask in the heat. I was ready to be done with these stories, to write lighter ones to replace them.

One by one I walked back to my house and returned a book, walked back to the overview, back home, returned another book. This time as I walked I thought about how the stories had served me in the past, even if they didn't anymore. They do find ways to serve us, or we wouldn't be tied to them, however weighted they may be. I did not return a book until I felt that I was ready to truly leave that story behind. And some stories did kind of fight back. I had to walk longer for them.

With my empty backpack, there was room to create a new story. A story that I could believe.

I'll give an example.

One of my stories, an old story for me, is "I'm not creative." It's really part of a bigger multi-volume book that tells me I'm not good enough, for anything, because I'm only worthwhile if I'm excelling, if I'm the best.

But Mary Russell recently told me about an art class where the teacher told the students his name for the class was "Make Bad Art." He wanted his students to try new things and get freer in how they approach their art; to release the judgments they experienced.

Now, I know I don't excel in art. But part of my new story has become, thanks to Mary, "make bad art." How else can I gain skill? And now I have a visual of a real art teacher telling me this. I've taken a new look at art I did during the pandemic. It's a very powerful record for me of some of what I've felt and learned.

I've also been struggling with an old story that would have had me say "no" to sharing these thoughts with you. But here I am, doing my best to write a new story.

We create a lot of stories about the events in our lives. Some of them are pretty simple like the pie crust story we began with. Some of them aren't. We've been telling them to ourselves for a long time and they've gotten all wound up and form loops in our brains and we've really come to believe that they are true. They may drive our lives even more than the actual events. We perceive new events through the lens of the old stories. We believe it's the events and the outside world that has to change, not our stories.

We hear "change the narrative" a lot now about politics, or racial justice—and sometimes we need to change the inner narratives, too. We can create new ones that serve us and others better. And then we can begin living into the new stories, even when it may feel like bad art on the road to making better art.

### **Meditation**

As we settle into a time of quiet, we're aware we are in a time of transition these days: of the turning from light to dark, may we find beauty with the darkness. Of this time when we feel strangely on hold from the lives we have known to where we are headed but not yet arrived, let us find comfort in working on a new story. So much of what will be is of our own making - let it be an arrival into hope, and joy. Let it be of light, for ourselves and those around us.

#### **Meditation Music**

I Am Light     India Arie

I am light, I am light

I am not the things my family did

I am not the voices in my head

I am not the pieces of the brokenness inside,

I am light

I'm not the mistakes that I have made

Or any of the things that caused me pain

I am not the pieces of the dream I left behind,

I am light

I am not the color of my eyes

I am not the skin on the outside

I am not my age, I am not my race  
My soul inside is all light  
All light, all light yeah  
All light

I am divinity defined  
I am the God on the inside  
I am a star, a piece of it all  
I am light

## **2nd Homily Soothing the Demon's Pain the Rev. Anne Bancroft**

The theme for October – this last Sunday in October – has been Deep Listening. Over the course of the month we've considered together how we listen to the other-than-human beings and creations that we share this earth with. We've considered listening to our conscience and voting in pursuit of a fair election. Last week, we considered language that helps us move into a new way of understanding the world and how it continues to evolve particularly around moving towards more nuanced, less binary language. But before the month is over I wanted to make sure we took the time to think about the Deep Listening that happens when we listen inwardly, to our inner voices – not the external suggestions and encouragements or chastisements, but the inner messages that are sometimes more easily found running around in our minds than moving in our hearts, right?

One would hope that that voice would be one of affirmation – one that says you are loved and lovable; you are capable and whole. What comes to mind is the story of Elijah: the prophet standing on the mountain, feeling lost and alone, looking for the voice of the holy in the storming wind, the earthquake, the fire – only to find that the voice of the holy was quiet, and inner, the gentle whisper of reassurance. You are not alone, Elijah – I will not leave you alone.

It made me wonder if the still small voice is always reassuring? Is that voice ever the one that reminds us we could be doing better? Or might we confuse the still, small voice of an enduring love with the demon voices that narrate the stories that feel more critical?

I loved Nancy's story about the books – the stories we tell ourselves that can weigh us down immeasurably, sometimes - as she mentioned - multi-volume sagas. When she first told me about this practice, I imagined bags instead of backpacks – imagining walking around with two

handled bags full of heavy and limiting narratives, as though you'd gone grocery shopping and bought too much and still had to walk all the way home.

The idea itself begs so many questions: who chose the stories for you? The ones you carry around that feel like burdens? Did you choose them yourself, like Nancy's pie story? Or did someone offer them to you? OR might someone have INSISTED you take them, maybe sharing a part of their own ill-written story? This is a thinly veiled nod to family systems theory - where so many of our stories originate in our early years, from those who ostensibly love us the most, though it doesn't always feel that way.

How long have you been carrying your narratives? In some ways, the ones we've had the longest may have found the most comfortable place way down at the bottom of the pile, whether they were gifted or acquired ourselves.

Remember the words that our Worship Associates share very week: in the spirit of love, all are welcome here? It speaks to the welcome we want all people to feel when they join us, as long as they are entering our community with an affirming and generative spirit or intending to find for themselves that spirit of love that will renew. In that spirit, all are welcome among us.

How could we do less for ourselves? The book that says you are not enough? You don't need that one. Our theology assures us we do not need that one. The holy, the loving God of our tradition's history, particularly the Universalist side, would not welcome a voice of anything but love. The narrative that is critical and judging? Maybe it's time to let that one go, too. The story that says, "you can't," or "you're too . . . ." fill in the adjective – that book is not helping you. And it is not helping you to be what you could be for yourself OR the world around you.

I know. It's not always so simple as putting a book down. I don't mean to shortchange the challenge of shifting an internal narrative.

But maybe sometimes It's not always more difficult, either.

At some point our youngest daughter found a song by Bette Middler, called "I'm beautiful" I'm going to put the link in the chat box so you can watch it later -

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDcGoB4A3iA>) Or maybe we'll watch it together.

It is classic Bette, pushing back at a world that told her she wasn't good enough.

"This is the Divine Miss M and I'm here to share with you some rare and stimulating insight into my cosmic fabulousity. It's really very simple. I simply believe with all my heart:"

I'm beautiful, I'm beautiful, I'm beautiful, dammit!

Our ten-year old would dance around the house singing it: I'm beautiful, I'm beautiful, I'm beautiful, dammit!

Too black, too white, too short, too tall  
Too blue, too green, too red, too small  
I heard that song for much too long

Ain't this my sun? Ain't this my moon?  
Ain't this my world to be who I choose?

I'm beautiful, I'm beautiful, I'm beautiful, dammit!

Now that's an inner narrative worth listening to, right?

I'm not too short, I'm not too tall  
I'm not too big, I'm not too small  
I'm not too white, I'm not too black  
I'm not too this, I'm not too that

There's no inner voice that serves you or the world that would hold you back, from pies or art or just about anything you set your mind to – we all need to put those books down. Maybe it's not about tossing them out the window, necessarily, but just doing what you can to set them aside, to listen to the voice of love that's always there inside you.

When we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every being - the first of our seven principles - that includes you. The voice, the story, the narrative that says you are less than is not, nor ever will be the still, small voice that's worth listening to.

I hope you can hear the affirmation. And if you need help, give me a call.

**Benediction** (from Soul Matters, adapted)

Listen, friends,

listen with new ears.  
Do you hear it?  
That voice,  
so familiar, yet still far.  
Less a longing and more a knowing.  
A whisper of something inside  
that seems to have known us  
longer than we've known it.  
It's the story worth hearing.  
You are loved.