

Angels with Broken Wings  
*A sermon towards healing*  
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker  
First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh  
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She cost only \$3.00 plus tax at a gift shop on the San Antonio Riverwalk, but she enchanted me the moment I spied her in a woven basket on the counter back in 2000. Approximately 3 inches wide and 2 inches high, this sweet bust of an angel, shiny and black, with flowing hair, billowing wings, and prayerful hands. Made in Mexico. I dubbed her “Angelina” and upon return from Texas, she occupied a prime location on the desk in my study at the church I was serving at the time.

Then, one fateful day in November of that year (Fair day, most likely), Angelina sustained an injury. Somehow (and I’ve yet to discover the cause), her left wing had broken off and sat on the desk by her side, with a small trail of ceramic dust encircling it. At first, I was surprised, since I had assumed that the angel was fashioned from metal. Then I became saddened and upset. “Who broke my angel? And how will I restore her to her original integrity? She’s ruined.”

Time passed and as often happens with the passage of time, troubles descended. First, I experienced personal traumas and then September 11<sup>th</sup>. For me, Angelina’s broken wing came to symbolize the endurance of the human spirit in the face of tragedy. With her eyes closed in contemplation and her hands raised perpetually in prayer, she reminded me that we are all vulnerable and blessed. I came to accept her as an angel in two pieces – broken, yet complete. Could I accept the same in myself?

Then, Angelina up and disappeared. I was heartbroken and bewildered. “Who absconded with my angel?” I discussed it with the administrator. I pondered it with my Spiritual Director. I searched my office. I let go. And then she reappeared two weeks later, her wing carefully and skillfully glued back in place. Hm? Could it be one of the Sanctuary Sparrows who dusted my office? I went in pursuit of answers and finally ended up face-to-face with Ray Sorensen.

Trying not to sound too accusatory or daft, I asked, “Ray, did you fix my angel?” He smiled, paused, and replied, “Yes, Robin. I did. I thought it had been broken long enough.” As my eyes misted up, Ray explained this to me in his no nonsense way, “It had been broken long enough.” Yet, I sensed from the gleam in Ray’s eye that his statement expressed both metaphorically and literally an observation he had about me personally in

the midst of a difficult year, about humanity in general, and about faith and suffering and renewal.

Of course, I may simply be projecting these deeper meanings onto Ray, although as a former Fire Chief, he has observed his share of suffering, bravery, and resurrections. On the other hand, being quite a Mr. Fix-it, Ray may have just been fed up and annoyed with seeing my knick-knack in two pieces on the desk. Perhaps it was just too darn difficult to dust around that thing during his Sparrowing duties. Either way, Ray –I’m holding on to my lofty allusions, ok? My sermon today depends on it.

I can tell you that whenever I’d look at that sweet, praying, patched-up angel on my desk, I’d hear Ray’s words: “It had been broken long enough.” This morning, I hear his words again, I ask you to ponder their meaning, and wonder with me: How long *is that* exactly, the length of time that we should live in brokenness? Can such a timetable be established?

We heal in our own time, at our own pace, according to the rhythm of our particular pain or loss. So, is there such a thing as being broken “long enough?” Or *too* long? Or, might it be more helpful to accept that we are broken *as* long as we must be, in order to fully experience the throbbing wound of our brokenness before we can invite healing?

Healing is very much an individual and highly intimate journey, and the process of healing inevitably takes time for all of us flesh-and-blood, breakable humans. I’d argue that generally, in our achievement-oriented culture, we are expected to go from 0 to 60 in everything we do, including grieving and healing. Yet, grief and healing will find their own rhythm, of that we can be sure. Memories and intense emotions can seem to diminish, and then they come crashing back unexpectedly as reminders of events and loved ones stir up the pain.

We do well not to treat spiritual or emotional wounds like skinned knees that require only new-fangled breathable band-aids or anti-bacterial ointments. Sprinting doesn’t apply here. One need to stroll, and even limp a bit, and take in the scenery along the way – the emotions, the reactions, the pain, the despair, the hope, the glimmers of renewal. We must submit ourselves to a rigorous *physical therapy* of the spirit in order to rehabilitate that reattached wing. It won’t flap at first. The glue is dry, but too rigid. We are not yet strong or flexible at the broken places, merely reassembled.

