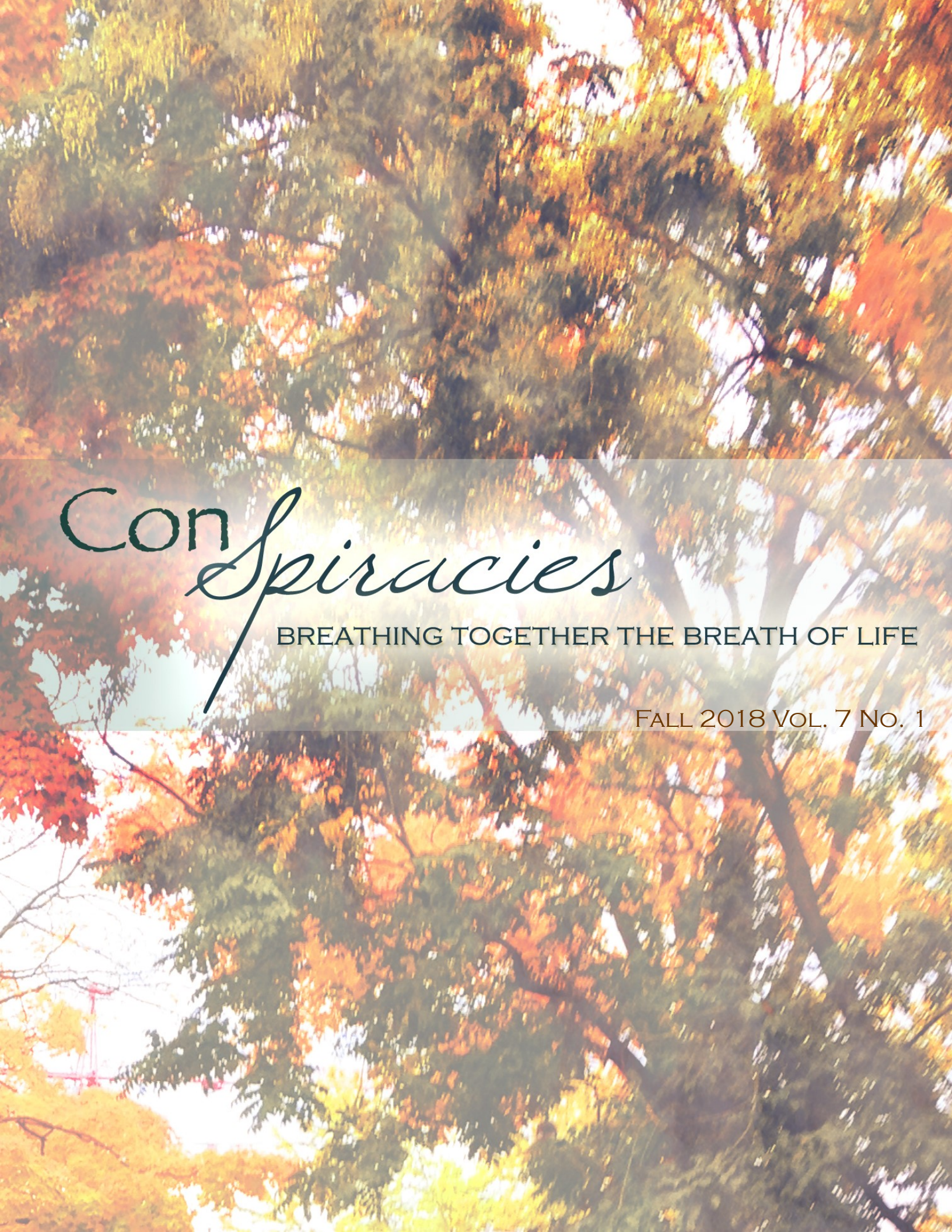




Con*Spiracies*

BREATHING TOGETHER THE BREATH OF LIFE

FALL 2018 VOL. 7 NO. 1

Conspiracies

CALLED TO BE HEALERS

KERRY MALONEY.....2

MARY, UNDOER OF KNOTS

WILSON HOOD.....4

BECOMING UNRAVELED: KOL NIDRE 5779

EMILY ROGAL.....6

SCAVENGING

JAIMIE DINGUS.....8

A REFLECTION ON WELCOME

ALIA SHINBROUGH.....10

YOUR LIFE IS MORE THAN YOUR WORK, AND YOUR WORK IS MORE THAN YOUR JOB

ELIZABETH NGUYEN.....12

UNTIL THE GREAT TAO PREVAILS

SHUMO WANG.....14

MAKING OUR CASE

STEPHANIE PAULSELL.....15

HUDDLED AROUND THE LAST OF THE LIGHT

AMY WESTON.....19

ALL THINGS ARE SUBTLY INTERCONNECTED

ABHIJITH RAVINUTALA.....22

BELIEVING FIERCELY

SARAH FLEMING.....30

CALLED TO BE HEALERS

KERRY MALONEY

HDS CHAPLAIN AND DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LIFE



Kerry Maloney preached this homily at HDS's weekly Tuesday Morning Eucharist on September 11, 2018.

Luke 6:12-19 (Lectionary text for Tuesday of the 23rd Week of Ordinary Time)

12□Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. 13□And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: 14□Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, 15□and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, 16□and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. 17□He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. 18□They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. 19□And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Like many of you, I found myself last Thursday afternoon sitting, literally, at the feet of a great healer. What drew so many people from across the University to Sanders Theater to attend the HDS Convocation, to be in the presence of Dr. Atul Gawande last week? We didn't all show up to be diagnosed and treated, though he could have done that for any of us if he'd had the time and we'd had the need. No, we were there for the healing. If you've read any of his books or columns, you know that, true healer that he is, genuine power comes forth from him—in the form clear stories and bracing truths.

One of the last times I was in Dr. Gawande's presence, just about this time last year, I was sprawled out before him on a table in his operating room, Radio Head blaring on the speakers

as I drifted off into a chemically induced surgical nap, thanks to some awesome meds and an excellent anesthesiologist. I could have chosen any of several dozen outstanding surgeons here in Boston, but after interviewing a few, I chose Atul—not only because I had met and worked with him briefly twenty years earlier when he was a young surgical resident and had followed him—you might say, stalked him—ever since (even on Twitter—and if you know me, you know I do not “tweet”); but also because, though his technical skill matched or exceeded those of his countless colleagues, when I met with him for a consultation and he examined me, power came out of him. It was palpable. Not magical for sure. But real. Real presence. Profound attention. Complex respect. Surgery might not cure me, but even the pre-op exam had put me on a path toward healing.

In this morning's Gospel we find Jesus about to deliver the great Sermon on the Plain, the Lucan counterpart to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has been up all night praying. Then he chooses his crew, the Twelve whom he “calls to himself.” And then...then the crowds come “to hear him and to be healed of their diseases....Everyone in the crowd sought to touch him because power came forth from him, and he healed them all.”

