

A HOUSE CALLED TOMORROW

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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I recently turned in the substantially-revised manuscript of my new book on contemporary spirituality, which is scheduled to be published next year this time by Random House. In the book, I describe spirituality as the practice of openness — openness to our own physical and emotional experience, openness to the people around us, and openness to the natural world. I go on to say that, on these terms, I was brought up to be one of the least spiritual people on the planet.

Growing up Conservative Mennonite was, at least for me, an experience of being closed off to other people and the world around me, rather than being open to them. In retrospect, it seems like the spiritual discipline we were expected to practice involved denying that there was anything attractive about other ways of life. It also involved denying how we felt about our own way of life. For the most part, it involved denying we even had emotions, much less that we should express them.

In a turn of phrase that may or may not ultimately make it into print, I describe my family of origin as the American Gothic of the feelings. You probably know the painting by Grant Wood of a severe-looking man and a stern-looking woman in front of their farmhouse in Iowa. He's holding a pitchfork and staring straight ahead, while her attention is focused elsewhere. The only window you can see in the house looks like it belongs in a church.

To my eye, the scene captures perfectly the emotional reticence of my upbringing. It may be coincidence that my father's predecessors originally settled in Iowa when they came to this country. Then again, it may not.

In any event, I don't recall my father ever talking about his feelings. In fact, I recall many instances when he reacted negatively to other people expressing their feelings. It was almost a sin to have emotions, because they indicated your narcissism. Perhaps because my father has come to typify the problem of emotional reticence, at least in my own experience, I've had a tendency to view him as the source of my own reticence — hence the American Gothic reference.

Shortly after I turned in my manuscript, I spent several days with 30 other senior ministers of large Unitarian Universalist congregations. We gather annually to share experiences and insights, usually in conversation with an outside expert on some topic that's relevant to our work. This year, the speaker was Resmaa Menakem, a psychotherapist from Minneapolis who specializes in trauma, conflict, and violence prevention.

Menakem's sessions with us were based on his recent book titled, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. His focus in the book is the trauma inflicted by the enslavement of Africans by American colonists, a centuries-long horror that began 400 years ago. But the principle he articulates applies to other types of trauma as well.

His key insight has to do with how trauma gets dissociated from the original event and takes other forms over time. After a person suffers trauma — enslavement, for example, or torture, or rape, or violence on the battlefield, or a debilitating illness — people who know about the trauma usually attribute its effects upon the person to the trauma itself. We understand that someone acts in a certain way because of what happened in Vietnam, for example, or someone responds that way because she was sexually assaulted.

Over time, however, the effects of the trauma become dissociated from the trauma. People who don't know about the trauma attribute its effects not to the trauma, but simply to the individual's personality. That's just the way he is, we say, or that's just the way she is. As more time passes, these so-called personality traits expand to become family characteristics. Children begin responding like their parents, even if they have no knowledge of the trauma on which their parents' responses are based. Over the generations, especially with widely shared traumas such as the enslavement of Africans by the colonists, family traits eventually become culture.

When it comes to race relations in the US, what most people call culture — whether they are referring to the culture of African-Americans or the culture of Euro-Americans — is the dissociated presence of trauma. The historic trauma of slavery upon which our nation was founded and constructed, Menakem argues, is carried around today not only in the bodies of black people but in the bodies of white people as well. The fact that black people were denied not only their equality but even their humanity for most of our nation's history is a deep-seated and still-festering trauma that has constructed what many today blithely take to be American culture. The same principle holds true for women, who have been routinely subjugated — physically, politically, and religiously — since the beginning of time.

As I listened to Menakem's presentation, I found myself thinking about American Gothic and my father. I suddenly realized that my father's emotional reticence was, in part at least, the dissociated presence of trauma suffered by his predecessors many generations before. For the better part of a century in Europe, the belief in adult rather than infant baptism, known as Anabaptism, was a capital crime in some parts of Europe. Mennonites and other Anabaptists were routinely hunted down by Calvinists, tortured in an attempt to get them to repudiate their beliefs, and then executed in a variety of horrific ways.

We have a glass-front bookcase at home that I inherited from my maternal grandfather. It contains a large book — maybe four inches thick — called the *Martyrs' Mirror*. It's a compendium of hundreds upon hundreds of individual stories of

Mennonites who were tortured and executed for their faith. My grandmother used to tell me stories from the *Martyrs' Mirror* when I was a child.

