

Recently, while I was working in the garden, I came upon a somewhat egg shaped stone, which made me think about how we may prefer the solidity of stones but it's hard to get a chicken out of one. Unlike stones eggs are fragile. It takes very little to shatter an eggshell. That's a good thing for chicks and ducklings and such like critturs because they have to take that first and only tooth they get and crack that shell from inside to get out. Those that don't, die. So an eggshell has to be hard enough to protect the developing life within it as well as fragile enough to let that life come forth.

This is flower communion. Norbert Capek, the Czech minister who began flower communion, knew all about fragility. After leaving Czechoslovakia in the 1930's, after he had discovered Unitarianism and become a Unitarian minister in the United States, he left the safety of America and returned to Czechoslovakia as Hitler was overrunning that country. There, he was involved in anti-Nazi activity. Ultimately, both he and his daughter perished in the concentration camps. So, he knew just how fragile life could be. He chose to put himself in danger to defend fragile lives when other people wouldn't or couldn't recognize the danger to the Jews, the mentally ill, the disabled, the Roma people, people who were declared to be less than human and so, according to the Nazis, not entitled to anything, including life. What fragility in others, what danger to others, do we need to think about? Who are fragile in our country, in our time?

Flowers are fragile. That is part of their appeal. We could have a communion of artificial flowers, flowers made of paper or plastic or silk, and, though they might be pretty, and though they would not wilt or die, there is something about real flowers that calls to us, that is more precious than the best that a craftsman can create. Perhaps it is because we know that they are with us for such a short time.

It's a strange thing about fragility. Sometimes those who seem the least fragile are often the most in need of care. I remember the prisoners in Auburn, men who would not, or could not, admit the inner fears and sorrows that hollowed out their lives, men who could not admit to what were called weaknesses, such as vulnerability or love. Most of them had been forced early to grow this tough but brittle shell. This is not confined to men, though men often have learned to present a tough shell than women and have had fewer ways to deal with their feelings of vulnerability than women. This fragility is not confined to men who are either prisoners or who work in fields such as law enforcement or the military where toughness is prized and fragility is derided. This is also widespread throughout our culture where a hard shell is seen as the mark of decisiveness and effectiveness. But what dies within that tough shell? What creativity and happiness are never allowed to see the light of day?

Those who present a tough front are often most fragile but they are unable to come to terms with their vulnerability in ways that could bring them comfort and the ability to grow. Instead, they show the symptoms of unresolved lives in rigidity and anger, in self-righteousness and defensiveness, in violence toward themselves and others, in the inability to change. It manifests in health problems, in addictions, in early death, in suicide.

We can look around us and see people who fit this description, because we are all good and seeing problems in others, but the truth is we are all fragile. Just like flowers, we are not made of silk or plastic. We are living things and, like all living things, we have limits to our lives. This is part of what makes us so precious to each other. We need to recognize this in both ourselves and others. We need to take care of each other. And we need to take care of ourselves.

Relationships can also be fragile. And yet relationships are necessary. It has been harder and harder to resist the temptation to isolate ourselves with only those people who agree with us. How many times are people cutting themselves off from those they used to love because of some lack of agreement? And yet, how many people can find a group that agrees with them on all issues? If I agree with someone on environmental concerns I might have a very different sense of spirituality. If I agree on concern for the poor, I might have a very different take on

issues of sexuality. Even if I could find a group that was in complete agreement on all issues, how many people want to live in an echo chamber? How can anyone grow and change that way? How do we strike the balance between our own needs and the needs of others? How do we maintain our own sense of integrity, which includes our own opinions, the voice of our own consciences, and yet find a way to include others, to make all voices not only heard but welcome? Where do we find a way to genuinely hear each other without pain or anger?

We need to understand that all of us are prey to feelings of inadequacy, of envy, of depression, of loneliness, of all the terrible feelings that make us withdraw and try to protect ourselves. Unfortunately, the ways in which we try to protect ourselves are often the very patterns that increase our fragility. And so, we can find ourselves growing harder and harder shells, shells that do not keep us safe. Shells that let the better part of us die unborn.

When we are confident, we make the decisions, even the hard decisions, that allow us to change and grow. We have that marvelous magic called resiliency that lets us take risks and survive failure, survive even catastrophe. Fear leaves us paralyzed, unable to change, clinging to what we know, longing for promises of security above all. "A risk-averse political horizon promises security at a price, not only more surveillance, but also a loss of confident daring." P. 144

That last sentence is from a book called *The Ordinary Virtues* by Michael Ignatieff. The author visits various places which have lived through extraordinary disasters to discover how people coped with those times and how they are faring now. For each place, he highlighted one virtue that was emblematic of their recovery. In the chapter on Fukushima, the Japanese city that experienced earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear reactor destruction, he chose ‘resilience’ as the relevant virtue. He highlights the response of the community to the disaster, both at the time of the tragedy and afterwards and finds the following definition of what makes up resilience helpful. He says:

“The key feature of a resilient material is elasticity. The most resilient materials are alloys, combinations of elements acting together, rather than elements acting alone” p. 151.