Much has been made of the fact that here, in typical Lucan fashion, Jesus meets the multitude on their level, not from on high like the second Moses that the Matthean version of Jesus depicts—up on the mountain, above everyone. And, of course, there's also the long tradition (or hermeneutical guess) that one of the principal writers of Luke-Acts corpus may have been a physician, in light of the texts' outsized attention to physical suffering and healing as well as its obvious preference for the poor and the marginalized, the gritty details and the gritty people that would have captured the time and attention of any doctor of that day—or of this.

Here in this text is a Jesus who touches the suffering—who puts his hands on their fragile,

CALLED TO BE HEALERS

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HDS CHAPLAIN AND DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

broken, aching, mortal bodies—who puts his own mortality in direct contact with theirs. And there, in that contact, healing happens. Not magical, for sure. But real.



Photo: Leah Limbaugh

Dr. Gawande told our Dean that he and his team have been training medical and public health students how to ask patients the most important of questions that need to be asked, questions so simple that they have, until now, eluded all the technical wizardry of modern medicine—

questions like, “What do you want us to do for you? What are your goals and priorities? What gives your life meaning? What would you be willing to sacrifice to achieve them?” “We’re training people across all disciplines to ask these questions,” Dr. Gawande said. And then he told Dean Hempton, “We’ll be coming for the divinity school students next.”

Now, not to sound too full of ourselves, but I instantly thought, “Oh no. No. Our students should have come for yours long ago.” Because this, dear friends, is what you trade in. You all turn those questions over a hundred times each day in a hundred different ways. You dissect power and its consequences morning to night. Whom it comes out of and how. On whom it falls and where. From whom it is stolen and why. How much it weighs and how much it costs.

And you all know the difference between curing and healing. You all know that while any of us can, with profound attention and care, be healed of just about anything that breaks us, none of us can be cured of it; and absolutely no one can be cured of our shared mortality. Tending that great ontological wound, that fundamental human mystery, is your calling. It’s why you came here. Whether to be a scholar of that mystery, a minister to it, an agitator over it, a prophet of it, an artist around it— it is why you are here. You are here to be physicians of the human condition, physicians of the soul—people who will put your own fragile, broken, aching, mortal bodies beside the suffering, vulnerable bodies of others—whether they are sprawled on a surgical table before you, sitting across a seminar table from you, seated beside you at a lunch table, or hunched over a library table, turning a page in one of the books you will write. You are here to hone your vocations as healers, from whom, I’m sorry to tell you, power will come forth. We gather at this table each Tuesday to remember its source and to pray that we will all carry it with exquisite responsibility and wield it with unfailing humility.

Now, of course, that doesn’t make you Jesus. (And it certainly doesn’t make Atul Gawande Jesus.) But it does put you—it puts us all in this particular liturgical community—in his crew. Our baptism signed us up for that. Like the Twelve, Jesus has “called us to himself.” And like the Twelve, we are all in the healing business for life, whether we like it or not, no matter where our many disparate vocations take us, no matter what shape they take.

Decades ago, Henri Nouwen famously dubbed this vocational dilemma that we have inherited as a call to be “wounded healers.” Which is exactly right. At this table, where Jesus is both the host and the guest, the wounded and the healer, we find that Power sprawled out, broken open, laid down, so that, week after week, we may take it up. God, help us all.

MARY, UNDOER OF KNOTS

WILSON HOOD

MDiv '19



Wilson Hood delivered this homily at the HDS Noon Service hosted by the Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ Students (DUUCS) on September 10, 2018.

Tongue-tied.

Adjective.

According to Merriam-Webster: “Unable or disciplined to speak freely, as from shyness.”

Tongue-tied is exactly how I felt while standing in the hallway of the Cardiovascular Intensive Care Unit on my first night as the on-call chaplain at a major university hospital in North Carolina this summer. The nurse who had referred me over the little phone in the on-call chaplain’s room had not shared very much, offering what small amount she did know at a no-nonsense clip: patient is male, late fifties, currently breathing on a respirator tube but moving to “comfort care.” End-of-life is imminent. Condition rapidly deteriorating. Patient’s wife and daughter are requesting the chaplain to say a few words. Come as soon as you can.

Prior to receiving this referral, my experiences as a chaplain had felt mostly anticipatory, a matter of signing the right forms, completing orientation, and looking cute for the picture on my ID badge. I could handle all of that stuff- especially the picture. What utterly terrified me, however, was the moment I would finally be the Chaplain with a capital C, the one who gets the call, the one responsible for showing up and making space for something meaningful in utter meaninglessness. My fear stemmed not just from this fact of what chaplaincy is, however, but also from the insane conclusion everyone around me had seemed to reach that I was the one for the job. Particularly given that I was returning to the South for the first time in a ministerial role since starting divinity school, I worried that spiritual care coming from a body and theology like mine would fail to meet the needs of my predominantly evangelical and conservative Christian patients.

For these patients and their families, could a voice like mine—a voice with traditionally feminine characteristics coming from the lips of a male chaplain—could this voice praying or reading words of scripture at the bedside still convey the power to comfort and heal? As is the case for many gay men I know, my voice has constantly served as a source of anxiety, a terrifying tangle of insecurities around masculinity, passing, and safety. Standing in that ICU hallway outside my first patient’s door, waiting to enter and find some way to be a presence in the midst of tragedy, I found myself mentally returning to my small southern high school, to the silences I swaddled myself in for fear of my voice drawing too attention to my queerness, to all of the ways I was never quite enough.

It is not surprising to me that many of the vocal features we tend to most mock and devalue in our culture—features like “upseak” and “vocal fry”—are features most associated with young women and feminine-presenting folks. We assign these features the cultural association of naivete or silliness, we condense them into the images of the “valley girl” or the “dumb blonde,” and by doing so we attempt to strip those speaking of power and basic human respect. We don’t like these voices because we don’t like to listen to those doing the speaking- not the other way around.

As a gay man, my anxiety about my voice is not so much rooted in homophobia as it is in misogyny and our culture’s seemingly endless appetite for belittling the ways in which women move, think, act, dress, eat,

MARY, UNDOER OF KNOTS

WILSON HOOD

MDiv '19

and, yes, speak. Standing in that hospital hallway, agonizing yet again over my voice as my hand hovered over the door handle, my mind suddenly drifted to the figure of Mary and to a conversation I had about her with an HDS colleague long ago. “You know,” she had mused, “Mary was a young woman with little social capital in her culture, so her voice would also probably have been devalued or ignored. To her community, she probably would have sounded a lot less like Pope Francis and a lot more like Cher Horowitz from *Clueless*. But God chose her to speak anyway.” Holding this Mary close to my heart, I took a deep breath, knocked on the door, and went inside.

Mary spoke boldly of God’s presence in the midst of our suffering, and she did so unapologetically in a voice that also would have been heard as too feminine, too out-of-place, too queer to be speaking of such lofty things. While preparing to offer my reflection during this Noon Service, I came upon the devotional name of Mary as the “undoer” of the “knot” of Original Sin, and I remembered that night on the ICU when she gave a young gay man the permission to also speak of God’s presence among and within us, to untie the tongue-tied knot of shame and fear which had left him paralyzed and silent.

