

2005-2-27 STIGMA

Mark Belletini

"The first proof of a person's incapacity to achieve is their endeavoring
to fix the stigma of failure on others." *B.R. Hayden, 1970*

"The connection between secrecy and stigma is intuitively known by children."
Ann Hartman, 1993

Opening Words

We are here

to rid ourselves of walls that keep us

from living abundantly, with character and joy.

Many are the paths through the wide gate of worship...

paths of mind and heart, memory and hope,

spirit & doubt. Paths of life and longing...

All are welcome. All are worthy. And so we say:

**Living our lives with purpose and gratitude, moved by the beauty of the
world and claiming justice for all who live upon it, we open our hearts to
greater loving, healthier knowledge, deeper compassion and hope of peace.**

Affirmation:

A. The Welcome of New Members: Rite of the Cardamom Seed
(See insert)

B. The Installation of New Covenant Group Leaders

Hymn: 318

Sequence

Word, leave me for a time.

Go away. Go on. Go.

Leave my head. Leave my mouth. Leave me.

Fly off and transform yourselves into wooden beams, warm and gold over my head.

Drop to the floor, soften on the carpet, gray, teal and red. Comfort my feet.

Why don't you grow transparent, like the glass panels in the clerestory?

Let me see right through you.

Rise up and disappear, like a wisp of smoke above the flame in the chalice.

Breathe out of me into the clear air.

Dive into the sound of the bell like a stone falling into a clear pond, and ripple through the world without noise or even a sigh.

Leave me, leave us all, in silent peace,
if for but a moment.

silence

Word, attach yourself now to the faces
that live in my heart. Become names
that remind me of those I love and those
I am concerned about, and those whose
lives are in turmoil, and those who are
angry and those who are grieving.

Let their names pass through my heart like a clear
stream in spring, or fly off my lips like
the whisper of late winter snowfall.

naming

Word, undo yourself for a while...transform into music, and let the vibrations of
the music
carry you into the ancient hymn sung by all the planets and the stars, all the
breathing in and breathing out of the human race, the great anthem of the
cosmos. Praise for light! And praise for life!

Readings

The First Reading is part of a poem, Stigma, by Barbara Fletcher, 1997 in the book Other Voices

They wear secrets on their matte faces,
smoothed on subtly, a makeup mask.

I saw them pass traces of stories on linen napkins, on handkerchiefs, saw them brush their lips against ears, leave stories behind in russet smudges, wipe foreheads and lips with delicate finger-strokes, then press gossip into palms, gossip that rubs off like face powder, like lipstick-- or like pollen, passed from flower to flower, from anther to stigma...

The Second Reading comes from two ancient biblical sources: The Book of Melakim, or Kings, and the Gospel of Matthew. The second book was written five hundred years after the first.

First, A. From the Book of Melakim, the following disturbing folktale

On his way to Beth El, as the prophet Elisha was walking down the road, some young men came out of the town, and started mocking the prophet. "Hey, Baldy, where are you going? Hey, Baldy, Baldy!"

Elisha cursed the young men, and wouldn't you know it, two bears ambled out of the forest nearby and mangled the whole lot of them.

B. 1

Jesus said to the priests "I am telling you right now, streetwalkers and tax bureaucrats are going to come into the presence of God long before you will."
21:31

B. 2 Jesus said to the people "Congratulations, you who are destitute! God's world is yours! 5:2

Sermon

I've preached at a variety of churches over the years. Probably fifty or so. Some larger, some small. Some in 200-year-old buildings of stone, others in rented schoolrooms of the local middle school. Some with choirs as grand as ours, and others with mostly recorded music. In almost all cases, as the visiting preacher, I have been taken out to lunch afterward as a courtesy, and so I could meet some of the local folks.

On one of these Sundays, as people left the restaurant to go to their afternoon commitments, one of the teachers in the religious education program stayed on with me. It was clear she wanted to say something to me privately.

