

## “Legacies: A Father’s Day Reflection”

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First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton  
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*This sermon was inspired in part by Tomie dePaola’s delightful picture book  
The Knight and the Dragon.*

Once upon a time, in a castle by the sea,  
in the darkest hour of the night,  
a child was born, a tiny baby boy,  
destined for great things,  
destined to be a splendid knight in shining armor,  
a knight who would fight dragons!  
Everybody said so.  
Stars fell from the sky at his birth,  
and the astrologers all said that was a wonderful sign,  
a portent of marvelous, glorious things in store for the child.  
Mermaids lifted their heads from the ocean  
and sang lovely, strange sea-songs in honor of the babe.  
His mother laughed and wept as she held him for the first time.  
His father’s heart clenched with pride and love  
as he looked on his firstborn child  
and whispered to himself, “My son, my son!”

Years passed.  
The child grew, as children do.  
He learned, as children do.  
When he was very young, he spent most of his time in the kitchen,  
where it was safe and warm  
and you could always get a snack before dinner.  
He liked to watch the cooks at work.  
He liked to see them working with their hands,

he liked how the flour for the bread went “pouf” into the air as they started kneading the dough.

When he got older,  
he went off to school at the local knightly academy,  
where the top electives were poetry-writing and advanced etiquette.  
In that far-away land, it was very important that a knight  
be an educated, classy sort of person.  
Knights had to be able to write poetry—  
to impress the ladies, of course!  
They had to know how to dance  
and which fork to use  
and how to sneeze into their elbow instead of all over the table!

Our hero’s favorite part of school was actually *after* school,  
when his dad took him into the castle courtyard  
and taught him sword-fighting and jousting and archery!  
That was so fun.  
He loved his dad so much.  
His dad was strong and smart and a really good knight.  
He used to tell him stories and legends  
of terrifying dragons and noble deeds of derring-do.  
His dad taught him how to ride a horse  
and how to skin a rabbit when he caught one for dinner.  
And on one dreamy sun-sparkly afternoon at the lake,  
his dad taught him how to swim,  
holding his head gently in his big, strong hands,  
letting go just a little, not enough to be too scary,  
letting him build up his confidence until he could do it,  
he could swim, all by himself!

The years passed, as they do for us all,  
and one day it was time for his final exams at the knightly academy.  
His senior project was to go fight a ferocious dragon!  
He was very excited about it all,

and you know what comes next, because you've all read the story.  
He went to the library and studied up on dragon-fighting.  
He worked on his armor until it was *perfect!*  
The night before the fight, he could barely sleep.  
He was so proud to be carrying on the family tradition!  
The morning of the fight, his dad patted him on the back  
and promised to buy him a new horse if he won.

Well, you've all read the story,  
so you know how the big fight went.  
Our poor knight ended up stuck in a tree,  
one shoe off and one shoe on,  
while his opponent the big scary dragon  
ended up drenched in a pond,  
much to the consternation of the fishes.  
And all of a sudden  
that poor dragon didn't look very scary any more,  
and that tree branch jammed into our poor knight's armpit  
sure was uncomfortable!  
And he said to himself, *This is not quite the way Dad said it would be!*

He was stucker than stuck, up there in that tree.  
He was miserable, almost as miserable as the poor soggy dragon  
over there in the pond.  
He let out a little feeble, sad cry of "Help! Help!"  
And the dragon echoed back, "Help! Help!"  
The knight looked at the dragon, the dragon looked at the knight,  
and in a minute or so the knight went out on a limb (as it were)  
and called out, "Hello, over there!"  
The dragon replied, "Hello, over there!"  
The knight thought the dragon looked rather friendly  
when he wasn't trying to light people on fire.  
And he remembered a line he had learned long ago in poetry class  
back at the knightly academy.

“Excuse me, sir dragon,” he called out.  
“I am reminded of the famous words of the German poet  
Rainer Maria Rilke, who once said,  
‘perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses  
who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave.  
Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being  
something helpless that wants help from us.’<sup>1</sup>  
Do you think that might apply to our situation?”

The dragon pondered these words, for he, too, was fond of poetry.  
In a moment he replied, “I hardly think I am a princess in disguise.  
I rather think I would know if I were.  
But I am a dragon who *would* rather like some help drying off.”

So the dragon helped the knight get un-stuck from the tree.  
The knight gave his saddle-blanket to the dragon so he could dry off.  
The dragon said to the knight, “I love my father,  
but I think he may have had some mistaken opinions about knights.”  
And the knight replied, “I love *my* dad too,  
but I think he may have some not-quite-right ideas about *dragons*.”  
And so it came to be  
that the knight and the dragon had to form their *own* ideas  
about what was so and what was not.

As do we all, of course.  
Every dragon and every person comes to inherit  
a mixed bag of opinions and ideas from the ones who raised us.  
Some of what they taught us was good and true,  
some not so good or not so true.  
And the same was true for them, and their parents,  
and their parents before that.  
The reality is, none of us gets to have perfect parents,  
and none of us gets to *be* a perfect parent, much as we try.  
And of course we *are* trying, all of us.

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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 69.

There's a passage from our reading this morning that says,  
"We would hold fast to all of good we inherit  
even as we would leave behind us the outworn and the false."<sup>2</sup>  
And isn't that what we're all trying to do?  
We are all trying to hold onto the good we inherit,  
and pass it on to our children,  
and leave behind whatever is worn out and false.