This afternoon, I want to leave you with this question: What leaves you feeling tongue-tied? What shames you into silence? What tangles keep you from speaking for justice and love and mercy, for the persistent presence of God even in our darkest places? I believe that Mary meets us there, waiting to undo the knots of shame and oppression, setting us free by her example. May we continue to speak, even when it scares us, knowing that it is in those very voices most dismissed and devalued that God chooses to show up. Amen.



Photo: Kirstie Welsh

BECOMING UNRAVELED: KOL NIDRE 5779

EMILY ROGAL
MDiv '20



Emily Rogal, MDiv '20 preached this sermon at a Kol Nidre 5779 service (September 20, 2018).

Kol Nidre and I have a complicated relationship.

Five years ago, I spent the Kol Nidre of my freshman year of college blissfully unaware what day it was, sitting in a crusty tattoo parlor in the East Village of New York City while a tattoo artist lopsidedly marked my wrist with the deathly hallows symbol from Harry Potter. The following year, I suavely invited a boy I had a crush on for our first date to hear me give the dvar Torah at the Hillel's Reform services. A year later, I spent Yom Kippur in a hospital bed in Brooklyn, battling out mono while the Chabad rabbi chaplain attempted to convince me to start keeping Shabbos.

I am sure that you, too, could stitch together these past years with your own seemingly mismatched set of experiences, poorly planned tattoos, and loved ones. I wonder, in the cosmic bouquet of your life, which of these led you to be here today?

I offer these moments from my own life not only because they are, for the most part, extremely bizarre and spiritually charged in their own way, but because I believe that there is something about this evening, this particular twilight, which invites us to break the locks on our hearts and to really encounter ourselves.

This is an evening in which we are meant to be unraveled.

Unraveling

Kol Nidrei, the name of this service, means "all the vows." Three times in a row, we publicly and privately release ourselves from any "vows, renunciations, bans, oaths, formulas of obligation, pledges, and promises that we vow to ourselves and to God." In some ways, this boundlessness, this

exemption could be a source of relief, a "free pass." A chance to start over.

I think that the recitation of these words are meant to strip us to our core. If we were not bound to an institution, to a gym membership, to one another, to a nation, to a religion, to ourselves, to G!d...if we were completely and utterly untethered, who would we be? Who are we when we are unraveled?

This past summer, I spent a month doing an intensive outpatient therapy program for OCD and anxiety at a mental hospital. Every morning at 9 am, I would gather with a group of incredibly brave people, both commuters like myself and those who lived at the program, in order to confront, and eventually one day, make amends with our fear.

While exploring the building one day in between groups, I stumbled upon the second floor of the treatment center. Whereas the OCD center was lively, often times full of laughter, colorful art on the walls, and counselors chattering away in the corner, the second floor contained a small lobby and a locked door with a small window. Affixed to the door was a sign, "Caution: Flight Risks."

I returned to my floor, curious and more than a little bit unnerved. I became obsessed with finding out what this floor was, who these people were, what it meant to be a flight risk, and what it meant to live behind a closed door. Probably due to a HIPPA law or two, no one gave me any information about who these people were, but were quick to assure me that they were getting the treatment they needed.

I returned to the second floor often out, desperate to see a sign of something human and not clinical. I once saw someone shuffling across the floor in slippers and a bathrobe. Once I peered close enough to see a bin of crossword puzzles. Sometimes, during our groups on the first floor, I could hear the sound of what seemed like someone moving a couch across the floor.

BECOMING UNRAVELED: KOL NIDRE 5779

EMILY ROGAL
MDiv '20

Who were these people? When did they feel the sunshine on their faces, and did they get to call their families? What demons were they working to tame? Did they feel loved in their journey? Could they remember a time from before they were hurting? Could I? Can you?

How do you remember someone if you can never know them? How do you remember someone if you can't picture their face?

When, and how, do we vow to remember them?

Remembering

In the *Avinu Malkeinu*, Our Father our King, prayer, we attempt to re-call G!d's attention, like being stranded on the highway and sending up a flare. We ask to be *remembered* — in all of our fullness. "Eternal Parent, do not look toward our sins and transgressions," we beg, aware that we have all betrayed, gossiped, lied, transgressed.

The remembrance that we ask G!d for is not passive, it is not the type of remembering that one does in the aisles of Trader Joe's where you're like, "oh yeah, cookie butter, that could be good." It is a complete and total reckoning. It is taking your soul to the dry cleaners. It is hauling all of the dusty, terrifying parts of ourselves down from the attic, even the ones that we would like to forget, so that we can find a permanent home for all of the pieces of ourselves.

It is countercultural to perform this type of remembrance on ourselves, let alone to ask for divine assistance. We as a society are notorious for not only putting those people who we would seemingly prefer to forget behind locked doors, in solitary confinement, hidden in institutions, averting our eyes, out of sight and of mind, but we do this to parts of our own selves, as well. We have unraveled others while we have felt our own unraveling.

Yom Kippur asks us to take the pieces of us that we have hidden for fear of judgment, for knowledge of our own guilt, for the pain of rejection, and to offer them up for judgment and reconciliation. We offer them up to be remembered.

We ask for this remembrance because we have all experienced this type of life giving remembrance. Dr. Cornel West once said at Harvard Divinity School Convocation, "I am here because someone cared for me, I am here because someone attended to me." I offer another version of this in which "I am here because somebody remembered me." I am alive because someone, at some point, saw me putting a button or a Barbie shoe in my mouth and took it away from me. I am alive because many someones, at many points when I have been parched, have offered words and torah to me that were like drinking from a cool spring.

In order to be remembered by G!d, in order to do the justice and life-affirming work of remembering others, we must first seek to remember ourselves in all of our complexities, all of our pain. We must see ourselves in the reflection of the Divine closing gates at tomorrow's Neilah service and say, *I was remembered, I am remembered, and I will remember.*

In order to be remembered, we must first become unraveled.

We must release what we have placed out of sight. We must unlock the doors, let go of the flight risks within ourselves so that they, and we, too, can move towards a path of *shleimut*, wholeness.

May the words of the stories that you free within yourself create the ink that will inscribe you in the book of abundant life and blessings.
Gmar chatima tovah.

SCAVENGING

JAIMIE DINGUS
MDiv '19



Jaimie Dingus offered this reflection at the HDS Noon Service hosted by the Harvard Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Students (HUUMS) on September 5, 2018.

