



February  
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# Ploughshare

## ***Take Your Brokenness Into the Wild***

***by Cindy Pincus, Consulting Minister***

I like to imagine the wilderness is a place to visit. A place that stays put, over there in west, over there in the mountains, over there in that part of the liturgical calendar. I like to think of the wilderness as a gated place, wild but safe behind a wall or at least the geographical boundaries of a national forest. I pack my camping gear, I put on my rain jacket and I enter that wild land.

And of course one must always stop for coffee and a snickers bar on I-70, maybe sit for a moment in wifi range for that last selfie so people know one is about to have a highly enviable adventure. I like to imagine that I control my relationship to the wilderness, that I only have to visit when I'm good and prepared. That whatever brokenness I bring to the alpine tundra is nothing that I can't handle.

Please see *Take* on page 2

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## ***Boundaries***

***by Erin Kenworthy, DRE***

Owen is taking Karate. At a recent class, the instructor stood opposite from him with a kick pad and slowly approached. When Owen felt that they were close enough, his instructions were to kick the pad using the side kick the class had been practicing. The instructor approached, and she literally ran into Owen's side before he even picked up his foot to kick. After several tries, he finally landed a kick, but it was clear that he needed to work on anticipating when the target was close enough to hit, and far away enough that he didn't get bowled over before he had a chance to act.

Sitting in the waiting area, I empathized with him. We've emphasized kindness in our home, that being kind is important, even when you are in a bad mood. frustrated. or just don't feel like it.

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## *Take from page 1*

But the wilderness does not stay put. She travels where she wants, when she wants, to whom she wants. Wilderness is not a simple thing, and neither is our human brokenness. They won't behave, it's never the same from year to year and our preparations only lead us to the gate and perhaps a short distance inside, but then I'm on my own.

I take 10 broken steps towards the wild and she takes 10,000 steps towards me. In our many forms of brokenness, we are often at the gate still looking back over our shoulders to see civilization, not so far away. This time, surely, I'll make it through just fine. Surely the thirst won't be so bad. Surely, all my preparations this year are the right ones. Surely my brokenness isn't so broken and everything will be fine.

In certain Christianities in this country, there's a Jesus I like to call Rambo Jesus, or Crossfit Jesus, depending on your generation. You've seen him on billboards if you've driven through the south. He's the militant leader of the various armies of Christ. His muscles bulge and his veins pop out as he breaks himself free of the arms of the cross, electrolyte loaded sweat dripping from his brow. And I have to confess, there's a part of me that loves this kind of attitude. I'm not saying she's the healthy part of me but there's something in me that loves facing the world in my brokenness and uncertainty with Rambo Jesus by my side. This year, I say, I'll bust out of every cross. This year I'll crush my Instagram habit, I'll give up sugar forever this year. This year is the year when me and Rambo Jesus right here will get closer to God by doing an 8 minute mile every day.

This is the year when I'll tramp into the wilderness with the exact right gear, the perfect glute workout, the elite mental preparation that will carry me over every peak and across every valley. This is the year, I've said, disregarding completely the fact that humans are constantly a work in progress and almost never reach the supposed destination.

One of my favorite bloggers, the Internet Monk, said that a simple Google search will yield plenty of spiritual practices that cross-busting Jesus would approve of: "Adventures, trainings, journeys, disciplines, formation. The focus is on getting stronger, better, more mature, more capable. Casting off death so as to become more alive. Stripping off the sin that so easily besets us and running a good race to the finish. Us, doing it alone, on the power of our own engine, with God cheering us on. [Spiritual discipline] can sometimes be mistaken for a strange process of trying to be good, good at, good for, getting good with god, getting better at life."

And yet, as the Internet Monk says, spiritual practice is not actually about being good or getting better, or getting unbroken. Spiritual life is about what is still whole within is when everything else is broken.

Last summer, at a time when I was feeling particularly broken, I hiked into Gunnison National Forest to a remote lakeside campsite. Believe me when I tell you that I had made all the right preparations. I had the most ergonomic backpack, the hottest white flame gas, the high-arch hiking boots, the rain-proof, thunder-proof, high tech bug repellent tent. And I had made my sacrifices too, surrendering all but one utilitarian spork, all but one small pot, and yes, even that 10-year aged sharp Wisconsin golden block of cheddar cheese was reluctantly sacrificed to save weight in the pack. This being done I marched myself into the forest on the sole conviction of my own self-sufficiency. I was going it alone on the power of my own engine.

