

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship at Stony Brook

8/27/14

"Take Me with You!"

Opening Words: The Journey (Mary Oliver)

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice--
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Reflection: "Songs Without Words"

Rev. Margie Allen

Pianist Donna Demian brings us four of Felix Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words* in the course of the service today. There are about 48 songs in the collection, fully a quarter of the composer's work for piano. The songs are short, lyrical pieces that offer little guidance to the pianist about how to play them or what they mean. I don't think Mendelssohn himself gave them the names that have acquired or ever spoke of their meanings. In fact, he once wrote about the *Songs*: "What the music I love expresses to me, is not thought too *indefinite* to put into words, but on the contrary, too *definite*." Words, for the composer, were not sufficient to say what he wanted to say. The music allowed him to express his thoughts more *definitely* than he could in words. To give the notes words added nothing. Music was his mother tongue.

I think we all start out in life as "songs without words." Is a baby not a sweet wordless song? We learn gradually to put the words of some language together into sentences to describe what is happening to us, already happened to us, might happen to us. In doing so, we tell ourselves and others who it is we see ourselves becoming. Now, Mendelssohn did not leave musicians completely clueless about how to interpret the *Songs*. He indicated the tempo with words like *allegro*, *adagio* and *presto* and, in some cases, the mood, with words like *agitato* or *expressivo*.

The projects Herstory designs offer "girls without words" the opportunity to give voice to their feelings (the musical mood) and their drive (the musical tempo) and the unsung notes of their experiences and to organize them in a way that creates meaning. In doing so, they are able to become more themselves, hear their own song more clearly, understand their gifts more incisively, recognize their choices more easily. They are able through the empowerment of writing to face their challenges with more chance of overcoming them, to create a dream they really can hope to make manifest.

The ability to articulate the story of our lives and imagine a future happily occupied by our most evolved and healthy self is a core human task. Sometimes it seems impossible to capture in any kind of vocabulary what it is really like to be us. There are certain times in life when that task gets truly crazy-making, when we ourselves and our situation are changing so much and so fast that we lose track of who we are, what is happening, what we need to do or how we need to act. Being adrift, confused, bereft, vulnerable is hard. Teens. Young adults with or without very young children. Empty-nesters and people undergoing a mid-life crisis. The newly retired. People in the last 15 years of a long life or ill and aware that they will soon succumb to their illness. For everyone, those intervals in a life are packed with challenges. But for many, the stress and risk of these ordinary passages are magnified by their circumstances in life. For people in poverty, for oppressed minorities, for unwelcome immigrants, for those overwhelmed with responsibility for others, for those with a history of abuse or neglect, for people with mental illness and addictions, for people who have lost and suffered much, for anyone who shows up as different from the "norm," those life passages, difficult at best, can be brutal, even deadly.

People, young and old, who are making their way through challenging transitions often find themselves confronting a set of core questions that being human raises: Why are we here? Why is life so hard? What values guide my choices in life? Where do we come from? What happens when I die? What is happiness made of? What do I have to offer the world? Am I a part of an organized something that is bigger than I am, bigger than I can comprehend? Who is in charge of my life journey? The Herstory Writers Workshop makes an assumption that Unitarian Universalists also make: that the work of telling the story of who we are and of answering those questions for ourselves is a sacred task that takes a village. We need other ears to hear the story, other eyes to see what we have seen, other voices to notice the pattern, ask the question, find the gap or the connection, shine a light in a dark place that the teller of the story has forgotten was there. We need one another. No matter who we are, how rich or poor, no matter where we were born, no matter the work we do, whether we sleep in a box in the alley

or a luxury mattress in the penthouse or behind bars on a bunk, whether we are “documented” or college-educated or schizophrenic or self-medicating with a substance that is going to kill us sooner or later, we all have a need to tell the story of who we are and a community to hear and help us shape it.

We need listeners whose lives are similar to ours, listeners who share many of our challenges, emigrated from the same country, eat the same foods, know the town or the neighborhood, face a similar array of opportunities or barriers. But we need also listeners whose circumstances and experiences are radically different from our own, who see the world through a totally different lens because of their race, their ethnicity, their gender identity and sexual orientation, their financial means, the area of town that is home to them, cultural norms they accept or struggle with, the kinds of social injustices and threats to human wellbeing that are common in their community. We need to run up against both sameness and difference and from both we need empathy and challenge and devoted companionship over time. We need people who will help us find the right words and get them in the right order, people who really want to find the path we are walking and join us there. We need companions to help us make sense of what we find in the stories we are and help us choose the right path through the story we are walking together.