Good Morning Y'all! It is so good to be with you in worship today. I spent Saturday morning celebrating the scavenger's holiday that is Allston Christmas. If you're new to the city Allston Christmas is the affectionate term for September 1st when everyone moves in to their new apartments, and the new tenants upon realizing that that old comfy couch, or that well-worn kitchen table won't actually fit on the U-Haul or up the new stair case, they leave those bits and pieces of their old lives strewn on the sidewalks for the rest of us to scoop up. Francesca my new roommate and I got up early and cleaned the last few items out of the trunk of my car, making as much room as possible. You see, we had a mission. We needed a chest of drawers, a chair, maybe a desk. And so we set out on this delightfully Bostonian quest.

Together we wove through the neighborhood streets starting in Somerville moving through JP and Roxbury over to Allston and Brighton and back home again. We whizzed passed lines of moving trucks and groups of sweaty friends lifting boxes up into new beginnings, already looking forward to the pizza that would inevitably be ordered later. As we rounded one corner a chest of drawers just the right size caught our eye. Later on two strangers helped us as we worked desperately to fit the perfect wooden chair into my slightly too small trunk. It can be a good day, this Allston Christmas. I love it because I love a good deal, but more because there's this spirit of collaboration and of generosity and of fresh starts that's palpable in the air. Old things that no longer fit in the lives and trunks of one person are made new and useful and joyful again sliding across my back seat soon to be filled with new clothes, new life.

When I think about welcoming us all back to this special community here at HDS I think it's similar to the feeling of Allston Christmas. This is the start of a moment that has never happened before. This particular group of new and returning students, with our different stories and hopes joining together, is new and is made new by our choosing to be here, intentionally learning and caring for one another. I welcome you to a network of relationships that are collaborative that help one another and are generous with what they give.

At this school, in this time, we will all be challenged to know exactly what we carry with us. We have to know the stories of the people who came before us, who shaped our journeys. We need to know the privilege, the bias, the false narratives that allow so many of us to enjoy immense power and that for too many of us have caused immense pain and destruction. Know what you are carrying in here. And know that as you start here or start back here at HDS the fullness of who you are as a person cracks and chipped paint are all welcome here. Also know that over these months together there are pieces of you that may begin to not fit so well. Like the piece of furniture jammed in a doorway beginning to scrape at the molding, it's ok to let go of some of who you have been, to let go of the parts of you that were less compassionate, less aware of your own story, less open to the transformation that happens in the magic spaces of honest relationship, it's ok to leave those pieces strewn on the sidewalk, behind you. You will feel lighter without them.

Perhaps in shedding those pieces you will inspire someone else to shed away that which no longer serves. And if your experience is like mine you will discover things here about yourself that need to be unlearned. You will see things that have been jammed in the back corners of your moving truck, that need

SCAVENGING

JAIMIE DINGUS
MDiv '19

to be let go of. They need to be reckoned with, atoned for, and left like old mattresses on the sidewalk with a bright yellow warning labels alerting others to what they may carry. It's ok to let go of those pieces that no longer fit.

So welcome to HDS. Get ready to learn a lot, to find out a lot of new things about this world and about yourself. Some of this learning will be easy to find left out on sidewalks or left in the beautiful silent spaces between sentences, between stories. Some you may have to look a little harder for. Welcome. This is a place where the furniture you each brought with you will not match. Different styles, shapes and colors, come together laden with the stories and people we carry with us. It's beautiful here though, the door is wide enough for you, and there are friends and mentors ready to help with the heavy lifting. So, welcome.



Photo: Kirstie Welsh

A REFLECTION ON WELCOME

ALIA SHINBROUGH
MDiv '20



Alia Shinbrough offered this reflection at the HDS Noon Service hosted by the Harvard Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Students (HUUMS) on Wednesday September 5, 2018.

The first thought I had upon being asked to present a short reflection at this noon service was “why me?” ...The second thought, and my response was, “I am willing.” I am willing because this reflection is something I know I’m capable of offering, regardless of whatever discomfort I may feel in being encouraged to fill this role. I replied out of a sense of responsibility, because I was asked, and because it was within my ability to answer that call.

My attention to this reflection has embodied a commitment I made to myself, and to my community here with HUUMS, and at HDS more broadly. In a Unitarian Universalist context, this commitment could be understood as a covenant of sorts. A UU understanding of covenant resembles a promise between and among people and communities, a promise we know full-well we may not always be able to keep, and yet we value the attempt, and the re-commitment that follows what might be characterized as a failure to live out the promises we make to one another. This explanation is hardly adequate, I can and have written whole sermons on the importance of covenant in UU communities, but today I wish to briefly share this idea with all of you because this is the grounding framework of my understanding of commitment, and of community, and of answering those calls we receive as we are able.

Perhaps you, like me, have noticed that we talk a lot about “call” here. Sometimes so much that I wonder if my ringer is on silent while everyone else seems to have theirs on full blast. But perhaps a better way to understand being called in this context is to know that there is more than one ringtone, more than

one manner by which we find ourselves in a place to care for and share our commitment with each other, our community, and the world around us.

What I do know, even in those moments when I yearn to be as cued in as I perceive others to be, is that I am here. And because I am here, someone else is not. And by accepting that reality, I have also accepted the opportunity to make the most of my time in this place. In fact, I believe that we all share a responsibility to make the most of ourselves because we are here, and because others are not in our place. This is not to say we as individuals or as students are simply interchangeable, but to acknowledge the role that chance, luck, privilege and opportunity plays in our lives and has played in leading many of us to this moment. I believe there are countless people likely more worthy than me to share this reflection (and this community) with you, but by the same measure, as I am here to do so, I will do it to the best of my ability. This is a commitment I choose to make, both to myself and to all of you.

So I invite you to look around, and try to notice who you don’t see in this room. Try to see the areas of growth we all still have to fill. Imagine who could be in your place, who you may even feel deserves to sit in the seat you’re in more than you yourself. And now try to envision having a commitment to yourself and to that person, to make the most of this time because they cannot. If it helps, visualize it as a thread connecting your potential in this moment to the potential of countless others who are not present. It is a gift to be here today, in this time and in this place, and one we should not so easily disregard. So, I welcome you here today, because you are here, and I invite you to share in the responsibility that comes with this gift.

My first thought when I was asked to present today was “why me?” now, I’m asking us all to reframe this question which often comes all too easily, and has no good or easy answer... to reflect instead on the questions of “if not me, who else?” and “because it

A REFLECTION ON WELCOME

ALIA SHINBROUGH
MDiv '20

is me, how can I best serve?" In this moment, I feel I can best serve by encouraging us to open the doors a little wider, if only in our minds. To reflect seriously and intentionally on our position at this institution and within this community. For many of us, it has been a long journey to get here, and for many more it has hardly been straightforward. There may have been hurdles and twists and turns on the road to our arrival at this moment. Chance, and intention—hope, and disappointment—struggle, and loss—and even divinity intertwined to bring us here, and there will likely much more to come in the future.

So I invite you: come in, for there is much work still to do. This is work that cannot be done alone. Look around, because right here are the people who will support you on your journey, and you on theirs. And right here are those who will challenge you to reach places that would be previously unimaginable. Somewhere in this room may be someone who will offer you their hand when you are at your lowest, and somewhere there is someone who you will offer your hand to. We are now on this journey together, and though our colleagues may not always be those we would have chosen, they are here, and I believe that together we share a commitment to each other and to the larger world, a commitment which is ours to define as we learn and grow here.

