

Revision: The Work of Repair

Good Morning!

This sermon was hard to start, even though I had months to think about it. It helps to admit that to you. It helped to admit that to myself when I finally sat down to write. What to say? I wondered, given the experiences we have all been through with the pandemic and with our poisonous politics and painful racism that was highlighted by the terrible attack on our Capitol on January 6th. It has been, to say the least, an upsetting and unsettling year, dizzying and disorienting in its eventfulness. A kind of protracted grief punctuated by shock. Doesn't this time last year feel like forever-ago?

Trying to get perspective on these past many months, I have needed to do what writer Natalie Goldberg calls "composting," a process she describes as allowing "our experience to sift through our consciousness." For me, this composting has happened most effectively when I have found space.

As winter has exacerbated the already narrowed pandemic world, I am ever more grateful for lying in bed first thing in the morning looking at the sky through the bare tree branches. Watching the shape and drift of the clouds, sometimes lit sunrise pink. It is obvious, but still worth noting, and particularly now, appreciating, how spacious the sky is. A welcome and necessary expansiveness, when we are so often looking down—at our phones, laptops, and iPads, watching Netflix, scrolling social media, focused on the news.

In a piece in *The New Yorker* about his experience during the pandemic, art critic Peter Schjeldahl (skel-dahl) writes, "I've been feeling apologetic to certain trees,

near my home, for my past indifference to their beauty—and a lesson in joy that we used to take for granted. We will have peeled eyes.”

I love that line: “I’ve been feeling apologetic to certain trees, near my home, for my past indifference to their beauty.” You, like me, may have found going for walks during this pandemic has taken on new meaning. For me, it’s not only been an opportunity to savor trees and appreciate the sky, it’s also been a chance to escape the 24/7 news cycle and broaden my vista that gets closed in by too much time inside the same space, often focused on work and feeling buried under by emails. My head gets filled with noise, which then makes me irritable. But outside, I am nourished and refreshed by nature, and these walks allow me to revise the way I see the world. They give me the space to reconsider whatever hassled, stressed, or stuck mental state I may have gotten into.

These walks, like writing this sermon, remind me of the importance of revision.

As a teacher of writing, I am all too familiar with how many of my students resist the idea of revision. For them, it means they didn’t get it right the first time. It means more work when they hoped they were done.

Elizabeth Jarret Andrew observes in her book *Living Revision: A Writer’s Craft as Spiritual Practice*, “We humans dislike being undone The state of incompleteness is uncomfortable, as is vulnerability and unknowing. We have an unrelenting urge to wrap things up.”

But I love the word revision with its meaning “to re-see.” I love what it invites us to do—to reconsider, to see with fresh or as Schjeldahl (skel-dahl) puts it, “peeled eyes.”

Revision is the work of writing. It is the also work of being alive.

Indeed, everything—from a piece of writing, to the way we see ourselves and each other, the stories we tell, the opinions we hold, the understandings we have—needs to be revised.

“When we lead curious, openhearted lives,” Andrew points out, “revision is a natural consequence of growth.”

But as I was reminded in the writing of this sermon, revision not only takes times but needs time.

The time to gain perspective that allows us to question our initial version of things.

In school, we are taught to efficiently write a tidy, tight essay.

But I prefer writer Grace Paley’s invitation to, “write about what we don’t know about what we know.” And this takes time.

Paley reminds me to look at the world and others with curiosity. To wonder what I don’t know rather than simply assert what I do.

To revise is to consider other possibilities. And to take into account how other’s see and experience the world.

The beautiful question that is the heart of memoir writing is, “What’s it been like for you to be in the world?” This question acknowledges that each of us experience the world differently and opens a space to learn more.

Yes, we’ve all been through the pandemic together. But as we also know, our experiences of it have been vastly different.

I am grateful that much of my work gives me the opportunity to hear people's stories. These stories help counteract my judgment. They make me rethink what I thought I knew. They remind me there is more than one perspective: mine.

Stories make room for other stories.

In the book *Storycatcher*, Christina Baldwin tells about a group of people on opposite sides of the abortion debate who come together as part of the Public Conversation Project. The twenty participants engage in an on-going, three-year conversation during which they agree to share stories, not opinions, and to listen rather than try to persuade. It is, of course, an exercise in tolerance. And what emerges is not changed minds about the issue, but changed understandings about each other.