Tanasha Gordon has found such companions. In Herstory, she found a circle of peers, a guiding set of writing principles that work, facilitators and mentors who care. Tanasha participated in a special program at Touro Law Center when she was attending Central Islip High School in which young people, like her, with a parent or sibling in jail write side by side with working lawyers, law interns and advocates for restorative justice. This program is part of Herstory’s intergenerational/ cross-community Youth Writing for Justice project, in which each participant learns how to use personal memoir as a tool for action, daring their circle of peers and a community of future readers to care. Erika and Serena, whom you greeted earlier, worked with Tanasha as she gradually put together the parts of her story you will hear this morning.

I listened to a recorded conversation Tanasha had with Barbara Allan, founder of Prison Families Anonymous and Rachel Weiner, her social worker at Central Islip High School [A podcast of this interview can be heard here: <http://www.storiesforjustice.org/doing-time-on-the-outside-voices-from-children-of-the-incarcerated/>]. Tanasha spoke about how hard it was to open herself to the other youth in the Touro group. Her life up to that time had been a private matter and laced with secrets never-before articulated. But as she moved forward in the program, she realized that she was not alone, that others had suffered as she had and that, in speaking up, she was speaking for them as well.

Tanasha is going to read from her “book in progress,” a book about how she overcame her fear of speaking out. A book for all ages. A book for everyone, she says, not just for those whose live hard lives on the bottom rung of the ladder of the American Dream, but also for people who enjoy more privileged life, to help them get beyond their judgments into empathy and companionship.

Do you know what it’s like to be Tanasha Gordon? She dares you to care!

HerStory: “Do You Know What It’s Like?”

Tanasha Gordon

[Youth Writing for Justice; Central Islip HS - Touro Law, Spring 2014]

Do you know what it’s like to not have a father not be able to play basketball with you? Parents to take you shopping? Do you know what it’s like to have parents in jail and they cannot provide for you financially? I used to play basketball around the corner as a kid with my closest friend, “Kay-tee.” Her

dad would give her money. Her mom would see what she wanted to eat. Her dad would even come play basketball with her sometimes. But, what about me? I never had a father to play basketball or football with. Never had a mommy to ask what a period was or sex.

What do you know about your mother and father? I cannot tell you what my mother's favorite drink is. I can maybe tell you her full name and favorite color. I don't even know how old my parents are. Now, think about everything you know about your parents. I wish I had my real mother and father to tell me what to do, give me rules. This not only should give you an outlook on how one can be affected by parents that have been in trouble with the law, it should also make you realize and appreciate your parents, whether it is just your mother or your father, because 17 year-olds like me would LOVE to take your place.

Jail... it will get you... it will hold you... it will shape you... But it will never take the pain away that I have felt most of my 17 years of life. It affected me much! I felt alone. I felt like all the other boys and girls had mommies and daddies, but I didn't. I had people who played the role, but that cannot replace the feeling that I had. Sometimes, I just walked around with a frown, just wanted to punish things and throw things.

Some people wonder how I became such a good person, how I didn't end up in trouble or a juvenile delinquent. It was only God that has kept me mentally sane. But when you see someone, or try to judge someone, look at their background, find out their history. Being a child to a parent that is in jail is not easy. Before you criticize anyone, find out about their book and the story inside it.

Daddy, is that you?

Still not living with any of my biological sisters. My mom, in jail, finally started writing me letters. Me, in shock because I didn't know what to write, how to feel, always had unconditional love for my mother. Me, in the church choir, loving to sing, happy, healthy... always wished my mother was there.

Do you know how it feels to wonder if your mother is in jail? Dead? In the street? Coked up? There were times where I just wished my "mommy" never went to jail! Why my mommy?! She is such a good person! Don't be mean to my mom! She doesn't deserve this! Imagine your mother in jail and she can't come see you because she has no freedom!

Dad, is that you?

Mommy, coming to visit me at times. I don't remember how often over the weekends, but whenever I did, I never wanted to leave. Now, 8 years-old, spoke up for myself and said, "I want to live with my mommy." Did I get to go? Yes, of course. But, did it last long? Hell no! I used to go to my Aunt Mary's house with bruises and cuts on my arms and legs from getting beaten. Did I think anything of it? No, because I loved my mommy. She is a good person. I didn't want anything to happen to her.

Three months... three months is as long as it lasted. Everything had gotten so bad that we had to go back to court for custody battle. Me, in the court room, not knowing what was happening, just sat there, hour after hour after hour, waiting for my mom. Soon, mom storming out of the room, turning the corner and sitting on the floor. Me, looking at her with a sweet benevolent smile as she says, "DON'T LOOK AT ME." With tears in my eyes, why can't I look at my mommy? I love her. Why is she being so mean to me? She is a good person. I know she doesn't mean it.