Welcome and welcome back to this community. Welcome to this day, this moment, and this space. Welcome to this shared responsibility. Welcome to this service. I cannot wait to see what this next year together holds for us, and to discover the many ways we are called into service beside each other.

At this moment, perhaps you are also asking "why me?" to which I will say "If not you, who? And because it is you, what will you make of it? How will you serve?" May we take these questions with the gravity they are due, and may we learn to answer this call willingly, with patience, courage, openness, and grace.



Photo: Kirstie Welsh

YOUR LIFE IS MORE THAN YOUR WORK, AND YOUR WORK IS MORE THAN YOUR JOB

ELIZABETH NGUYEN
MDiv '12



The Reverend Elizabeth Nguyen, MDiv '12 delivered this charge to the Reverend Aisha Ansano, MDiv '16 at Aisha's ordination to the Unitarian Universalist ministry in Arlington, MA in April 2018.

We remembered my aunt Kath this week, who passed away three years ago April 1st. She loved an old hippy song by Charlie King with the words, "Your life is more than your work and your work is more than your job."

This is my charge to you: "Your life is more than your work and your work is more than your job."

First: your work, your calling, your ministry is more than any job. Sometimes you may do one thing for money and one thing that is ministry. Sometimes you'll carve out a ministry from a job that wasn't really set up for that. I've done both and some of each all at the same time.

Rev. Aisha: you gather people together. You speak the language of spirit that skeptics and nerds and innovators and tech people and food people can hear. You talk about race and gender and queerness and migration in ways that honor yourself and minister to others. None of that has to do with your title or what the UUA or some evaluation says. And sometimes, your ministry will ask you to go outside of or even against the job that people want you to do. And you will do it. Because your work is more than your job.

Second: Your life is more than your work.

Do not let anyone make you a hero. For many reasons. But perhaps most, because heroes have to work the hardest to grow. I say to you with love, as a fellow woman of color, multiethnic person under the age of 50, very few people will defend the time and resources and openness of spirit that we need to grow. People would rather have us be the expert, the savior, getting good at panels and accumulating cute stuff for our bios, than give us the resources we need to grow so that we may know how to guide our people in their growth.

Your life is more than your work.

Do not let Unitarian Universalism insulate you. Say yes to opportunities and mentors and relationships that are about food justice and singing and soup and wine-making and what it means to be rooted in the Caribbean and what courage looks like in 2018 and what meaning is to those who never go to a house of worship.

And now I have to add to what Charlie said - our life is more than our work, our work is more than our jobs, and we are for more than ourselves.

Our ancestors made a way for us. Came through colonization and migration and carrying home on their backs. They sacrificed often not out of choice. Honor the sacrifices that were made for you by being intentional with the ones you choose to make. As a minister of color in this denomination, there will always be someone who wants to decide what is worth your time and what is not, who will want parts of you and not all of you.

YOUR LIFE IS MORE THAN YOUR WORK, AND YOUR WORK IS MORE THAN YOUR JOB

ELIZABETH NGUYEN
MDiv '12

At the end of our journeys, we do not answer to any of that. We answer only to our understandings of god, the covenants we make with our ancestors and the future generations. We may find ourselves in moments mightily convinced that we answer to congregational boards or project funders or Facebook or denominational whims or the culture of our crew. And don't get me wrong, accountability to community is our calling and our core. But in the vows you Aisha made today and the vows that many of us make when we say our covenant together on Sunday mornings or our prayers before bed or an intention before meditation, we do not promise our loyalty to big donors or 501c3 status or the fragile, human flawed laws of this land. We pledge allegiance to liberation, community, and to the generations to come. So when they send the fire marshals into the sanctuary congregation in Springfield, MA or humanitarian workers at the border are charged with conspiracy and harboring, whenever your moments of reckoning come, I charge you to remember that your covenants are with the ancestors, spirit and and those who come after.

Rev. Aisha, our life is more than your work, your work is more than your jobs, and you are for more than just yourself.

If we start with a hippie song we have to end with a horoscope by Chani Nicholas:

We were made for this.
Born for this. Brought into being for this. Have no choice but to be sturdy enough for this.
We were made for this.
Forged in the fires of this. Created in the image of this. Blessed by the knowledge of this.
We were made for this.
Because it has come to this. Because we choose to come to this. Because everything that has been passed to us has been for this.

Bless you Aisha.



Photo: Leah Limbaugh

UNTIL THE GREAT TAO PREVAILS

SHUMO WANG
MDiv '20



Shumo Wang delivered these remarks at the HDS Noon Service hosted by the HDS Confucians on September 19, 2018.

I want to tell a story first. My own experience when I came back to the States from China before the fall semester. I was passing the

customs, where people need to show the custom officers some documents and have a small talk with him or her, to prove that they're not a threat to this country. The customs officer, who was a lady, checked my documents and said: "Oh Harvard. Good for you. What are you studying at Harvard?", I said, "I'm in a program called Master of Divinity." "Divinity? Hah, do you have a religion?" "Yeah, I do have a faith. I follow Confucius' teaching. I am a Confucian." And she said, jokingly, "Wow than you must be pretty Confused, right?" I shrugged, "Yeah maybe. Everyone could be a little bit Confused, isn't it?" Then she asked: "You don't mind that? I mean I probably shouldn't have said that. I know nothing about Confucianism. I shouldn't make joke about it."

I said it's cool and I mean it. Honestly speaking I was not that offended at that time. First, I do make that homophone joke myself sometimes. And second, it is not very rare, that people know very few about my faith and feel comfortable making fun of it. I've heard worse.

I grew up in a country where the people were taught and ordered to hate Confucius forty years ago. My parents and their generation were taught in school that Confucius was the root of the Reactionary thinking and needed to be thrown away into the ash heap of history. The society haven't seen living Confucians for decades. So, when I told my parents and friends that I wanted to be a Confucian and wanted to see Confucius' teaching reviving in China and the world, they were all like: "yeah, I think that's a great goal, but I don't think it's possible. Confucianism, as a faith tradition, is dead. It's impossible to

achieve your goal, at least in your lifetime."

Well those words remind me of a story between one of Confucius' disciples and, a customs officer. Well, not an actual customs officer, but rather a guard of a city gate, also someone who checks your documents and has small talks with you. One of Confucius' disciples, Zi Lu, who was famous for his bravery, slept outside the city gate (See Analects 14:38). I should provide some background of this story that Confucius and his disciples has been wondering among Countries and Cities for 14 years but met no ruler who was willing to accept Confucius' teaching. And for several times, they had to face quite violent situations. So, we can image that poor Zi Lu, separated from his Master and fellows, ran to a city at midnight when the gate was closed, had no choice but to sleep outside the gate. In the morning the guard who came to open the gate saw him and asked: Who are you and where are you from? Zi Lu answered: I'm a student of Confucius. And the guard replied: Oh, Confucius, is that the man who knows it cannot be done, and keeps doing it? Who knows it cannot be done and keeps doing it. The guard meant no respect when he said that. Just like the customs officer I met, he was just making fun of Confucius whom he thought was too idealism.

