

“The Sacred Mistake”

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
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“Perhaps ...”

By Shu Ting & translated by Carolyn Kizer (adapted)

Perhaps these thoughts of ours will never find an audience.
Perhaps the mistaken road will end in a mistake.
Perhaps the lamps we light one at a time will be blown out, one at a time.
Perhaps the candles of our lives will gutter out without lighting a fire to warm us.

Perhaps when all the tears have been shed the earth will be more fertile.
Perhaps when we sing praises to the sun, the sun will praise us in return.
Perhaps these heavy burdens will strengthen our philosophy.
Perhaps when we weep for those in misery;
we must be silent about miseries of our own.

Perhaps because of our irresistible sense of mission
we have no choice.

.....

I feel my blood pressure plummeting. My mind has gone numb. “This could not have happened. *This could not have happened.*” I plead with myself. But there before me is the evidence on my laptop screen that indeed, it has happened. The frustrated, snarky text message about the woman who would be interviewing me in an hour went not to my spouse – not to Kate – but to, yes, the woman who would be interviewing me in an hour.

As alcohol is merely the evidence of the alcoholic’s deeper problem, this text message was merely evidence of my deeper mistake. I was being cavalier. I was moving too fast. I didn’t pay enough attention or respect. Those were my mistakes. The text message: unfortunate evidence.

To honestly consider mistakes, much less sacred mistakes, the plate must come to the table with a generous helping of humility and a willingness to be vulnerable. That's really where the sacred lives: in our vulnerability.

I am reading and listening to Brene Brown who has made a career of studying shame and vulnerability. These words come to me in Technicolor: "Vulnerability is the birthplace of every meaningful experience we have."

Think about it:

The first time you told someone you love them.

The day your child came into your life thereby changing your life forever more.

The day you decided you would put down the bottle for good.

The moment that you came out to your loved ones as gay / lesbian / bi / transgendered.

The first time you stood outside our building with other Souls exclaiming to our neighbors and the world that Black Lives Matter.

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of every meaningful experience we have."

Indeed.

Maybe that powerful idea will chip away at the stonewall that is our mistrust of anything vulnerable. Maybe enough space will be created so that we will be less afraid to make mistakes. Maybe by accepting our constant state of vulnerability we will be less afraid to expose ourselves as we truly are.

And then maybe – just maybe - we will stop making ourselves smaller than we truly are. Perhaps we will worry less about whether ...

... these thoughts of ours will [ever] find an audience.

Or that ..

Perhaps the mistaken road will end in a mistake.

Or that ...

Perhaps the lamps we light one at a time will be blown out, one at a time.

Or that ...

Perhaps the candles of our lives will gutter out without lighting a fire to warm us.

Because all of those things may, in fact, come to pass. But it's no good reason to fade into the scenery.

You are invited to cast off the pressures of perfectionism.
For just as the day is long, perfectionism will poison your joy.

You are invited to slow down.

"Speed is aggression", said the Buddha. And who are we to argue with the Buddha?

You are invited to make peace with vulnerability.
For within that vulnerability is where your courage is firmly nestled.

You are invited to consider your mistakes as the pathway to your holy self.

Because you have work to do. And together WE have work to do and we cannot do that work if we're all too nervous about making a mistake.

Which brings us to this: We bought a house last week. All Souls bought a house last week.

And because our intention is to provide housing for refugees we got some press both print and television. The article in "The Day" was lovely. Accurate. The television spots were equally lovely and accurate. And because as your minister I must, I read the comments. The comments served as a reminder that as a congregation we are wading into vulnerable waters.

We understand our effort as one of radical hospitality. Radical hospitality is the core of the mission statement we live by: "to create a welcoming, caring, justice-seeking community within and beyond our walls." This mission is the foundation of our vision of a house of hospitality for refugees. We hope that the people we welcome as refugees will come to know us as their neighbors and friends, and that we come to know them as our neighbors as friends as they begin what will no doubt be a long process of transition.

However and sadly, not everyone is supportive of our mission or this vision.

Yesterday morning I had the great honor of sitting with the folks who have participated in the Exploring All Souls series. Some of them will be joining the congregation as members next week so yesterday was the last of the series that is a lot about discernment. We talked about what it means to be in covenantal relationship in a religious community. "What is unique about this relationship and experience", I asked. The responses went in a direction I hadn't anticipated, true as they were.

"Kindness" was the first response.

"Welcoming"

And then there was talk of the pathways to service. One Explorer pointed out that if one wants to get involved with feeding the hungry, there are obvious ways of doing that at All Souls.

And quite quickly, the conversation turned to 25 Jay Street – our house of hospitality. How might we help? Asked everyone seated at the table.

We're in this effort together. And because we're in it together, it allows us to be a little bit braver. So many Souls reposted the links to the article in "The Day" and the television spots. You did so with comments bursting with pride: "So, like, yeah. That's my church." (I think that constitutes "bursting with pride".)

And UUs all over the country chimed in: "Just wonderful. Please extend our gratitude to all who labor for this work." (From Ann Arbor, MI)

And this from a colleague who had also read the comments:

"Blessings to you and light around you and the building and its future occupants to shield against the vile, hateful words and intentions of [the] people already cussing you all out!" (From San Francisco, CA)

Actually, I was in my office and had just finished reading the comments when a man I didn't know walked through the front door. I overheard him say to Ellen, All Souls' office administrator, "I'd like to make a donation."

I introduced myself and asked if the article in "The Day" had inspired him. Indeed, it was the story, the mission, the vision that moved him.

And the same moved two others to make financial donations – one woman from Branford who wrote, “Just wanted to send a little something to help the refugees your church is sponsoring. I can’t imagine all the pain of leaving and moving to a new country – all the unknowns. Yet you are all giving them hope and a chance to be free! Sending good wishes.”

And another check that came with no note. Just a check with “Refugees” written in the memo.

We are not alone.

And now the hard work continues. And we will make mistakes. Many mistakes. Because the only way that this boat is going to sail is if we are willing to make mistakes. If we are willing to put ourselves out there for the greater good as well as our own good.

Perhaps you will make mistakes that will make others grumpy and frustrated.

We’re still in it together.

Perhaps your mistakes will be in the form of a misstep as we learn about our neighbors’ culture & traditions.

We’ll learn together.

By our willingness to be vulnerable before bald-faced hatred expressed by some of our fellow Americans; and by putting our faith in the balm that is solidarity; by putting our faith in our “irresistible sense of mission” we will prevail.

And perhaps the story we are co-creating will have this ending ...

*Perhaps when all the tears have been shed the earth will be more fertile.
Perhaps these heavy burdens will strengthen our philosophy.*

This human experience is so very messy. So beautifully, tragically, consistently, dramatically and simply so very messy. And mixed in the mess are the mistakes that are part and parcel of our vulnerable selves.

Our vulnerable selves that are whole & holy.

Our vulnerable selves that are enough.

Let's get to the sacred work of radical hospitality, Friends.

It is our irresistible mission: we have no choice.

Blessed be. Amen.