Later on, around eight o'clock, "Come on, Tanasha, it is time to go." My mother, angry and tears in her eyes, me, walking with my "mom," who has raised since the age of two. This day, I always remember it as "the day before Thanksgiving." My first holiday with my mother was to soon be destroyed, and I know why... but that's a different story.

Then, not too long after, my "mom" tells me, "Your mother is in jail." Wow! The sharp pain I felt in my heart. I wanted to go visit her but was too scared to ask. All this I am telling you is brand new to everyone. No one EVER knew I felt this way. No one EVER knew I had this pain... no one but my Aunt Mary.

Reflection: "Take Me with You"

Rev. Margie Allen

I was an adult before I realized that many of my Dad's characteristic little quips were actually quotes from Shakespeare. He was an English professor. We had a cat named Mistress Quickly, for instance, named after the innkeeper at the Boar's Head Tavern in Shakespeare's *Henry* plays. Anyway, "Take me with you" was one of the expressions he used when he didn't understand what the heck you were talking about or when you weren't getting where he was going. "Take me with you" meant that there was some distance in understanding between us and we needed to stop to let us catch up with one another. In a Herstory writers circle, participants learn to notice those moments of distance as they listen to a peer reading her story out loud. Together, listeners and writer work to find the words and images that bring the passage alive, giving the sense of the listener being "right there."

Writers start by looking for a "page one moment," a vivid memory from their past that will be compelling for the Stranger/Reader for whom they write. Herstory writing is different from journaling. Participants write for a listener they wish to engage. In their "page one" they "dare the reader to care." As time goes by, writers find more moments of their life's journey to bring to language. As they connect the dots of their own stories and listen intently to the unfolding stories of their peers, the group often begins to discern the patterns of injustice that disturb the lives of people in their community. In time some are able to give their shame, their anger and their despair back to the unjust systems that created them and, in doing so, reclaim their wholeness and their power to choose well for themselves, to save the only life they can save, as they gather the strength to join others in the larger struggle for justice. In this way, the Herstory Writers Workshop leverages the art of memoir-writing as a tool for propagating compassion and deepening listening skills, revealing the repercussions of injustice, generating social justice movements and sowing the seeds of peace. Meanwhile, the participants witness productive partnerships between helping organizations, work with peers across multiple and radical differences to find surprising commonalities, and gain a compelling new understanding of the power of the pen to order and move lives.

Herstory Writer's Workshop devoted to giving voice to some of the most isolated and vulnerable populations on Long Island—women in prison, in homeless shelters, women on disability and welfare, domestic workers; Asian, Hispanic and Caribbean immigrants, pregnant and parenting teens and, more

recently, to young men and boys [*Educator's Voice*, NYSUT's Journal of Best Practices in Education, Volume VII, Spring 2014]. The Youth Writing for Justice Project has involved 50 public high school students from four of Long Islands most troubled school Districts and six regional institutions of higher learning: SUNY Old Westbury, St. Joseph's College in Patchogue, Touro Law Center, Hofstra University with C.W. Post and Adelphia University. Students from regular and alternative high schools work in groups with college students who are studying in a number of different disciplines. They read aloud, listen to one another, and together help to shape the path each writer is blazing through the story of his or her past. They stand in as listeners for each other in the role of the Stranger Reader, helping to keep the story alive and compelling, to invite the reader right into the scene as a caring witness. In the process, Erika writes, the high school teens often discover that the experiences of the college students weren't so different from their own: overcoming obstacles, setting goals, staying in school [*NYSUT United*, April 2014].

Herstory brings to a particular population in need a set of tools and a spiritual practice for pushing back against the obstacles that a broken society and broken families and communities have placed in the way. Herstory brings young people, step by step, ear by ear, heart by heart, word by word, back in touch with their own power to choose and live out a purposeful and meaningful life. I am in awe of the courage of Tanasha and other students who have worked as hard as she has to surface and tell their stories. I wish that kind of courage for all of us here. You too, in the words of the poet David Whyte, can choose to "Start Close In," with the first step, "the step you don't want to take." And please, take us with you.

Start close in,
don't take the second step
or the third,...
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step
you don't want to take.
Start with
the ground
you know,
the pale ground
beneath your feet,
your own
way to begin
the conversation.
Start with your own
question,
give up on other
people's questions,
don't let them
smother something
simple.
To hear
another's voice,
follow
your own voice,

wait until
that voice
becomes an
intimate
private ear
that can
really listen
to another.
Start right now
take a small step
you can call your own
don't follow
someone else's
heroics, be humble
and focused,
start close in,
don't mistake
that other
for your own.
Start close in,
don't take
the second step
or the third,
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step
you don't want to take.