I think the guard was partially right. His words indeed portrayed Confucians, a group of people who believe in the original good nature of human-being, who believe in that everyone has the potential of bettering oneself and becoming Sage through self-cultivation, who believe in that the power of love and respect inside family and among individuals will eventually make the world a harmonious unity. Confucius was in a dark, chaotic time, his idea was big and unrealistic. People said, "It's impossible. There's no way you can make it", but he kept going forward, because that is the Way he has witnessed and followed. Nowadays Confucians will continue his Way, keep going forward, however impossible it appears to others, until the Great Tao prevails.

MAKING OUR CASE

STEPHANIE PAULSELL

SUSAN SHALLCROSS SWARTZ PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF
CHRISTIAN STUDIES



Stephanie Paulsell preached this sermon at Harvard's Memorial Church on Sunday October 14, 2018. The texts of the day were Job 23:1-9, 16-17 and Mark 10: 17-31.

My mother was a runner before the days of fancy running shoes and weekend road races. When I was a kid, she would lace up a pair of thin-soled Keds and run around our neighborhood after supper in the evenings. None of my friends' moms did this. It was the late 60s, early 70s, and jogging was just beginning to become popular in the United States. My mother was an unusual sight running around our neighborhood, graceful and fleet. She has always delighted in the strength of her body—always the first one into the waves when we went to the ocean, always the one to accumulate the most laps when we went to the pool. Even now, in her 80s, she is limber and active, although she walks now, instead of running. I imagine she ran during my childhood because it made her feel good. I expect it was also a relief to get away from family life for a bit, to enjoy a little solitude.

I don't remember her talking with me about why she ran, but I do remember my mother telling me that when she ran through our neighborhood, she always had an escape plan in mind. She would think about which houses she could run to, who might answer the door, who might be sitting out in their back yard and hear her call for help if anyone threatened her, or followed her, or pulled up alongside her in a car. My mother ran to enjoy a little peace and quiet. But the cost of that peace and quiet was a certain vulnerability, and a mind that couldn't afford to be anything but alert and watchful.

It's not that our neighborhood was particularly dangerous. The truth is, there is no neighborhood where women don't have to make calculations about our vulnerability as we run, or walk, or push a baby stroller. Depending on our own experiences, and the experiences of people we know, the threat of sexual violence might vibrate at the front of our minds, or lie dormant in the back, nearly indiscernible. But it doesn't take much to bring it forward, because awareness of that threat is, to some degree, always there for women. Of course, it's not only girls and women who experience sexual violence. People of all genders do. But we do seem to be expected to understand vulnerability to sexual violence as a normal part of being female and to arrange our lives accordingly. Even now, in the #metoo era, sexual harassment and abuse remain part of growing up, part of being in school, part of going to church, part of dating, part of going to parties, part of working, part of walking alone, part of jogging alone, part of life.

Indeed, the threat of sexual violence is so much a part of life for women that it often goes unspoken. We do pass on from mother to daughter, sister to sister, friend to friend the kind of information my mom passed to me: have an escape plan when you're out by yourself. Yell "fire" instead of "help." Bring a canister of mace with you or a really loud whistle. Make sure your car is in good working order. Lock your doors. Don't speed when you're driving alone so you won't get pulled over. Women share such practical wisdom all the time. What we don't talk about so much is how sexual violence shapes our lives, our careers, our relationships, our engagement with the world. We don't talk about what we didn't do, where we didn't go, what we didn't achieve because of sexual violence, or the risk of it. We just fold those absences into our lives.

The #metoo movement, the Kavanaugh hearings and all that has flowed from them have begun to unfold those absences, and spread them out on the table of our society for all to see. Like Professor Anita Hill

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SUSAN SHALLCROSS SWARTZ PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF
CHRISTIAN STUDIES

before her, Professor Christine Blasey Ford—with nothing to gain, and a lot to lose-- spoke with great dignity about how sexual aggression and violence had impacted her life. An academically gifted fifteen-year-old girl began to struggle with school. An outgoing athlete began to experience anxiety and depression. Decades later, Professor Ford was still trying to come to terms with her experience in therapy. Thirty-six years later she can still recall the laughter of her assailants, can still feel the panic and the pain. The sheer unfairness of this, the injustice of it, makes me tremble. To say nothing of the fact that Brett Kavanaugh was, only days later, seated on the Supreme Court. Or that Professor Ford has had to live in hiding, apart from her children. Or that she was mocked by the president of the United States at a political rally. The laughter of the crowd in response is now indelible on my hippocampus.

So when I read the lessons for this morning, Job's words stood out to me. "Today," Job says "my complaint is bitter." Having endured loss after loss, Job wants justice and longs to argue his case before God. If I knew where I could find God, Job says, I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. Job wants to be heard and heeded. He believes his case is reasonable, and if he could only lay it out God would respond, and "I should be acquitted for ever," Job says, "by my judge."

We all know what this feels like. To long for things to be put right. To make our case so clearly that others cannot help but be convinced. But in spite of eloquent advocates in every age, the same injustices keep getting passed down, from generation to generation. Sexual violence derails lives and shatters communities. That's why in every violent conflict that has ever been, it has been used as a weapon of war. The racism that Martin Luther King, Jr. once warned could someday plow our civilization under continues to inflict trauma and undermine human dignity. Even though God has raised up prophets in our midst to make a case for our shared humanity, our society cannot even say with one voice that black lives matter. And looming over all our ills is the galloping catastrophe of climate change. The possibility that we might rouse ourselves to respond to it with the seriousness it demands seems so remote, even as entire communities disappear into the maw of violent storms and uncontrollable fires, even though our best scientists have made their case, over and over and over again. I hear my students, and my daughter, wonder out loud if they should even think of bringing children into this world. Like Job, we have filled our mouths with arguments. And we are choking on them.