Eventually, we will fly again, perhaps not with the graceful or powerful soaring arch we once executed; but fly again, nonetheless. Tentatively at first, losing altitude in the whirlwind, and then more aerodynamically, in spite of life’s recurring wind shear.

In a moving reflection, my friend Marilyn A. offers us first-hand witness to the rigors of the healing process in the aftermath of her eight-year-old daughter, Faith's, tragic decline and death. She tells us:

“Healing comes slowly, almost imperceptibly. Like everyone says time does help, but time alone doesn't mend the shattered soul. It takes real work. It takes questioning and seeking. It takes comforting and understanding from even one person who cares. It requires a determination to re-enter the human race. To be strengthened not broken by your loss. To see yourself as a more complete person for having lived through this experience, not as a soul rent of hope and belief because of your loss.”

As Marilyn has expressed, there is no “normal” to return to after a significant loss or change. We do not “get over” our losses, and to attempt such is unproductive and unhealthy. We never completely finish our biggest griefs and traumas. We carry them. And there is no shame, no failure inherent in this truth. Resolving grief is not an item on a to-do list that we can strike off once we are done. In loss, we must adapt and refashion our lives to incorporate what has transpired. -- through death, divorce, job loss, family crisis, or ill health.

In the words of poet Margaret Atwood: "We can shun sorrow in fear, but when we give ourselves to the uses of sorrow, we find what peace is to be found, what happiness we can salvage, in walking the fields and towns of this earth." I'm reminded of Atwood's wise words whenever I begin walking with one of you in the discernment and healing process after a loss or crisis of any kind.

Psychologists explain that some traumas and griefs are hard to finish because we sometimes find ourselves swinging between approach and avoidance. In “approach,” we mourn, review happy memories, even rail against God or nature; and in “avoidance,” we deny, sleep a lot, abuse drugs or alcohol, pretend it didn't deeply effect us. Both strategies can lead, not to healing, but to numbness and an ailing spirit.

The 16<sup>th</sup> c Rabbi Moorawczyck said that, “The cure is hard if the sickness is old.” Although I would agree that it's most productive to undertake the grieving and healing process sooner as opposed to later, I've also discovered from personal experience that even the angry scars of old wounds, seemingly “healed over” or “healed up,” can be intentionally reopened to allow an incomplete healing process to run its course.

When I began my pastoral training at Mass General Hospital in the summer of 1999, a serendipitous encounter forced me to confront the unfinished business of grieving for my mother, who had died of cancer in 1986 at the absurdly young age of 55. As fate or karma would have it, my

very first patient on my very first day was a woman with cancer, approximately my mother's age. I entered her room in time to witness her daughter, who naturally was approximately MY age, spreading photographs of her smiling children (approximately MY children's ages, no doubt!) in a fan shape on the bed in front of her mother.

This startling, poignant scene pierced me with a pain that I had buried and dishonored. For 13 years, I had been an angel grounded by a broken wing; and, yes, in this case, I knew in an instant that I been "broken long enough," exiled from both grieving and joy. Opening this red and jagged scar has helped me to grieve personal losses since that experience with more honesty, facility, and courage. I discovered that not only did I survive the loss of my mother, but also I was able to grow on the healing journey itself.

Am I "healed?" Well, I can look at my mother's photograph now without that tourniquet tightening around my throat. I'm able to better remember her vivacity instead of her disintegration; to recall her in the fullness of her life, rather than only myself bereft of her presence. The process of grieving made me stronger and healthier than before. And for that, I am grateful.

So, what constitutes the "glue" that enables our reattached wings to offer strength and flexibility, rather than rigidity and limitation? Marilyn sent me a list of ways she has endeavored to live her own life since the loss of her daughter, Faith. I agree with Marilyn's suggestions: Stay actively engaged in life; read books that uplift you or deepen your spiritual development; don't use anger as a shield or allow bitterness to take hold of you; be patient with yourself and others.

Marilyn reminds us: "Some have had more hardships to bear and some have had a gentler existence, but we're all in this world together and no one is getting out alive." Broaden your view of life and don't sweat the small details. Accept that you don't have complete control over your destiny and take each day as it comes.

