

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
31 January, 2010

Promises Worth Keeping

When you say *I promise*, when I say *I promise*, what happens next is a microcosm of all that we are.

I am enchanted by loyalty: loyalty between family members and friends, loyalty across species, loyalty to ideals, loyalty to strangers. And I am captivated by loyalty to self, the ways that we make promises and keep promises to ourselves. There are the lesser promises of New Year's resolutions and the greater promises that we call vows, and there are, perhaps especially, the deep promises of our childhood vows. All of these promises say something profound about *who we are*.

You know this poem:

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here

To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there's been some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

– Robert Frost, *Stopping By Woods on a*

Snowy Evening

What promises compelled the poet onward on that wintry night? What promises move us through our lives, and ask of us our faithfulness and devotion?

I want to thank Arlington Street's David Schumann, who introduced me to

an audio clip of Alan Rabinowitz. In just a few paragraphs, Alan speaks an iconic sliver of memoir about devotion to his childhood vow, and the ways that promise has propelled him into the deepest meanings of his life.

When Alan Rabinowitz was five years old, his father brought him to the great cat house at the Bronx Zoo. Alan found himself face to face with an old, female jaguar. Wondering how it was that she had come to be caged, he leaned in and began to whisper to her. Just then, his father came up. “What are you doing?” he asked.

Alan could not answer. He was afflicted by the most severe stuttering imaginable, and, in fact, never spoke throughout his entire childhood. Despite a keen intelligence and considerable athletic prowess in wrestling and boxing, his stuttering was so disruptive, he was placed in classrooms for children with severe special needs. “All the words were inside of me,” he said, “but they just wouldn't come out.” Every day, he came home from school, gathered up his pets – what he calls his New York City-style pets: a hamster, chameleon, gerbils, a turtle, and maybe a garter snake – and closed himself in his bedroom closet with them. The animals, too, were without a voice; people ignored them, or misunderstood them, or hurt them, or, sometimes, killed them. He felt a deep kinship with the animals, and, in fact, promised them that if he could ever speak, he would speak for them.

Against all odds, Alan Rabinowitz completed high school with straight As and went on to college. His devoted parents continued their quest for his

healing, going to the ends of the earth to get help for him. Finally, in the fall of Alan's senior year in college, they discovered a brand new, promising, and very costly program at a clinic in upstate New York. At twenty years old, Alan had never spoken a single, coherent sentence out loud. "But my father," Alan said, his voice breaking, "my father sold something very valuable, very precious to him, to make it possible for me to enroll in this program." Two months of spectacularly hard work later, Alan's voice was freed. After twenty years of silence, he began to speak.

Imagine!

Alan went on to graduate school in wildlife biology and zoology, at home in the forest, alone with the animals: his "real-world closet." Eventually, right before he got his PhD, he met Dr. George Schaller, the preeminent animal scientist in his field, who asked Alan if he'd like to go to the jungle of Belize and begin a brand new study there, a study of jaguars.

Alan Rabinowitz didn't even know where Belize was, but he said an immediate *yes*, packed a pickup truck with the little he owned, and drove from New York to Central America.

From the locals, he learned how to capture a jaguar. He caught them, attached radio collars, released them, and made a study of their lives.

Slowly but surely, it became soul-searingly clear to him that someone was

killing the jaguars. He knew that he needed to protect them, or there would be no more jaguars left to study. He knew that he needed to reenter the world of people and use his voice to keep his vow to the animals.

He made an appointment with the Prime Minister of Belize, and was given fifteen minutes before the cabinet to speak for the jaguars. He knew, he said, that there was no time for stuttering; he had to make a spectacular case.

For reasons he'll never know, he was granted his audience. An hour and a half later, he emerged, victorious: the prime minister and the cabinet had voted to establish the world's first jaguar preserve, with Alan Rabinowitz in charge.

The fear is that, preserve or no, if jaguars make themselves seen, they will be killed. So the trick is not to see jaguars; Alan knows them intimately from their tracks. One month after the hearing, Alan spotted the tracks of a new jaguar, a huge male. He followed and followed and followed him, but impending darkness got the best of him, and exposed in the jungle is no place to be at night. He turned to return to camp, and there, not fifteen feet away, stood the jaguar – massive, profoundly still, and poised. The jaguar had circled around and was following Alan. He easily could have killed him.

Instinctively, Alan squatted down. The jaguar sat. Time's telescope collapsed, and broken boy and broken jaguar at the Bronx Zoo were now powerful man and powerful jaguar set free. Alan Rabinowitz should have been

afraid, but he was enchanted. He stood, looking deeply into the jaguar's eyes, and found himself, for the second time in his life, speaking to a jaguar. Leaning in a little, as he had so many years ago, he said, "It's okay now. It's all going to be okay."

The jaguar turned, and was gone.¹

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
 But I have promises to keep,
 And miles to go before I sleep,
 And miles to go before I sleep.

*

Now I'm thinking of another poem, from the Persian Sufi mystic, Rumi. We sing it here:

Come, come whoever you are,
 Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.
 It doesn't matter.
 Ours is not a caravan of despair.
 Come, even if you have broken your vows
 a thousand times.
 Come, yet again, come.

It matters that we return to our vows, says Rumi; it matters to others, and it

¹ Alan Rabinowitz, Director of the Science and Exploration Division, Wildlife Conservation Society. Please visit the.moth.org/listen

matters to us. It matters that we seek to make good on our promises, and carry on.

Maybe you can't remember making vows. I'd wager you did; all of us did. I really encourage you to join me in reflecting on this, because our lives – this is important! – *our lives are the evidence of what we have promised*. That to which we have given our heart and soul are the voice of our vows.

In 2005, writer and philosopher David Foster Wallace gave an extraordinary commencement speech at Kenyon College in Ohio. Here is my favorite passage: “There is no such thing as not worshipping,” he writes. “Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship – be it J.C or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles – is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship *money and things* – if they are where you tap real meaning in life – then you will never have enough.... Worship *your own body and beauty* ... and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they ... plant you.... Worship *power* – you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need even more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship *your intellect, being seen as smart* – you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on.” What we worship, he says, speaks to that which will free us. And the kind of freedom “that is most precious,” David Foster Wallace concludes, “the really important kind of freedom involves

attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over in over, ... every day.”²

My spiritual companions, the only thing standing between our promises and their fulfillment is courage and the determination to free our voice. In each of our lives, there's a jaguar in a cage longing to run wild; the only thing standing between that jaguar and its freedom is our “attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care.” Let us vow to worship what is worthy of our love ... worthy of our lives.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But we have promises to keep,
And miles to go before we sleep,
And miles to go before we sleep.

Onward, now, together.

² David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*, pp. 99-120. *Italics added.*