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Arlington Street Church
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The Power of Vulnerability

Egypt! As I wrote this sermon, I could not have imagined that a peaceful protest would become a revolution before our very eyes, and, after nearly thirty years, everything changed after eighteen days. As President Obama said it, “the wheel of history turned at a blinding pace.”¹

What caught my attention, in the first two weeks of the protest, was the extraordinary tenderness in the brave hearts of the Egyptian people. Even – and perhaps especially – in the face of totalitarian oppression, they carried a dream, like a torch in the darkness.

I loved that parents brought their children to Tahrir Square to imprint them with the longing for freedom, the movement toward freedom; loved the words of the young Egyptian, who said, “For the first time in my life, I really count. My voice is heard. Even though I'm only one person, this is the way real democracy works.” I loved other examples President Obama lifted up: “a military that would not fire bullets at the people they were sworn to protect;” and people of faith praying together, defined not by their differences, but by their shared humanity and a dream. In eighteen days, the whole world learned two of the most beautiful words in Arabic: *tahrir* – liberation; and *seimiyya* – We are peaceful.²

Let us dedicate our gathering here this morning to the spirit of the people of Egypt. I invite you to join me now in a reflection on the power of that tender courage: the power of vulnerability.

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What does spiritual growth require of us? It requires more than a little fear and

1 As reported by Sunlen Miller, ABC News, 2/11/11. Please see blogs.abcnews.com/2011/02/obama-on-egypt-the-wheel-of-history-turned-at-a-blinding-pace-.html

2 Please see President Barack Obama, Remarks on Egypt, 2/11/11, at ibtimes.com/art/services/print.php?articleid=111708

trembling, and the heart of a warrior – tender courage, vulnerability. It requires of us a kind of cracking-open – walls come tumbling down – a cracking-open kind of broken-heartedness. Remembering that we are, every one of us, deeply interconnected, spiritual growth requires a devastating vulnerability to both those we love and those we can hardly abide.

As I set out on the spiritual path, if someone had said these things to me, and I'd really understood what they were saying... Well, I'm thinking of the sign in the haunted forest: *I'd turn back if I were you.*

But you and I, we didn't turn back. And sooner or later, as we walk this spiritual path – this road we are building as we walk on it – we arrive at an intersection where we're offered a choice: the choice of courage, tenderness, vulnerability.

Author Susan Piver writes, “At a certain point of immersion in the spiritual path, [we] can no longer pretend that everything is going to turn out okay... [We] can't step back into false security or go forward onto ground that won't give way. All [we] can do is run as fast as [we] can off the edge of the cliff into space and, like Wile E. Coyote, notice how [our] legs keep pumping furiously....

“As it turns out, this state of not-here-not-there creates tremendous fear and discomfort, and there is only one quality that can help.” What I'm calling vulnerability, Susan Piver names gentleness. She continues, “No matter how hard [we] push, we're not going to find solid ground, so the only choice is to relax. Gentleness is allowing what [we] honestly feel to arise without ignoring it, obsessing over it ... or getting freaked out by it. ...What is left is the present moment, and the willingness” to abide in the present.

She describes being upset by a contentious business meeting, adding to it her disappointment that she would be so thrown off her spiritual path by one difficult colleague. A friend asked, “So you think that not getting upset [would be] a sign of progress?” She had hoped that it was. “No,” her friend said. “Progress is how quickly [we] can stabilize [our] attention on what [we're] feeling. Progress is how quickly [we] can come back,” and open [our] heart [again].

“The only way to come back to the present moment,” Susan Piver concludes, “is to soften and let go.... And then [we] sit with it as [we] would sit with a sad child. When a child is sad, [we] don't shake [them] and say, 'What *is* your problem?' [We] don't ignore [them] or hope [they'll] go away, nor can [we] talk [them] out of it, no matter how brilliant [our] reasoning.” We just *be* with them. And we “can be this way with

[ourselves]:” tender, and feeling deeply.³ We can practice being this way with ourselves – the spiritual practice of vulnerability – and we can learn to be this way in the world.

We were born knowing it, you know – born tender and open and impressionable as emulsion paper. So it's not that we have to learn vulnerability; we unlearned it, and the spiritual work before us is to relearn it, relearn making mistakes and saying *I'm sorry* and forgiving – even ourselves; relearn that we can choose to begin again and again; relearn fear *and* hope; relearn dreaming and sharing our dreams; relearn answering *yes* to our longing for connection and wholeness.