None of that mattered alone in my sleeping bag at three in the morning when I awoke to sounds of huffing, scratching, and general terror inducing noises right outside the tent. I tell you truly that blood really does turn to ice, that hair really does turn white overnight. No tent, no hiking boots, no guidebook, no perfect squat workout will prepare you for the real fear that you are about to become a midnight feast.

## *Boundaries from page 1*

We've taught him to stand up for others, to come to the aid of his friends and classmates, and to be helpful in tough situations. What we've not done is spend a lot of time on how to defend himself, how to stand up for himself, and what it means to care for himself when his boundaries are tested. After a few minor issues at school, we've redirected our course. We enrolled him in Karate because it helps teach discipline, fitness, and self-confidence. He loves knowing the moves, being recognized for having good classes by earning stripes on his belt, and being in a group of all-ages learners who are becoming friends and supporters.

This most recent lesson alluded to boundaries. We each get to set them, to determine when we retreat from them, push them forward, and when to strike when they are crossed. The practice of finding his own boundaries in a safe place is priceless, and the encouragement he receives when those boundaries are recognized and held is all too often missing from our default kindness curriculum at home.

The concept of personal boundaries was foreign to me before encountering Unitarian Universalism. In reflection, I think it is possible that I have been nearly killed by my own understanding of "kindness", where kindness meant giving more of myself than I had to give. In terms of consent, money, patience, energy, time, emotional support, I equated kindness with the willingness to allow others to leap across my weak boundaries, consume my resources, and move along with little consequence. But at least I was kind about it. When someone close to me would hold to a personal boundary around time or money, I saw rudeness, an unwillingness to share resources that I had freely given away to others. Or would if I have given if I had anything to give. The world of boundaries sounded restrictive, like a greedy person hoarding resources and drawing lines that divided us from them, and me from you.

What I've slowly and painfully learned is that personal boundaries sustain us, rather than divide. As a parent, I've depleted myself regularly, the consequences of which are neither desirable or pretty. I've walked forward into overcommitment, deferred maintenance of myself and my relationships, and a tendency to vigorously ignore those red flashing alarms of warning that my boundaries have been breached and the tanks are empty. In those moments, I don't feel any closer to my spouse or my children, nor that I've gained anything but anxiety, resentment, and a sinking feeling in my midsection.

When defined and honored, personal boundaries allow us to give generously of our abundance, to feel healthy and ready to connect, and to bring a better version of ourselves into the world. Boundaries provide us the space we need to assess our targets, set our sights on what we want to manifest, and take meaningful action when we are ready to do so. We learn to say yes and no, and mean it with joy and intention in our hearts. We show our children that kindness can be extended to others and to ourselves. We can model that agency in the world begins by honoring your own voice. In a world and a culture so often steeped in brokenness, let us re-establish boundaries that lift up support, connection, and sustainability. Let us test and re-negotiate boundaries that do not serve us. Let us feel discomfort when our boundaries are pushed, and find there fertile ground for learning and nurturing our growing edges. And may we strike when we are called to do so.

## ***President's Corner*** by *Stu Ferguson, President, Board of Trustees*

Mike Morran's sabbatical is more than half over and I, for one, will be happy to see his return at the beginning of April. It's not just having guest speakers every Sunday or a mildly uncomfortable auditorium to sit in (although it is warmer and brighter than it was). Not even like last Sunday when the police dispatch came over the speakers to let us know the building was locked down because of police action down the block. It's more that being in our own space with our own minister will feel like we are back on the path we should be on.

I must say that despite the hardships and adventures our congregation has been able to remain remarkably stable. Thanks to the many people who stepped up to keep our important programs running, not just the Sunday service and religious education program but, even off site homeless initiatives that have been staffed by our members working in neighboring churches. Also, our finances remain stable thanks to all our members who squeezed to keep our operating budget solvent at the same time as paying off our amazing capital funds drive.

There is light at the end of the tunnel. Our minister should return in April. Our building should be done sometime in May. And with the increased yearly pledging, I am confident we will be able to afford an assistant minister by the end of 2019. So, we can be proud that First Unitarian is in good position to carry forward its mission into the next 50 years! Even though my job as president of the congregation is a little more work this year, it is a bright, hopeful ray of sunshine in my life. There are fun parties like this Saturday put on by the development council. It even included live music with Chris and Steef Sealy! I invite you to join me in keeping our eyes on the prize and not letting national politics get in our way.

