

"If You Could Speak to Your Younger Self ..."
Sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
June 2, 2013

A minister has a front row seat to the theater that is life. But some days it would be more accurate to say that a minister has a ring-side seat at a prize fight. We witness the people we have the honor of serving facing off with the person you most often and thoroughly bludgeon: yourself.

And there may be none who you beat up more often than your younger selves.

The life-long relationship we have with ourselves called out for reflection from a wee paragraph in a brief interview. Richard Linklater is a film director who has given us a trilogy of films that peeks in on a couple at nine-year intervals. The third of these is about to be released. He said,

I'm fascinated with that relationship ... we ... have with our previous selves. We all have that, that's all we have, our whole life – who you were as a kid, who you were at 20 – the great thing about getting older is you can reference yourself. But I'm equally sure that if we really could meet ourselves, we'd be surprised. Because we've re-characterized ourselves so many times to fit our current needs: 'Oh, I was an idiot then, but now I'm smart.' Not giving yourself enough credit, or giving yourself too much. It's a fascinating relationship.

"If we could really meet ourselves we'd be surprised."

Last week, I handed my friend Kevin a five-page letter that he'd written to me in 1982. It was written on old school notebook paper ... back and front. Kevin was as intrepid as he was curious. But when he encountered his 23 year-old self from the privileged vantage point that is 31 years later he was really surprised – just as Linklater suggests. Inspired by a story about a 23 year-old man who walked across America asking people what they would say to their 23 year-old selves, I invited Kevin to consider the same. The next day he emailed me his response. This is what he said:

My older self would tell my younger self that you did just fine. I expected to be embarrassed a little while reading but wasn't, not even for an instant. It was me writing that letter and I liked that person.

He also said: "Wow -- we really did used to do that: write letters. My younger self would tell my *older* self to do that." Remember letters? I have a box full of them. It sits in the basement of my house chock full of power like the arc of the covenant. To look these stories straight in the eye is to encounter the person with whom we have the most complicated, life-long relationship: ourselves. As I delved into the letters from my dearly beloveds, I felt a duo presence: the past self and the current narrative or, as Linklater might say, the re-characterized self. There could be no denying the third character in this story: the tension between the two.

I know that there is some interesting dance that happens in our brains when we attempt to face the music. I know that at least six of you will helpfully send me links to various neuroscience articles that will brush the mystery off the dance floor. But for this morning, let me just propose that sometimes we forget who we once were because we simply need to justify how we got to where we landed. The marriage ... the friendship ... the job ... the recovery failed because I was a total screw up ... because I was distracted ... because the spouse ... the friend ... the boss ... the sponsor didn't get me. Or was a jerk. Or I couldn't get out of my own way.

Some of this may well be true. But just as likely: if you could meet who you once were you would be really surprised. But instead we climb right up into the ring and have at it. We emerge seeming and looking unscathed but our former self – there on the floor of the ring - has been through it and from that point on, is r-cast somehow. How do we reconcile the two? Mostly, we don't. We leave it to artists who have the vision and insight to hold up a mirror and invite us to take a peek. Or we leave the reconciling to our friends who save our letters for 30 years and then when we read them the past reconstitutes itself. We either recognize the evolution from that person to this one, as in: "it was me writing that letter and I liked the person I was." or we are completely dumbfounded.

So I sat in my backyard digging through the letter-filled arc that unlocked the past. Through the long echoing tunnel that is time, came voices that were achingly familiar as was the handwriting that once signaled a life line the moment the letter was revealed in the mailbox. With each unfolding, the past and present approached each other tenderly.

I wished I could put my arm around all those sweet kids in their 20s and say ... "Wait till you see. All your passion your frustration ... all the effort in love and work and recovery and the not knowing where you're going; it all comes together in time. There will be a disaster – or two or three - between you and the getting to that integrated and peaceful you; but keep on! Don't be so hard on yourself because you'll be plenty hard on yourself in time, God knows. But now I

remember who you were. And because I remember, I will tell you to get out of the ring. I will tell you to stop. I will tell you, now all grown-up, that who you were then brought you to here now, after all. Glory, glory; lay your burden down."

How about you? How about doing this: imagine your younger self. 23 if you like. The point is to imagine the person who you think you used to be in all your magnificence and prickliness. Try approaching that person you were with compassion and kindness ... patience. Throw your arms around their shoulders and say what most people say to their younger selves, "You're doing okay. Keep on."

And if you're younger than 23; there is something in this reflection for you. It is a glimpse of what may come. It is the expression of hope that here you will experience patience, compassion, and kindness no matter how prickly you may be feeling. Hopefully, you'll treat yourself with compassion and kindness ... and then report back to all of us because we want to hear.

In fact, we will be hearing from eight of our youth next week when they share their credos with us at the Coming of Age service. We will all put our arms around these 8 brave and young Souls as though to say, "You're doing okay. Keep on."

"The great thing about getting older is that you can reference yourself." It's even better to do so with compassion. With kindness. To make meaning. To integrate.

You're doing okay and you DID okay, Friends. Keep on.

Blessed be. Amen.

"Let us be at peace" Thich N'hat Hanh

Let us be at peace with our bodies and our minds. Let us return to ourselves and become wholly ourselves.

Let us be aware of the source of being, common to us all and to all living things.

Evoking the presence of the Great Compassion, let us fill our hearts with our own compassion – towards ourselves and towards all living beings.

Let us pray that we ourselves cease to be the cause of suffering to each other.

With humility, with awareness of the existence of life, and of the sufferings that are going on around us, let us practice the establishment of peace in our hearts and on earth. Amen.