On Jamie Crawford's first day of kindergarten, I was a wreck. Our daughter was very tiny and very quiet and took in everything with her enormous dark eyes. There were so many things I didn't want her to learn in school.

Her sainted teacher, Carolyn Callender, invited the class to sit down in a circle, while the anxious parents hovered at the edge, looking on. I can't remember how she did it, but pretty quickly, Ms. Callender got around to coaxing the kids to share anything that worried or frightened them about this new place, school. I wanted to raise *my* hand. One boy – the biggest, though he turned out to be among the youngest – spoke up. Although I know Gil now as a deep-voiced young man, I can still hear his little voice. “I'm afraid I won't have any friends.”

Several other kids in the circle piped up, “I'll be your friend! I'll be your friend!” And I watched as my Jamie, seated next to him, leaned into him. That would be her way of calming him, and herself; later, we knew it as the moment they claimed each other, and began a shared journey to this day. Then Gil turned around to his mother and gave a little wave, and Jamie turned to me and said, gravely, “You can go now, Mommy.”

That little voice and the tender fear – *I'm afraid I won't have any friends* – remains my touchstone about the power of vulnerability. A five year old taught me everything I ever needed to know about it but was afraid to ask.

Our beloved Rev. Lauren Smith writes, “We think vulnerability will destroy us, but it's our fear that tears us apart.... We build walls—literal and figurative—to free ourselves from fear, and we end up imprisoning ourselves in the process.” She sent me this story as she'd heard it on National Public Radio's *This American Life*:

3 Susan Piver, “Out of Fear,” in *Shambhala Sun*, May, 2007, pp. 70-72

Several years ago Rocky Anderson, the liberal mayor of Salt Lake City, debated Sean Hannity, FOX news broadcaster. One subject was the war in Iraq. The event got enormous publicity. Supporters of both sides turned out in droves.

Utah is a politically polarized state—very conservative, with a deep pocket of liberalism in its capital city. From the start of the night, the debate had the tenor of a dog fight. The moderator could hardly maintain control over the debaters or the crowd.

Rocky Anderson and Sean Hannity ignored the format of the debate to launch into pre-scripted rants. The supporters of each side cheered raucously each time their guy made a point, and jeered and booed the opponent.

Author and educator Scott Carrier writes, “When it was over, I walked home feeling tired, asking myself, ‘What just happened?’

“There was no knock-out punch, no clear decision. Everyone left feeling like their guy had won.

“Nobody had changed their minds.”

“Then I remembered,” says Scott Carrier, “that there were two moments in the debate when everyone felt the same way. Like what happens sometimes in a concert or a play. The audience becomes one emotion.

“It happened the first time when Rocky Anderson showed photos of dead Iraqi civilians, including ... bodies of Iraqi children. Initially, the audience cried foul—*you’re hitting below the belt*. But as the images continued, the room became quiet.

“Photos of dead children.

“Time stopped. Thinking stopped. All that was left was feeling. *This can’t go on. We have to stop this*. It was like mass nausea.

“Then the screen showed a government document and everyone snapped out of it. It went by so quickly.

“But then it happened again when Sean Hannity showed documentary footage of

dead Kurds. Victims of Sadaam's nerve gas bombings. Whole families lying dead in the street.

"...Dead children.

"The room became like a quiet lake.

"And I thought, *this is it*. The solution lies here. Forget all the political arguments and just sit by this lake and try to figure out its name."

Scott Carrier concludes: "We don't like each other very much, us and them. ...But we have this lake between us."

This is the spiritual practice of carrying the power of vulnerability into the world: we use it as a point of entry into seeing clearly, and abiding in the deep knowledge of our profound interconnectedness, even with *them* ... until there is no "them." The 13th century mystical poet Rumi wrote,

Out beyond ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense.⁴

Beloved spiritual companions, there is a field. There is a lake. There is a square, Tahrir Square, named for liberation. There are choices, great and small, to live in fear, or to share our fear, and free ourselves to live in peace - *seimiyya, seimiyya*. May we be tender and courageous. Let us lean in to one another, and embrace the power of vulnerability.

4 Coleman Barks, *Essential Rumi*