Share your story with others. Reevaluate what is important to you, and reassess what you admire in others. Marilyn tells me that she has concluded that she admires people for their compassionate and beloved characteristics, their service to others and their care. Rather than running from the existential crisis of losing her child, Marilyn has courageously sought to explore what she is supposed to take from this gut-wrenching experience.

Despite these wonderful strategies, the truth remains that the healing process is not necessarily a cure. In the case of my desktop angel, the wing may be "repaired," but it is still broken and cannot become unbroken again, even though Ray has glued the wing back to the angel's body so skillfully

that only the closest inspection reveals the wound. To be human is to exist with an essential brokenness. We are ceramic, not metal; we have the capacity to break and heal, and thank goodness for both.

Yet, I'm not one for extolling suffering as a religious "goal," even though we often learn from it. I tend to agree more with the sentiments expressed by the writer Robert Morris: "Suffering itself never saved anybody," he writes. "Not your suffering. Not mine, not even Jesus' suffering saves anybody. Rather, it is the way suffering is faced that makes the difference whether pain, sorrow, difficulty, deprivation or challenge become part of our soul's stretching or shrinking." In other words, how we face the task of retuning our wings, how we harness hope, will dictate whether that wound heals jagged and red and rigid or a bit smoother and more blended and flexible and strong enough to carry us aloft.

Our *chosen* faith, Unitarian Universalism, is an intentionally hopeful and optimistic religion. In the words of former UUA president Paul Carnes, "Our form of hope accepts the essential tragic character of life, the randomness of the Universe, the sin and misery of the world, and then somehow or other sees through this. This is more challenging for us because we cannot, choose not to, begin with the promises of God, the healing power of Jesus, or notion of predestination about salvation.

In one of his sermons, the Rev. Mark Belletini lifts up this characteristic UU hopefulness. He recounts a remarkable outing with an older, but feisty parishioner named Margaret, during which she gleefully climbed a Mission Fig tree of her childhood and then later, wept at the graves of her two beloved sons – taken well before their times. Belletini recalls the gravestones, spot lit by the noon sun and glowing within a burst of orange California poppies.

"With a single movement," he writes, "Margaret dropped to the grass, lay prone, and began to sob with all her might. I climbed up the hill and stood next to her, but did nothing else." Later, after what seemed like hours to Mark, Margaret told her minister: "You did well, young man, refusing to console me. You know you can't really do that. But I thought it might be important for you to know that this is what happens after your parishioners leave the lovely funerals you do, and this can go on for a long time."

She continued: "As you know, Mark, my life did not turn out exactly like I imagined it. But I want you to know there is a deep thanksgiving in my heart as well as all the ache. There is blessing as well as curse. It's all mixed up together, the great loss and the great love, the misery and the joy. The world is tough, Mark," she concluded, echoing the words written by Marilyn and the words held silently in many of our hearts, "and I certainly don't

think there is some dotting God anywhere looking out for me. But nevertheless, this world of ours, it's wonderful."

When I look at my sweet, shiny San Antonio angel, I feel just as Margaret does. This world of ours is a tough albeit wonderful place, touched by angels like Faith and Margaret and Marilyn and you and me. It's been said that angels are celestial messengers who deliver divine wisdom to our earthbound in-boxes. What message has been delivered by my wounded, prayerful, tabletop angel? Well, for starters, like us she is not metal or shatterproof. She is scarred. She abided, with her hands raised in prayer, even during the year her detached wing languished beside her, grounding her to the desk.

Brokenness and Healing connect us to both pain and joy, and in the end, the willingness to experience both the sublime and the tragic allows us to grow the two functional wings we need to achieve "lift off" in an often-turbulent world. We go on to heal with our hearts and souls healed broken. Or, to put it another way, healed *broken open*, perhaps with a visible scar where the wound has been cauterized with the glue of patience and compassion, wailing and praying, suffering and acceptance.

In the end, each of us is an angel with breakable or broken wings. The question is: Have you been *too* broken for *too* long? If so, come under the shadow of this healing community's steadfast wing and under the everlasting wing of the Mysterious Presence, and let the process begin.

If you're not ready, we will remain patiently earthbound with you. We will witness and not seek to console. We will listen with you for the brave and astonishing light. When the time is right, our strong and flexible hearts will take wing, and we'll know where to find the glue. Won't we, Ray?

Blessed be. Blessed we. Amen.

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