

Staying Safe/Staying Open Sunday, April 22, 2018

One of my favorite Charles Addams cartoons shows a college quad with a banner hung between pillars – “Welcome Class of ‘54”. Gathered below is the reuniting class of ’54 – scruffy, in patched clothes, not a pin-striped suit or polished loafer among them. In the caption, one alumnus says to another: “I thought it was me, but maybe the school’s no damn good.”

I am thinking about this cartoon because in June, I’ll return to my college, where there will be reunion banners welcoming alumnae, from members of the class of 1938 to the class of 2013 - none of whom will be in scruffy, patched clothes. And many of us will feel that we are failures compared to those around us. For when your fellow alumnae include the first woman secretary of state, the first woman from a national party to run for president, physicists, feminists, and financiers, , authors, ambassadors, and astronauts, movie stars, and even a chess grandmaster – it’s hard as a normal person to feel that you measure up, that you belong. When I was a chaplain there – before coming here – I started a panel at reunion to help alumnae get beyond those superficial measures of our lives. Alumnae on the panel – all of whom were outwardly successful – told stories of the curveballs life had thrown at them – depression, addiction, illness, layoffs, divorce, deep dissatisfaction, unhappiness – and how those seeming failures had put them on a path to more authentic living. After the panel presentation, we would lead the alumnae present in small group conversations about their response. One year an alumna came up to me after the whole program was over. She told me that she was back for her 45th reunion and that this was the first time she’d come back to the college since her graduation. She’d stayed away all those years because she lived with depression and felt that she was a failure next to her other classmates. For some reason, she had come that year, and she was glowing with the insight that she wasn’t a failure, wasn’t alone, that no one has it all together, no one’s life is perfect. She at last felt herself to be part of this body of women. She felt connected – and so did everyone else who came for the 5 years we offered it – after the formal panel and conversations had ended, after everyone had been thanked, alumnae would linger, sharing stories, telling the truth, owning to being vulnerable – and making new friends.

But still we don’t feel safe being honest. This year for my reunion, I’m helping to plan a similar conversation just for my class called “Take off the Cape.” As you can guess, it’s about recognizing that none of us is a superwoman – though some of us seem it – the astronaut for instance is a member of my class.

Looking for women who might speak about flying capeless, I went back to our “Record Book” from 5 years ago where members of the class wrote about their lives. Almost every entry – including my own – is about how everything is fine – married or living single, with children or without, we’ve all got it all together. Only in a few do you get glimpses of struggles, of pain, of disappointment but also only in a few do you glimpse joy and gratitude and excitement. Even many of those who wrote about illness, the loss of a job, or a divorce minimized the dis-ease and moved onto resolution. There was a hard time, but all is now fine. If we didn’t want to connect, if we weren’t interested in each other’s lives, why would we have written these accounts or been reading them? Yet why are we so afraid to tell the truth? Why can’t we admit that for every one of us, there are times when all is not good? Why can’t we trust that our stories will be received with love and care? What do we fear?

We fear that showing those aspects of ourselves and our lives will keep us from connection. We fear that if others knew us in all our messiness and imperfection, they would say “ugh” and turn away. We fear being labeled as failures. We fear rejection. So we build walls, wear masks, tell stories that make us always the best, always in control, and can’t see that that strategy isn’t connecting us but precisely the opposite - it only isolates us.

How can we let down the walls and take off the masks? How can stay safe but stay open? How can we risk inviting others to connect?

It all starts with us. Because fear of rejection doesn’t come from those around us. It comes from within. And if we feel that we are not worthy of connection, of friendship, of regard or respect, then few will want to cross the walls and shields we set up to disprove our own opinion of ourselves. And think of all the ways we try to shield our insecurities and fears – like Lou in the story I told the children, we may pretend we don’t care; we may withdraw; we may try to distract others to play to our strengths; or we may try some methods Lou fortunately didn’t – putting down those who can do what scares us, those who make us feel small, those who lead us to ask uncomfortable questions of ourselves. And look at how well those behaviors are playing out nationally right now!

