

Rev. Kim K Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
7 April, 2013

Spirit, Draw Near

With thanks and love to Rev. Jane Ranney Rzepka

“Last weekend at Spartanburg’s Spring Fling, I was paying attention to 90-degree-heat and shoving crowds, standing in line at the bumper-car ride with my two boys.” My hilarious colleague, Meg Barnhouse, is telling this story. “One of them kept changing his mind about whether he wanted to ride. What he really wanted to do was toss rubber chickens into a pot, five tries for two dollars. My brain was a rubber chicken. I had just dragged the children all over the fair, looking for the writers with whom I was supposed to sign books and the folks from my church with whom I was supposed to sell beer. I couldn’t find either group, and the whole time I was looking for those people, both boys were pulling on me asking, ‘Can we ride the rides now?....’

“ ... [I]nto my head came this thought: ‘I am in hell.’... So I said, ‘Let’s go ride the rides.’

Meg Barnhouse continues, “When I saw my older son dive into a car and start manhandling the wheel, waiting for the ride to [begin], I moved into the shade ... to watch ... with his brother.... I saw my son’s mouth open wide with joy, its inside stained red by tiger’s-blood-flavored shaved ice. He was in a state of bliss, being slammed from behind and from all sides by other bumper-car drivers. He threw back his head and laughed, putting the pedal to the metal in reverse, snapping his head forward as he took aim and slammed into another car, looking sideways at the other driver, grinning, not quite able to believe this was actually allowed....

Meg Barnhouse concludes, “... Joy changed my breathing. I was having fun.... [M]y brain cooled off enough to remember to enjoy my life, to

be there for the beauty and grace in that situation.... Here was beauty, and here was grace, and here I was, in the middle of it.”¹

That’s how it is, isn’t it? One minute’s a rubber chicken, and the next is tiger’s-blood-flavored shaved ice. And what is it that catapults us from stalled-out to miles-per-hour-in-bumper-car bliss, from hell to beauty and grace? Meg Barnhouse says, “Let’s go ride the rides.”

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This is poet Robert Bly’s *One Source of Bad Information*.

There’s a boy in you about three
Years old who hasn’t learned a thing for thirty
Thousand years. Sometimes it’s a girl.

This child has to make up its mind
How to save you from death.
He says things like: “Stay home. Avoid elevators. Eat only elk.”

You live with this child but you don’t know it.
You are in the office, yes, but live with this boy
At night. He’s uninformed, but he does want

To save your life. And he has. Because of this boy
You survived a lot. He’s got six big ideas.
Five don’t work. Right now, he’s repeating them to you.

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Or you could ride the rides.

On Wednesday evening, I had the great pleasure of hearing my beloved colleague and friend, Jane Rzepka, tell her *Odyssey*: the story of her life and adventures as a Unitarian Universalist. Jane was raised in a fellowship in rural Ohio – a gathering of like-minded, like-hearted people who gathered to build a spiritual community, and a church, and only, years later, to call a minister. Her earliest memory of church is of eating powdered sugar donuts and learning to turn cartwheels in coffee hour. It was an exuberant introduction.

¹ Rev. Meg Barnhouse, *Trying to Be There*

Jane Rzepka writes, “Unitarian Universalists ride the rides. We believe that everybody is invited, and not only invited, but free to choose among the death-defying scary rides, the little whirling tea cup rides, the classic merry-go-round rides, the rides in the dark, the sentimental rides that have scenery and cheerful songs, or, yes, the bumper cars. We have a theology that requires us to decide for ourselves what kind of a person we want to be, what kind of ride we want to take given the constraints on our lives, and, once that’s all decided, we are required to help the rest of the folks climb into their seats.” Our religion, Jane Rzepka concludes, “our unfettered religion, encourage[s] us to find ... the joy.”²

Beauty and grace and joy: Seek, and ye shall find.

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On Thursday afternoon, National Public Radio’s Robin Young interviewed 53-year-old singer and composer Rob Morsberger. A year and a half ago, when he was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor, he vowed to make as much music as he possibly could in the time he had left. Rob Morsberger kept his promise; since then, he’s released three CDs of new music. His exalted new album is a double CD called “Early Work.”

Robin Young begins by asking him how he is. He responds, “I just want to say that these interviews have meant so much to me. And I just want to thank you, and make sure that you know that they’re particularly special to me, that I’ve been here with you.... I need to let people know how I value them....”

Here is gratitude in the face of death; gratitude, magnified.

Rob Morsberger has about a month left, now. His health, he says, is “dire.” But he’s “happy.” He sings,

...When everything unravels
and love has been unkind
she packs her bags and travels
to another state of mind...³

“It’s all good in my book,” he says. “It’s part of my journey, and other people have similar journeys.... I found this whole illness thing ... a very

² Jane Ranney Rzepka, *From Ziplines to Hosaphones*, p. 119

³ from *State of Mind*

uplifting experience.... I'm enjoying my time.... I'm very grateful for [it] ... in every way. And I feel really fortunate that I had time to get most of the things right that mattered to me.... As far as I'm concerned, everything worked out great."

Rob Morsberger sings,
 In everything you do,
 I'll always be a part of you.⁴

And

If G*d needed a pair of eyes
 He could have my vision....⁵

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This is what it means to set a place at the table for the uninvited guest, open the door, and welcome whatever comes.

This is what it means to flirt with the possibility of grace.

This is what we mean when we sing, "Spirit, draw near."

Beauty and grace and joy and gratitude: Seek, and ye shall find. The operative word is "seek," as much as "find."

Beloved spiritual companions, this is our faith: seeking, and finding. Your brain is a rubber chicken in the steaming heat of an overcrowded fair ground, until you muster the will and the willingness to say, "Let's ride the rides."

Sometimes, we end up in a line where we didn't mean to be, for a ride we didn't want to take. It can be rough – dire, even. But our faith invites us to do our best with what we are given. If we're lucky, there will be tiger's-blood-flavored shaved ice and powdered sugar donuts and cartwheels ... or, at least, another state of mind. s

I close with Mark Nepo's poem called *Yes We Can Talk*.

Having loved enough and lost enough,
 I'm no longer searching
 just opening,

⁴ from *A Part of You*

⁵ from *If G*d Needed a Pair of Eyes*

no longer trying to make sense of pain
but trying to be a soft and sturdy home
in which real things can land.

These are the irritations
that rub into a pearl.

So we can talk for a while
but then we must listen,
the way rocks listen to the sea.

And we can churn at all that goes wrong
but then we must lay all distractions
down and water every living seed.

And yes, on nights like tonight
I too feel alone. But seldom do I
face it squarely enough
to see that it's a door
into the endless breath
that has no breather,
into the surf that human
shells call G*d.⁶

Spirit, draw near.

⁶ Please see poetrymala.blogspot.com/2009/03/poem-by-mark-nepo.html