"I need to let you know something about me," she said. "It's something I really can't bring up with the people in my congregation. And because of financial problems, we have not had a minister for over two years. But I am finding lately that I really need to talk about this to someone. Since you live far away from here, you're ideal, since that way I won't have to be embarrassed every time I see you."

"Well," I smiled. "I hope I am worthy of your trust. And we do have some privacy in this little alcove where they seated us. But if what you say is as serious as you think it is, I may suggest that you talk with a therapist about it."

"That would be fine. But I would have to travel to the next town even to find a therapist, so I am not sure what good that would do. Look, here's my story. When I was a young mother of three children, my husband left me, and to this day we don't know where he is. He just disappeared. But I had children to feed and take care of. So for two full years, I did something society does not approve of just to put food on the table. Something with a terrible stigma attached to it. Mark, I made money for my family by selling myself. I was a prostitute for almost two years. It was over 15 years ago, mind you, but there is not a day that goes by that I don't worry about someone walking into the church and recognizing me from those years. I know that even in this liberal congregation, the idea that a teacher used to be a street-walker once upon a time would really get some people huffy in a minute. They might yank their children out of the school, or cancel their pledge in outrage."

“Wow,” I said. “Really?” Then I called her by name. “You say you’ve been teaching here two years already, haven’t you? And from what I can tell, people really love you around here. I know the children here simply adore you. A visiting minister can really pick up on things like that pretty easily. Do you really think that if people knew this about your past, that they would fire you, just like that?”

“Yes,” she said, “I really believe that. The stigma of prostitution is so great. Once you have done something like that in your life, it’s as if you had a prison record. You are discredited for the rest of your life. It doesn’t make any difference how much I love the children, or how good I am as a teacher. I’m sure I would be marginalized.”

We talked about this subject for another half an hour. Then it was time for me to get to the airport for my return flight. This woman had simply wanted to process her past with someone who was not going to lock her up in a cage of disgrace. She didn’t want me to fix anything; I cannot, after all, change the past. But I think all she wanted from me was a sense that she was a full person, despite the stigma tattooing her. I hope I was able to convince her of exactly that.

It would be easy for me to tell twenty other stories about the power of stigma to silence or isolate people in this world. I could easily relate a hundred tales about the stigmas that keep fellow human beings from any thorough self-disclosure in important relationships. But I think just telling that one brief story gets the idea across pretty well.

This woman felt *disgraced* by her past life. Her way of making a living was considered “socially undesirable.” Her past served to “discredit” her. All of these phrases can be found in the dictionary under “stigma,” and they provide sufficient definition as far as I am concerned. Note, this woman never told me she felt “guilty” for having done what she did...she really felt, at the time, that she did such work out of complete desperation. No, a person bearing the mark of stigma is *stigmatized* from the outside first. Most of the inside torment *derives* from the severity of the outside torment.

Stigmas can be major or minor. And they can change over time. For example, when I was growing up, there was a stigma attached to a man and a woman who lived together before marriage. And back in the 19th century, divorce

was stigmatized, often in a sexist way. “The divorcee” was often characterized as a loose woman. The divorcing husband was not equally stigmatized as a “loose man.” Today, divorce is so common that much of the stigma attached to divorce has softened. And hardly anyone on the liberal end of things bats an eye anymore when two people live together before marriage.

Let me give you some more examples. In ancient times, (and in many places in the modern world yet,) women who did not bear children were stigmatized. The Bible, for example, is full of stories of discredited childless women. On the other hand, many single mothers were, and are to this day in many places, told that *their* situation is *socially undesirable*, which can only add to their already tremendous difficulties.

The stigmas I’ve mentioned so far seem to have to do with what society deems “proper relationships.” But often stigma attaches to people without any clear connection to their interpersonal relationships. People who have spent time in prison, for example, know a great deal about the power of stigma. Many of them, upon getting out, feel as if no one will ever really trust them again, whether they are single or married, a parent or not, gay or straight.