So why don’t we trust that we are worthy of respect, regard, connection, and love? Perhaps it’s human nature. Perhaps it has to do with the legacy of the Christian understanding of human beings as inherently sinful. Perhaps living with the fear of being found wanting seems easier than acknowledging all the ways we are truly falling short and either accepting them or doing something about them.

In her book *Year of Yes*, Shonda Rimes writes about confronting that fear by saying “yes” to everything that scared her. And what scared her wasn’t things like bungee cord diving or dropping nearly 200 feet in Disney’s Tower of Terror. What scared her was any situation where people would realize that she wasn’t the put-together success she seemed. And she certainly seemed a put-together success: she created the hit TV shows *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Scandal*, and *How to Get Away with Murder*. But inwardly, she realized she was desperately unhappy, masking her fear with food and alcohol, withdrawing from connecting with all but her closest family and friends, saying “no” to anything that might even nudge her out of her so-called comfort zone. After her sister told her directly that she was getting trapped in her fear, Rimes couldn’t hide the truth from herself anymore and she decided she had to take the risk of freeing herself from the prison she had set up. She began to say “yes” to what scared her: she said “yes” to giving speeches and forced herself to speak honestly instead of in safe platitudes. She said yes to using food to nourish, not to suppress emotions, and to making time to exercise – not to get thin for others’ approval but to be healthy for herself and her children. She said “yes” to staying single. She learned to say “thank you” to compliments instead of denigrating them. And by the end of the year she could write about her “year of yes,”

It has been unexpectedly glorious so far. ... I grew more courageous. I shed some shyness, some awkwardness, some social fear. ... I laughed more. I was bolder... I spoke my mind and spoke it loud. And as busy as I was, I felt like I had more free time than ever; I realized I'd been wasting a huge amount of time and energy on complaining and feeling sorry for myself.

She felt connected to herself and through that, connected to others. As I read her story, I pictured Picasso’s painting *Girl before a Mirror*. I’ve talked about it before – it’s an image that for me sums up much of the challenge of being human. A young woman stands before a full length mirror. For Picasso, she has a recognizable face – two eyes, nose, mouth. She has pale skin, blonde hair, but the rest of her is painted in bright, happy, colors. But her reflection shows someone muddy colored, darker, with less defined features. Yet the woman stands with her hands on either side of the mirror, embracing her reflection, embracing her darkness, her failings, her not measuring up. And, I think, it is only because she can embrace that in herself that she can appear so bright and happy. Somehow she has developed trust in her truth. Her embrace is her yes.

How can we embrace ourselves and live out of this wholeness? How can we say “yes” to what makes us whole and “no” to what doesn’t? We can start by not measuring ourselves in terms of others’ lives, achievements, and standards. I don’t

have to be an astronaut or a physicist to enjoy my class reunion. I don't have to lose 10 pounds or have a whole new wardrobe. You don't have to attain whatever image of perfection you carry in your head either. And going deeper, we can remind ourselves that we don't hold a theology of human sinfulness, but that we believe that everyone – including ourselves is good. We are lovable and valuable just as we are. As the theologian Sebastian Moore writes, we must “believe in [ourselves] as ... flaming miracle[s].”

And as flaming miracles, we can risk being honest with others – not with everyone – not with “t.m.i.” sharing, but with appropriate honesty – trusting our fellow church members, for instance, with the truth to the question “how are you?” and not reflexively saying “fine.” Or accepting a compliment and not trying to explain all the ways it isn't deserved. Try it at our Un-Birthday Party at coffee hour today and see how it feels. Risk being open to someone you don't know well. And try creating the space for someone else to risk share his truth with you. You don't have to be perfect to connect. As Mary Oliver's poem *Wild Geese* puts it:

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine....
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

We connect in our humanness. How might this kind of connection change you? How might it change your relationships? And through them how might it change the world? For only in connection may we comprehend the fullness of life.

-Pamela M. Barz