As a result of this longstanding pogrom, Mennonites learned to become “the quiet in the land,” as my grandmother used to say. They kept quiet, kept to themselves, and most certainly kept their opinions to themselves. To speak up or speak out was to express a death wish. The only way to stay alive was to exercise extreme reticence in all aspects of life.

My father had inherited this trauma-based reticence, and he passed it along to me. To be sure, he passed it along without examining it or mitigating it in any way, for which he bears some responsibility. But he didn't cause the trauma, and he didn't choose its impact upon his life or even upon mine. Instead of feeling angry at my father, I found myself feeling compassion for him.

This realization enabled me to understand an Emily Dickinson poem that had never made sense to me. Actually, I've always understood what the poem says, but I never understood how what it says can be true. Dickinson writes:

They say that 'time assuages,'--
Time never did assuage;
An actual suffering strengthens,
As sinews do, with age.

Time is a test of trouble,
But not a remedy.
If such it prove, it prove too
There was no malady.

Time doesn't heal all wounds, Dickinson insists, even if conventional wisdom suggests otherwise. Time doesn't make suffering sweet, which is what the word assuage originally meant. Rather, she says, “an actual suffering strengthens, as sinews do, with age.” She goes on to say that if time alone proves a remedy for trouble, then it never really was trouble — an actual suffering — in the first place.

To be sure, time may appear to separate past suffering from present circumstances. But what really happens is that suffering gets built into the structure of things, into sinew and bone — into our sinew and bone. The Mennonite culture that was built by crusading Calvinists is now my culture. The national culture that was built by white colonists enslaving black Africans is now our culture. The human culture that was built by men subjugating women is now our culture.

The contemporary American poet Alberto Rios, who currently serves as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, grew up living behind a Catholic Church in Nogales, Arizona, half a mile from the Mexican border. The border between the United States and Mexico was not simply a geographic border for him, he says, but a

border in all ways. His father was from southern Mexico, and his mother was from Northern England. He says, “Their very joining, their personal border, was tinged with a small sense of social and legal danger.”

For Rios, the important element in his parents’ story is that they were able to choose to cross this personal border, despite the danger it entailed. For him, choice is the hallmark of democracy. The ability to choose is also the essential element in the work of a poet — the ability to choose words. He says, “In language, the signifier of choice is the word “or,” which is the great American word, having tethered its meaning to hope, progress, a better future. As a conjunction, it always means more — an escape from any predicament. It means this *or* that. It is the root of inventiveness. The answer is never simply one thing, and one lives in a world that can always be made better — or, of course, worse.”

The point is that we have inherited whatever culture we have inherited, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. Within that culture, however, we have a choice going forward. We can do this or that. We can say yes or no. We can lift up or tear down. We can press forward or hold back. The choice is ours.

Alberto Rios captures this point of decision in his poem titled “A House Called Tomorrow,” with which I close. Rios writes:

You are not fifteen, or twelve, or seventeen —
You are a hundred wild centuries

And fifteen, bringing with you
In every breath and in every step

Everyone who has come before you,
All the yous that you have been,

The mothers of your mother,
The fathers of your father.

If someone in your family tree was trouble,
A hundred were not:

The Bad do not win — not finally,
No matter how loud they are.

We simply would not be here
If that were so.

You are made, fundamentally, from the good.

With this knowledge, you never march alone.

You are the breaking news of the century.
You are the good who has come forward

Through it all, even if so many days
Feel otherwise. But think:

When you as a child learned to speak,
It's not that you didn't know words—

It's that, from the centuries, you knew so many,
And it's hard to choose the words that will be your own.

From those centuries we human beings bring with us
The simple solutions and songs,

The river bridges and star charts and song harmonies
All in service to a simple idea:

That we can make a house called tomorrow.
What we bring, finally, into the new day, every day,

Is ourselves. And that's all we need
To start. That's everything we require to keep going.

Look back only for as long as you must,
Then go forward into the history you will make.

Be good, then better. Write books. Cure disease.
Make us proud. Make yourself proud.

And those who came before you? When you hear thunder,
Hear it as their applause.