There is also a stigma attached to someone who is diagnosed with a behavioral or emotional illness. Schizophrenia, for example, is often stigmatized with a remarkably ignorant humor: comedians or wannabe comedians will make demeaning jokes about ‘split personalities,’ which, of course, has nothing at all to do with the actual illness of schizophrenia. Stigmatizing an illness of the brain is as foolish and cold as stigmatizing illnesses associated with other organs of the human body. Who is going to tell me that leukemia should be a disgrace?

And yet, when I was growing up, cancer itself was stigmatized. You were not to speak of it in public. It was a whispered word. And how many of my friends with AIDS over the years had to spend their precious energy not on fighting the illness, but on fighting *the stigma attached to the illness*. Many of them told me that their medical team tended to whisper when talking to them. Like any child, my friends understood right off that whispering is a way of keeping things secret, and that secrecy and stigma walk hand in hand with each other through this world.

Prison, prostitution, and certain conditions of the brain are marked by major stigmas indeed. There are many more stigmas, however, based on the human body which are not associated with illness. For example, older children who wet their beds are stigmatized. Left-handed people were stigmatized for centuries. I've heard recently that hundreds of left-handed people die each and every year because they have to use equipment which is designed for right-handed people, who are the ones considered "normal."

People are also disgraced by their weight. Obese people, or very slender people, are often stigmatized with rude caricature in film, television and comedy routines. And, most strangely, the placement of hair on the body seems to concern a lot of people for reasons that are quite beyond my comprehension. Certain men can be stigmatized as gorillas or monkeys. Women are often panicked about the stigma of hair appearing where our mindless and all-powerful culture suggests it shouldn't. And of course, no one seems to be able to hold back from making comic comments about men who are thin on top. The rueful ancient Hebrew folk tale which you heard this morning suggests that the stigma attached to baldness is at least three thousand years old in some cultures. The fact that a couple of bears come out of the woods and maul all the town tormentors tells me a lot too. This tale of bloody vengeance suggests to me that the *emotional response to society's stigmatization* of certain physical traits has not changed much in three thousand years either. It hurts to be stigmatized. No one can be surprised that a person so hurt might at least dream about getting even for that inflicted pain.

The word "stigma" *itself* is at least three thousand years old, as old as the folk-tale. It's a Greek word which comes from an old Persian word "tigra" that means "arrow." The famous Tigris river which flows through Baghdad in Iraq was called that because at the headwaters of that mighty river, the water "flows fast as an arrow" in a series of rapids. Among the Greeks, the word "stigma" which was derived from "tigra" served to name the mark that arrows made, either a dent or a wound.

Thus, it's clear to me that to stigmatize someone is to hurt them. It is to send an arrow of contempt into them so that in their pain they will keep themselves far away from you, and more pointedly, far *below* you. Putting it another way, if I

am involved in stigmatizing anyone, I am also rushing to bless myself as “normal” by comparison.

Now of course, no one gets up in the morning and says “Gee, how can I stigmatize someone today?” There are no “how to stigmatize” books in self-help bookstores, and I have yet to find anyone who actually thinks that he or she ever disgraces anyone, even unconsciously.

And yet people are stigmatized. How? By assumptions we make. By how we talk about them behind their back. By how we gossip about them, or tell their tales. By how we cling to the idol of “normalcy” at all costs. By how we fall for the daily co-option that weight is hilarious, baldness a joke and mental illness a punchline. By how we refuse to face our fears about health or death or injustice. By how we theologize about human dignity...you know, do we believe that committing a crime dehumanizes someone forever, and that all former prisoners MUST be stigmatized so they keep far away from us?

No, our poet tells us very well how people become stigmatized, even in liberal circles.

“I saw them pass traces of stories on linen napkins, on handkerchiefs, saw them brush their lips against ears, leave stories behind in russet smudges, wipe foreheads and lips with delicate finger-strokes, then press gossip into palms, gossip that rubs off like face powder, like lipstick-- or like pollen, passed from flower to flower, from anther to stigma...”