In this emphasis on the value of melding many people together to overcome even extreme hardship, there is one indispensable element. He says, “Resilience depends critically on institutions.” A group of people, no matter how well meaning, cannot achieve much without the structure of a well established institution. Institutions give shape to good intentions and allow a focus where resilience can flourish.

A church, this church for example, is an institution. For many years, the institution of Church with a capital C, not just this church but the whole idea of Church, has been an important institution in our society. In its particular manifestations, it has not always been a wise or a benevolent institution. In its particular manifestations, it has often been so risk averse as to ignore many of the ills around it. It has been blind and smug, focused on individual shortcomings while turning away from the shortcomings of society as a whole. But it has also, in some of its manifestations, truly acted as the conscience of the nation, speaking out when it was not popular to do so on issues such as poverty, civil rights, and peace. Like all institutions, it has been a two edged sword.

And, like all institutions, it is made by humans and is vulnerable to change. The institution called Church is fragile. The institution called Unitarian-Universalism is fragile. And this church, this church that I hope has risked and supported those who are vulnerable, even when that was a risk, this church is fragile. That is what makes it precious to us. We are not made of stone. We have been flexible and living, changing as times change. Are we still doing this? Are we able to turn fragility into resilience?

Back to Michael Ignatieff who says:

“Resilience rises to virtue when it expresses itself as responsibility for others. If we become capable of this virtue it is because we retain hope in the future of such a community...Resilience depends of some shared belief in a collective future worth fighting for...No one wants to survive alone: that, surely, was the lesson of Robinson Crusoe.”

Let me repeat one phrase here. “Resilience depends of some shared belief in a collective future worth fighting for.” Do we have that belief? Are we able to find that shared belief? How do we see that collective future? And what can we do to find that together?

Fragility is something we all share. We are not made of stone. We cannot be carelessly used and abuse. We need to recognize not just our own fragility, but to understand that everyone shares the same wants and needs and the same fears and doubts. We must take care of each other, or the whole world is filled with the chips and shards of broken vessels.

But it is important not to let fragility immobilize us. It is important to try new things, to not rest on our laurels, to not assume that what we have done is all we can do. This is risk and risk means danger, means that something may crack a little. It is important for us to understand that a crack in the fragile cell could mean it is weakened but it could also mean that new life emerging. We need to

understand that there are no guarantees and no instruction manuals for the future. What will we do to support this institution, this small but vital institution, in the process of letting new life emerge? How will we support each other as we all take risks, as we all try new things, as we hope and experiment, and critique and fail and try again? How can we be a shell hard enough to protect and fragile enough to break open and grow?

At the corner of the church, we have a cornerstone. It has held up this church for more than a hundred years. It has been strong and endured. Stones are good for that. Stones are good for foundations. Stones are enduring but they can also be used as weapons and are almost exclusively used to mark graves. We need to walk that fine line between our strong foundation and our responsiveness to the future. Will we do this? Only if all of us here want to do this. Only if all of us are prepared to help each other help this church. I think we can. I think the spirit of this church is one of love and concern for each other and for others we have never met. Not many places can say that. We are an institution. Though many distrust institutions, institutions are also necessary. Around us we see many needs. Around us, right here, not in some other part of the world but right here, we see lives of misery, loneliness, and despair. Around us we see people desperately seeking some kind of meaning for themselves. I can't think of a better place for people to find comfort or direction, but how will we be able to show that this is the place to find that? What



role will we play in the lives of people right here around us? And how can we convince them that we can be trusted to be such a presence? In trying to grow we will make mistakes. In trying to grow we may put ourselves in ridiculous positions. But what other way can we move on?

I think of us as all fragile, living blossoms in the garden of the world. The garden is our church, our institution, that enables us to be more than a single flower that enables us to be as beautiful in the same way that a garden of flowers is more breathtakingly beautiful than a single bloom. Let us be generous with each other, generous with the mistakes and missteps that come with change. Let us be willing to be each other's support through the cracks and chips that come with growth. Those who began this church were willing to risk. We are their spiritual heirs. Let us go forward with the same sense of mission that brought this church here, a living, growing faith.