Listening is the act of creating space where change can happen. And as this project illustrates, listening is not the same as agreeing, even though we often behave as though it is. Too often instead of listening, we prefer to spout our opinions, marshal our arguments, and wield our facts as we dig into a position. We think in terms of sides. And in the echo chambers of Fox News and MSNBC, our world views are confirmed.

But, as Andrew comments in *Living Revision*, "Change on the page as in life, does not happen when we're stubborn and clingy. Revision asks that we cast the small world we've created in words—and all it represents within our being—in an entirely new light," writes Andrew.

To revise is to soften. To loosen our grip. It's about making room for what hasn't been said.

Being listened to helps us do this work.

When we are listened to in open-hearted ways—without argument or facile advice-giving or hijacking through too ready identification—we are more likely to give voice to harder stories that might otherwise fester or calcify.

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard observed:

What is the source of our first suffering?

It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak.

It was born in the moment

When we accumulated silent things within us.

There is, as Vivik Murthy, Surgeon General for Obama and now Biden, has highlighted an epidemic of loneliness in this country. While the pandemic has increased our sense of isolation, loneliness is not, of course, necessarily about being alone. It is about *feeling* alone. We can, after all, be terribly alone with others.

Loneliness is about not being seen. Or heard. Or understood. About not being found acceptable. It's about what we believe we cannot say. It is in a sense about being isolated in a narrative that is not allowed to change.

While they can be difficult to share, our stories—and in particular our hard ones—need to be aired in order to change.

In his memoir *Firebird*, about growing up gay, the poet Mark Doty writes:

“We live in the stories we tell; the stories we don’t tell live us. What you don’t allow yourself to know controls and determines; whatever’s held to the light ‘can be changed’—not the facts, of course, but how we understand them, how we live with them. Everyone will be filled by grief, distorted by sorrow; that’s the nature of being a daughter or a son, as our parents are also. What matters is what we learn to make of what happens to us.

And we learn to make, I think, by telling. Held to the light of common scrutiny, nothing’s ever quite as unique as our shame and sorrow could have us think. But if you don’t say it, you’re alone with it, and the singularity of your story seems immense, intractable,” writes Doty.

Shame silences us. Hurt locks us in. Guilt festers. And anger erodes. It has been said that hurt people hurt people. We need to loosen the hold these things can have on us and the way they can poison our relationships. We need to help each other shift the stories we are telling that do not serve us.

To varying degrees, we all carry stories that do not serve us, stories we repeat, grievances we nurse. I often think of what a therapist who was in one of my memoir groups once shared with me about her work. She said that in essence she was helping her patients no longer have dead-end stories. In other words, she was helping them to revise.

Revision is the work of healing. It is the work of restorative justice when an incarcerated person tells their story and acknowledges the harm they have inflicted not only on their victims but also the victims’ family as well as their own

loved ones. It is the work of repair, harder and more productive than fixed judgment, which is intent on defining someone by the worst they have done.

But revision requires the courage to be vulnerable, as Brene Brown has taught us, and the willingness to take into account more than our own story.

In her new Netflix special, Brown—now famous for her research and TEDTalks on shame, vulnerability, and courage—recounts a swim she and her husband, Steve, took on a vacation during which she told her husband how connected she was feeling to him in that moment. His response, “Water’s great.” Brown tells the audience how much this response felt like rejection, despite the strength of her marriage. At the end of the swim, when she questioned her husband about what was up, she discovered that while she was feeling connected, he was trying to stave off a panic attack. And as they talked, what helped them reconnect was the phrase, “the story I’m telling myself is . . .”

The story I’m telling myself is . . . We fill this story in so quickly when things go wrong that it’s hard to know that we’re even doing it. It takes effort to bring this into our awareness, to understand how shaped that story often is by our own hurts, insecurities, and fears. We have to pause. And admit to ourselves that we are telling a story and not necessarily describing reality. And instead of doubling down on our version of events that only serves to isolate us more, we have to find the courage to say to the other person, here is story I’m telling myself . . . and invite them to share their own.

As poet Mark Doty puts it so well, “What is healing but a shift in perspective?”

All this reminds me of the beautiful Hebrew phrase, *Tikkun Olam* – “repair of the world.” When we listen, when we create space, we let our stories breathe. And

when we allow them to be revised, acknowledging that there is more than just our version of events, we are allowing ourselves to see the world, each other, and ourselves in new ways. We are engaging in the vital work of repair.

And isn't that what we need more than ever right now?

May it be so.