HerStory: "The Day I Call Why"

Tanasha Gordon

Waking up that morning, taking extra long to get ready for school. Wanting to see my Aunt Mary, something telling me, *go, go, go!* So I decided I was going to take my cousin's bus since his bus came a little later than mine.

Phone rings. Caller ID: Mary. I quickly jump to answer the phone but my older brother, Jerry, got to it first. I listened for a moment realizing it was just my cousins goofing around laughing, soon realizing that laugh I was hearing was a sorrowful cry from her daughter.

Jerry running upstairs, saying repeatedly, "I have to go to Aunt Mary's house," me asking, "Can I go? Can I go?" He says no as I fix my lips to ask, "Why?" He says, "She stopped breathing." Me, gasping for air, "Oh, no!" Then, not too soon after, putting a smile on my face, *that's Aunt Mary, she will be okay.*

Jerry running up and down the steps, trying to get himself together. I ask, "Should I call mommy?" He pauses and says, "Yeah." By the look on his face I could see this was more serious than I thought. He left. I called my mom's job, speaking to her boss with whom she and I were very close to whose name was also Mary. "Oh, my God! I will tell her when she comes back." My other brother, David, running

out the room. I tell him what's going on. Him, getting ready to get mom for work, she still has two hours before she gets back to the yard. Soon hearing the phone ring. From the way he was talking, I could tell it was Jerry. Me, saying in my head, "Ah, she is okay!"

David breaks down his voice, sounding raspy, "No, man, don't tell me that! Don't tell me that! No!" Only one thing that could mean... she was gone. David, finally getting off the phone, goes to get mom as I call all my uncles. David pulls up, I run outside, get in the car and there we go, on our way to the hospital. Every one crying. I sit in the waiting room.

My other Aunt, Pearl, comes out and asks, "Do you want to see her?" I walk in the room of Huntington Hospital and see her, lying there peacefully, tears in my eyes, my mom and two brothers surrounding her. *MY AUNT MARY IS GONE!* Everyone, blaming themselves, blaming each other for things they could not do. Me, blaming myself because if I would have left when I first walked out that door, I would have been able to save her. Realizing the day before, I missed the bus and was mad at her for not being able to take me. There are so many parts missing but cannot be described in detail. Aunt Mary was gone, the matron of the family gone. And that is where everyone's life changed.

Reflection: "Purposeful Companions"

Rev. Margie Allen

This service is the eighth and final in our 2014 Summer Service series on the theme of "Wayfaring." In June, we set out for Ithaca with the poet Constantine Cavafy, hoping that our way might be long. Together on the Sundays since then, people in these chairs have traveled across Long Island with famous men; watched the unfolding journey of our universe, been a stranger in strange lands, accepted an invitation to ride along with the poets wherever they might take us, traveled a ways to visit with Toni Morrison, and practiced life's turnings around a deep, nearly inexpressible personal truth. Our way has been long, a good thing. I hope the summer harvest has been rich for you.

This new congregational year brings us the opportunity to rediscover OurStory, the story of this Fellowship as it has moved through time, to put into compelling words our own page one narrative, the one that will dare others to care about who we are and what we have to give as a Fellowship. In this work, we will again be called to serve one another as purposeful companions along the way. Let us look to Tanasha for inspiration, for the courage to walk through our most daunting doubts and fears into an empowering, generous story of a Fellowship setting out on a path to somewhere, bearing whatever it is that is needed there. Writing down Ourstory, like writing down Herstory, is a spiritual practice of becoming more ourselves. It involves listening, honesty, discernment, risk-taking and sometimes a leap of faith. We may get lost, but we will find ourselves again through the practice, being present to one another in this place, asking to know and be known, standing still and listening, letting the world as it is right now tell us where we are and where our long wayfaring will take us next.

Meditation: Lost (David Wagoner)

Stand still. The trees before you and the bushes beside you are not lost.
Wherever you are is a place called here,
and you must treat it as a powerful stranger
both asking to know and be known.
Listen. The forest whispers,
"I have made this place, you can leave and return once again
saying, here."

No two trees are the same to Raven,
no two branches the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a branch does is lost on you,
you are truly lost.
Stand still. Listen.
The forest knows where you are.
Let it find you.

Closing Words: (Constantine Cavafy, from “Ithaka”)

Have Ithaka always in your mind.
Your arrival there is what you are destined for.
But don't in the least hurry the journey.
Better it last for years,
so that when you reach the island you are old,
rich with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to give you wealth.
Ithaka gave you a splendid journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She hasn't anything else to give you.