For some of us it's a lot easier than for others.  
Some people have been blessed  
with parents who supported and loved them,  
parents who were great role models.  
Some people have had to struggle to overcome a childhood  
haunted by absence or abuse.  
For a lot of people, it's a mixture of both—good and bad.  
Whatever the legacy our parents have left us,  
the big question is this:  
Are we going to let ourselves be controlled  
by the mixed bag of ideas and behaviors we've all inherited?  
Are we going to blindly go off and fight the dragon,  
time and time again?  
Are we going to react in the same ways we've always reacted,  
even when they get us stuck up in a tree, over and over again?

Or are we going to choose another option: to become more mindful  
of the power of these legacies in our lives—  
to learn to make conscious choices about how we act in the world?  
I don't know about you, but I like Option B!  
And I know it can be done.  
We don't have to be prisoners of our past.  
We don't have to stay stuck in the same old patterns.  
We really can learn different ways of seeing and being and acting.

Recently I had an experience that reminded me of how hard that is

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<sup>2</sup> Phillip Hewett, *Singing the Living Tradition* #440.

but also how necessary, not only for individuals  
but for institutions and entire societies.  
A couple of weeks ago, John and I travelled to Ireland on vacation.  
Mostly it was just lovely and fun,  
but one day things took a more serious turn when I got into a  
conversation about the church in Ireland.  
The church is where I spend most of my life,  
and as a clergy person myself, I am deeply aware  
that clergy function as parent-figures in their churches.  
It's not our *only* role, but it is an inescapable one.

These days we've all become aware  
of the very serious trauma churches go through  
when the clergy charged with teaching and leading  
and caring for them, almost as parents,  
violate the trust they've been given and become abusers.  
As I'm sure you all know, there are a lot of tragic, terrible stories  
about clergy abuse here in the U.S.  
The stories that have come out of Ireland in recent years  
have been just horrendous.  
One year ago, a special commission issued a report—  
the Ryan Report, it was called—  
detailing how thousands of children, over decades,  
had been placed into church-run schools and workhouses  
where they were physically and sexually abused  
by the very clergy people  
who were supposed to be keeping them safe.  
It's such a terrible violation on so many levels.  
How do you recover from something like that?  
How do you recapture your sense of trust,  
your ability to trust *yourself*?  
Talk about a legacy to overcome!

I had wondered about how the people in Ireland were doing  
in the wake of this terrible news.

One day I had the chance to find out more.  
We were on a walking tour of Dublin,  
led by a young man with a Ph.D. in Irish history.  
He seemed very accessible, so I took a chance and asked him  
how people were dealing with the revelations of abuse in the church.  
And I tell you, he was *very* angry and bitter about what had happened.  
And rightly so.  
He ended up taking us to a site  
that was definitely not on the original tour itinerary.  
He took us to this vacant lot in the middle of the city  
that had been walled off with drywall,  
and the drywall was completely papered over with photocopies  
of pages from the Ryan Report on child abuse—  
testimony, photos, letters—completely covered, pages and pages.  
To be there and witness to all the suffering that represented—  
it was very powerful.  
Our guide told us, in his opinion,  
the church had lost its credibility forever.  
There was no way it could ever regain the trust of that country.  
And maybe he's right. I don't know.  
There *has* to be accountability there.  
I don't know if the church will be able to do what has to be done.  
There was so much anger there, so much betrayal and pain.  
But in that defiant display right in the middle of the city,  
I felt hope speaking to me too.

At the time I couldn't find the words  
to say what I wanted to say to those people.  
But I've thought about it since then,  
and if I could go back now I would tell them, there *is* hope,  
and the strength of your anger is the first step.  
I would tell them, you need that anger to clean you out,  
to purge all the lies you were told.  
You need that anger, you need to feel how deeply you were betrayed,  
you need to know how wrong it was

for someone who is supposed to be a vessel for the holy  
to violate your trust.

You need to know that was *wrong*,  
and you need to be prepared to stand up for yourself  
if anyone tries to do that to you ever again.

And I would tell them,  
beyond your anger, after you sit with it and really feel it  
and know it and honor it,  
what I wish for you is that hope will start to emerge.  
What I wish for you  
is that you will feel the holy welling up within you,  
fresh and pure,  
and you will know you are a part of the great holy mystery  
that flows through all things,  
and your anger can pass away because you don't need it any more,  
you have found again the joy and peace  
which is your inalienable birthright.  
This is what I would tell them now.

And I would tell them, you can to trust in your own ability  
to overcome even the most destructive legacy.  
Some of us have had the great good fortune  
to inherit gifts of goodness and truth and wisdom  
from those who were tasked with our care.  
Some of us have had to overcome patterns of violence  
and falsehood and betrayal.  
But within us lies the strength to do just that—  
to overcome,  
to be stunningly creative,  
to build something more beautiful and just,  
to be creators of a new reality for our own children.

For all the parents and all the children—  
may we all be blessed with the wisdom and the courage

to hold fast to every inheritance that is good,  
and leave behind us all that is harmful and false.  
So may we bring peace and hope into this world,  
today and always.

So may it be.  
Amen.