If I could only find God, Job says, I would make my case before him. Job looks all around him, forward and backward, to the left and to the right--but God remains hidden, unknowable, silent. Eventually though, God does speak to Job--from a whirlwind, the text says. And from that whirlwind, God addresses Job in a speech that is famously harsh. I will the ask the questions here, God says. You gird up your loins and answer. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Where were you when I put down



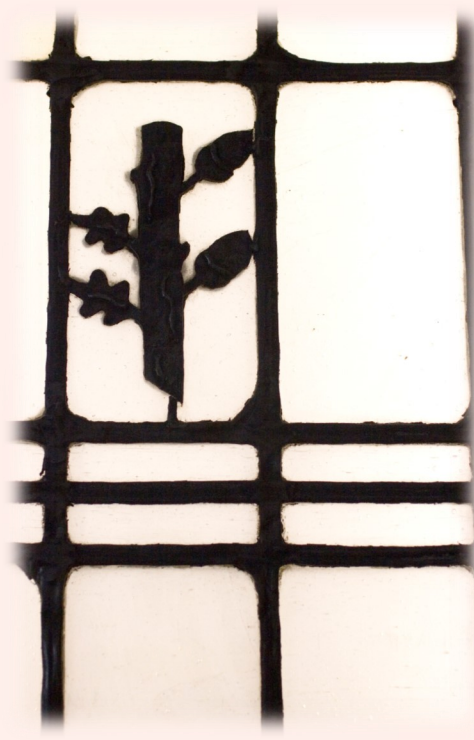
Photo: Katie Caponera

MAKING OUR CASE

STEPHANIE PAULSELL

SUSAN SHALLCROSS SWARTZ PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF
CHRISTIAN STUDIES

boundaries for the sea, wrapped the earth in clouds, and made the sun come up every morning of your life? Do you know where I keep the snow and the hail or where the mountain goats give birth or where the gates of deep darkness are? Who put wisdom in your inward parts, God asks. Who gave understanding to your mind?



One commentator on this passage describes God's response to Job as "barely bearable consolation." And you can see why. God's words are not reassuring. God doesn't address the case Job has painstakingly made or offer a solution to the problem of evil. Instead, a hidden God speaks from a whirlwind and overwhelms Job with the mystery and grandeur of creation. God's speech is beautiful, some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible. But if you think God missed the point, you are not alone among readers of the Book of Job. "What kind of God is this," one scholar writes, "who has nothing to say about Job's torture?" "The brunt of [God's] testy intervention," the literary critic Terry Eagleton has said, is "Who the hell do you think you are?"

Over the past week, I've been wondering if there's a way to hear something different in Job's encounter with God. Job has so much trouble finding God—he looks in front of him and behind him, on his left and on his right, and God is nowhere to be found. What difference would it make if we imagined the whirlwind from which God speaks as being Job's whirlwind, the whirlwind of his inner life. Maybe God has been inside of Job all along, hidden among the most secret parts of his pain. And when God speaks from that chaotic whirlwind, God unleashes a cascade of questions that draws Job deeper and deeper into the grandeur of the world—especially the parts of the world that are inaccessible to Job, like the empty deserts where God sends rain, or the dens of lions, or the floor of the silent ocean. Why does God do this? Maybe God does this to open up a channel between Job, isolated in his suffering, and the world all around him, which holds more possibilities than Job can even begin to imagine.

Photo: Stephanie Mitchell

In his speech from the whirlwind, God looks out at the world God made and called good. Job follows God's gaze and they look together until Job realizes that he is looking not only with God but also at God. "I had heard of you," Job says, "by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." In the mysteries of creation—including the mystery of his own humanity--Job finds God. God is not before him or behind him. God is all around him and within him. There is more to the world than Job knows. It is not just the place where he suffers. It is a living creation, continually changing and bringing forth new life. And there is also more to Job. He does not have to be stuck in a changeless loop of suffering. There's a whirlwind inside him that could blow it all down.

In the story we heard read from Mark's gospel this morning, Jesus turns our eyes, not to the grandeur of the crags where eagles build their nests or to the teeth of the sea monsters but rather to the grandeur of our shared humanity. A young man comes to him and respectfully asks what he must do to inherit eternal

MAKING OUR CASE

STEPHANIE PAULSELL

SUSAN SHALLCROSS SWARTZ PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF
CHRISTIAN STUDIES

life. Jesus tells him to obey God's commandments: don't kill, don't steal, don't bear false witness. The young man tells Jesus that he has kept these commandments all his life. And then Mark tells us that Jesus looked at this young man and loved him. This is the only place in Mark's entire gospel where Jesus is describing as loving someone. Jesus looks at this young man the way that the God of the Book of Job looks at the world: with awe, in wonder at the possibilities he contains. Loving him, Jesus says to the young man, then "sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...then come, follow me."

The young man doesn't, of course. He has a lot of possessions, and this invitation is too difficult for him to accept. I say this without judgment. I have not sold all that I have and given it away either. But Jesus presents this possibility to the young man as if he could do it, as if it's well within his capacity to give up what he has for the good of others. That capacity remains hidden in that particular young man, visible, perhaps, only to Jesus. It's hard, he tells his disciples, for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Hard, but not impossible. For with God, he says, all things are possible. Things do not have to be as they are. The world can change; we can change. And indeed, Jesus imagines a day when the way we do things now will be turned upside down: many who are first, he says, will be last, and the last will be first. Jesus is living as if that were true, and he is urging others—the rich young man, the disciples, us—to do the same.

It hurt to watch Christine Blasey Ford testify. She was terrified, she said. She said she feared her testimony wouldn't make a difference to an already-done deal but that she would be annihilated in the process. Her memories triggered our memories. Her stories evoked our stories. The telephone lines of rape crisis centers across the nation lit up with an unprecedented barrage of calls from people from every walk of life. Stories poured out onto social media, into the halls of congress, into the elevators the senators use. It was a whirlwind of pain.

But out of that whirlwind, the dignity and grandeur of human existence shone. It shone in the courage of Dr. Ford and many others. It shone in the sacrifice she and many others made for the common good. It shone in the willingness of so many not to fall silent, not to give up, not to despair when it seemed that nothing had changed since Anita Hill gave her own courageous, sacrificial testimony so many years ago. The mystery and grandeur of creation itself pulses through the vision so many people are working for of a world in which every single body is honored, and every person's dignity cherished and protected. A world in which we are courageous enough to change the way we live for the good of all. A world in which a woman can lace up her sneakers on a summer evening and run without fear or anxiety, with room in her mind for the most creative, the most expansive thoughts to move.



Photo: Kirstie Welsh

HUDDLED AROUND THE LAST OF THE LIGHT

AMY WESTON
MDiv '20



Amy Weston preached this homily at HDS's weekly Tuesday Morning Eucharist on October 23, 2018.

Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no

hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. -Ephesians 2:12-22

"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves." -Luke 12:35-38

You've probably seen the New York Times article

that was on the front page of Monday's paper, about what the current administration intends to do with regards to transgender people, essentially regulating us out of existence. To sum up the main thrust of it: "The Department of Health and Human Services' proposed definition would define sex as either male or female, unchangeable, and determined by the genitals that a person is born with." Male or female, unchangeable, determined at birth. It's the latest chapter in what has been two years of constant attacks, gradual erosion of the rights of transgender people, and an endless stream of misinformation and hatred. It has eaten away at our hearts and our spirits. It has broken our backs. It punctures our hands with needle and thread, tugging at us without end, until we know nothing but trembling.

I'm trembling. I don't want to preach a sermon. A sermon is supposed to be a dialogue, a conversation—with you all, with the text, with God. But I don't want to have a dialogue, I want to scream at God and wrestle with angels. I am tired and angry and my tears are big and hot. God went out to the wedding feast and we're here at home, and God told us to stay awake and stay alert until he gets back. I'm tired of waiting though. The house is in disarray, and an oppressor abides in the throne. Why hasn't God come home?