For stigma is also the part of a flower that is covered by pollen, and our poet knows that stigmas travel through society like pollen travels through the air...invisibly yet effectively. And always, she reminds us, by contact...”gossip in palms, lips against ears.”

I think our historic tradition, Universalism, calls on each of us to make a response to the power of stigma in the world. In fact, I think that liberal religion might very well be described not by its various theologies but by its attitude toward the power of stigmas to dehumanize and hurt. I think, for example, that the universalist teaching of the ancient Galilean teacher Jesus might be seen as a very good example of a truly “anti-stigma” attitude.

So it's a disgrace to be destitute, to be poor, to live in a trailer and take a bus instead of driving a new car? Jesus turns that old stigma on its head... "Congratulations to you who are destitute..." He blesses them, that is, destigmatizes them, and says they are closer to Love's domain than people who are no longer poor. And who were the two most stigmatized groups of people in the ancient world of Galilee? Streetwalkers, and the tax bureaucrats, who worked for the enemy Romans. Prostitutes and publicans is the older translation. Yet Jesus, while talking to the prestigious priests, insists that a harlot or a tax collector might actually be closer to God than any self-congratulating cleric.

This statement too, is an attempt to destigmatize, that is, to humanize human beings, and show that either all of us are blest, that is, inherently worthy, or all of us are cursed. There is nothing inbetween. We are all in this together, and have to find ways to work it out, or else we are all wounded together, *both* those who are wounded by arrows of stigma, and those who shoot the arrows as well.

For me, to be a Unitarian Universalist is to *accept a calling* to become conscious of how we might tend to stigmatize others, and to send them off in disgrace. To be a Unitarian Universalist cannot be construed to be only about personal spiritual liberality and theological skepticism. It's not political party membership, either, or any sort of shared agnostic metaphysics. I say that to be a Unitarian Universalist is to become more and more conscious every day about how we stigmatize others, and how we ourselves are stigmatized. We can work on our consciousness by remembering the times we ourselves have felt disgraced by others...for our relationship choices, for how our body looks, for what we have done or left undone. We do this by learning to laugh at what is truly funny, and not at what truly demeans or hurts. We can do this by admitting that what the children's story suggested this morning is true...it's very difficult to be wise and smart all by ourselves...we need to work together to find solutions, since each of us has a bit of wisdom to offer, and only a bit of wisdom. A tiny bit, no matter how important it might seem to us. Taking a page out of the book of the teacher Jesus isn't a bad idea either...we can look for ways of turning "normalcy" on its head. We can live by reason, not stigma, praise, not disgrace. We can refuse to discredit or dismiss any human being because of the mark that has been put upon them by the thoughtless.

In short, we can question ourselves, instead of just questioning traditional theology.

And if I could talk to that woman again, that teacher who loved to teach, but who taught with fear because of a stigma in her heart, I might say this: Maybe Unitarian Universalist congregations are better about this thing than you think. Maybe the old wisdom teachings really do have a hold among us. Maybe helping you to live without a stigma is the best part of work. At least, I have to trust in that possibility as the very ground of my own work. Thanks for sharing your story with me.”

Offertory

For the work of this congregation, and the upkeep of its place in the world; as a sign of our commitment to values which bless every child of earth, we both give and receive this offering.

Liberation Prayer

Bud of my life, open! Bloom fully, like a scarlet rose which is not ashamed to be entirely itself.

Fire of my life, blaze! Turn to ash anything in me that thinks it can control or buy either love or justice.

Song of my life, harmonize with all my dreams
for a future untouched by war or want.

Love, liberate my life from too many walls and too few boundaries.

Set me free to question everything with kindness, and to cultivate deep soul
in the dark soil of my days..

Hymn 134 O Liberating Rose (tune: Initials)