## ***Racial Justice Project*** by *Julie Meyers*

Please join the Racial Justice Project for our every other monthly meeting on Tuesday, February 6th from 7:00p to 9:00p at the home of Julie Meyers (1332 Elizabeth St, Denver - about a mile east of FUSD). We're going to use this meeting to really think about how our congregation is doing in addressing racism. A group of UU's in Minnesota has developed a Racial Justice Rubric for UU Congregations. Where does FUSD fall? We probably think that we're doing pretty well, but that is likely an optimistic assessment. What should we be doing to make a difference in our congregation? How hard should we push to make this issue resonate for more people? Liz Mount exhorted us on Sunday in her sermon to ask – how far should we go to fight for what's important? That question is a perfect one to be asking and thinking about at FUSD. Let's start that conversation on February 6th. An RSVP to Julie is appreciated [julie.meyers.md@gmail.com](mailto:julie.meyers.md@gmail.com)

## *The Meaning of Stewardship*

*by Karen Derrick Davis, Development Coordinator*

We come to church in many different frames of mind—sometimes we are experiencing “brokenness” and we need care and support, other times, we are able to focus more on sharing our gifts. These different mindsets are inextricably linked. We often find that when we “give,” we receive so much more. And, when we are in need, we provide a valuable opportunity for others to reap the rewards of giving.

Stewardship is defined as “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care.” At First Unitarian, we see Stewardship as a reciprocal relationship—the church community cares for us, as individuals, and we, in turn, care for the church community. In this vein, our Stewardship Ambassadors are here to support this reciprocal relationship. They are here to help you connect to the church—both to get what you need and give what you can. They will only talk with you about giving a monetary donation once each year—but throughout the rest of the year, they will do their best to facilitate your connection to our church community in non-monetary ways.

So please, look forward to the outreach from your Ambassador! They want to get to know you and help weave an even stronger fabric of support at First Unitarian. Feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions or concerns. (We are still building out our Ambassador team. If you are interested in joining this amazing team, please let me know. It is a great way to meet people within the church.)

### **Take from page 1**

I'm joking about it now, but that night changed me in a way I can't shake. There's something about being trapped inside flimsy nylon fabric and a bag of feathers with some kind of wild creature shuffling around your tent that gives you new perspective on life, on death, and on real brokenness.

I lay there motionless in that tent for about an hour, forcing down a diaphragm that desperately wanted to hyperventilate, forgetting every other distracting detail except the growing realization that my life may have just reached its terminus. Truly, the only choice I had left was acceptance. Unwilling acceptance that my life was not my own, that I was helplessly trapped inside what I started hyperbolically calling my nylon death shroud, and that I did not have a choice about what would happen next. The wilderness had come to me and was shaking me with everything she had. I went broken into the wilderness thinking I could be made whole and instead discovered that my brokenness was my wholeness.

I survived, obviously. But I prayed more fervently that night than when my plane is flying through turbulence over the Rockies. My hair has since returned to its luscious brown hue. But the heart of that night convinced me that brokenness is about more than just self-facing grief. Sacrifices are about more than just sacrifices. We, our broken selves, are the true sacrifice of spiritual practice whether that's in a church or in a tent. We ourselves are what will be surrendered. And when we are wholly surrendered in that way, our brokenness is paradoxically revealed as the very thing which will heal us.

The only lasting insight I have from my time in that tent is that our brokenness is not broken in the wilderness. It is merely a whole being within a much larger whole being and if we can hang on long enough to get shaken awake in our pain, we too will gain perspective big enough to include all of who we are, who we strive to be, and who we will become.

## *Whole Souul Living*

Brokenness is the Whole Souul Living Theme for February, but not so that we might wallow morose or despairing. Brokenness is simply an essential and unavoidable part of human life. It often marks the turning points of our lifelong journeys; the endings of chapters, the beginnings of new ones, the places where growth takes place.

This month, in our individual and especially our communal discussions, reflect on...:

- The hidden beauty in brokenness. Can you see it? Feel it? Grasp it?
- Consider the quote; "An unbroken person cannot be trusted." (Gary Rosberg)
- What is being communicated? Is it true?
- Tell a story of when brokenness was a prerequisite to new life, new growth.
- Someone wise once said that, "Pain and sorrow are simply the price we pay for a life that includes love." Is this a bargain?
- Someone else once said that we come to know God only through tears. What is your experience?



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