Yesterday, a friend said to me, "I feel like faith is a good thing to have during these hard times." And I would agree, were it not for the fact that this is, indeed, a time that tries my faith. I ask, Where is God in all this? And an answer is not forthcoming. The best Jesus has to offer us in this passage is a parable about patience.

I don't have time to be patient, God! We don't have the time.

The thunder crashes outside, the wind rattles the windows. The animals are silent. We huddle together with them around a single, guttering flame. Worried about thieves, the master of the house told us to

HUDDLED AROUND THE LAST OF THE LIGHT

AMY WESTON
MDiv '20

stay awake, and to stay alert, but it is not the thieves that frighten us. The floodwaters rise and hailstones crash against the roof.

Where is our Lord? When will we be saved? When will we be fed? At what point do we have to stop waiting, turn our collar up against the storm, go out into the tempest, and call with all our might to bring God back to this place?

I wish this reading started a few verses earlier: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” There is reassurance there. And my heart is put more at ease by being compared to a flock than by being compared to a slave.

It is a shocking turn for us then, to be put in the place of slaves, serving God. It would have been shocking for a citizen of the Roman Empire—a crushing and merciless society built on the back of a robust system of slavery. A society that aggressively persecuted outsiders and anyone perceived to be different. An empire that demanded loyalty and service, yet disenfranchised large segments of its population from being able to give that loyalty or that service.

If it sounds like I am describing the United States, I would remind you that the Roman republic served as the model for this one. From the tax codes to the senate to the architecture of the capital city.

If we are thus the modern incarnations of the Roman people, what message, what wisdom does Jesus have for us? We have a culture that demands loyalty to the flag. That pulls our attention away from caring and from loving, snatches at every little ounce we have to give. Kennedy’s famous words—ask what you can do for your country—begin to take on an ominous ring.

Jesus gives us a demand in tension with this one. Enslaved to empire, we can never be acceptable in the eyes of our ruler. We try and try to find a place. We ache and grasp and cry and plead. And as much as we try to say “we are just like you, we are your family and your friends, we are harmless,” we are nonetheless subjected to a machine of othering. Jesus gives a choice: break our spirits serving empire, or serve God. Attentively and patiently.

If we do this, Jesus promises that we will be fed.

But the thunder is crashing and the centurions are at the door. How can we find this patience? How can we know that God will help us in our hour of need? The author of this epistle puts her finger on what we might be feeling: “remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” No hope, and without God in the world. But God found a way forward for us! In Jesus we have access to God. In his words and his mystery and his incarnation we can find that hope and manifest God in the world.

As we are bent over this flickering light, starting at the shadows that move in the windows, cowering at the sound of the thunder, weeping in terror as the agents of empire pound on the door, there is a rabbi with us—their face barely visible in the lamplight. They tell us to be patient. They tell us that they are frightened too. That they died alone, forsaken by friends and with a heavy spirit. Perhaps this incarnation of Christ looks like a black trans woman, perhaps they are an immigrant nonbinary person, maybe she is a sexual abuse survivor. This is a Jesus who has suffered with us, a person who knows intimately our anxieties and sees the ways that the world works to crush us.

“Wait,” she says, “Focus. The storm may make it hard to hear, the way the soldiers pound on the door may confuse and frighten you. But if you stay alert,

HUDDLED AROUND THE LAST OF THE LIGHT

AMY WESTON
MDiv '20

and if you know well whom you serve, you will hear a different knock, and it will be God at the door. And God will enter, and sit, and you will be fed. Until then, be attentive, and make ready. Set the table and keep the lanterns lit. Build a kindom that will welcome God in all Their Glory. Find strength. Lift each other and place the foundations of the throne of Grace, laid on justice, community, love, and faith. Then, surely, you will be people who know and recognize the presence of God in your midst." Let us never drive out God from our midst. Amen.



Photo: Stephanie Mitchell

ALL THINGS ARE SUBTLY INTERCONNECTED

ABHIJITH RAVINUTALA
MTS '19



Abhijith Ravinutala, MTS '19, delivered the following remarks on October 15, 2018 in the series "The Spiritual Life," sponsored by the Office of the Chaplain and Religious and Spiritual Life.

I have spent enough time at Harvard Divinity School now to know that there are a few

general ways of beginning any set of remarks such as this. One way is to take the title of Spirituality and Mental Health Advocacy, the name of today's meeting, and pick apart each word in order to define and "problematize" it. I am not intelligent enough to do that. Another way is to launch into a passionate sermon with fist-raising fervor that leaves you wondering about the words spirituality, mental health, and advocacy, without ever saying them. I am not eloquent enough to do that. Yet another way, especially common in my field of Hindu studies, is to dig up a centuries old religious text and through the powers of my linguistic training, show 10 possible definitions of a Sanskrit word, one of which would be "mental health", and then proceed to draw conclusions about centuries of intersection between spirituality and mental health. I am not academic enough to do that. What I am, though, is a person with strong opinions (loosely held) and a storyteller. Allow me then to share three opinions, three stories, and a fact with you as a way of making the connections in my own life between spirituality and mental health advocacy.

Before I do that, however, three caveats: One: a trigger warning. Some of the material I am about to present will deal with themes of schizophrenia, suicide, stigma, and mental illness in general. If you become uncomfortable at any point please do not hesitate to leave and care for yourself as needed. The Harvard Counseling and Mental Health Center is located in the new Smith Center and is open until 6 pm today.

Two: specificity. I am not an expert in any of the topics I will bring up today. I will thus only attempt to speak to my own personal experience of tying advocacy and spirituality, and I will hope that you can apply those specific lessons to the general spiritual lives lived by all of you here today. This exercise of drawing generalizations from incredibly specific circumstances is literally the process of scholarship, so I trust you are all comfortable with it.

Three: If you have taken any classes with Dr. Charles Hallisey before, I apologize if you hear some repetition during the course of my remarks because I will certainly be quoting him. Of all the wonderful experiences I've had at the Divinity School, some of my favorite have been the feeling of new avenues, replete with unpaved roads and luminous streetlamps, opening in my mind upon hearing his words.

Now that the long introduction is out of the way, let me begin with one of my three stories, and a quick one.

Story 1:

I was sitting in my favorite coffee shop the other day, typing away at my keyboard toward a short story, when I just happened to look up. Across the length of the pristine white coffee bar, stained by mistakes, was a woman wearing a t-shirt. The t-shirt said, "All things are subtly interconnected." What do we understand from the use of the word "subtly"? Why not just say, "all things are interconnected"? For me, "subtly" is about the idea that those connections are hard to see and feel. In the same vein that we say a work of modern art is "subtle," the connections only make sense to the discerning eye. Maybe, then, both spirituality and mental health advocacy are exercises of training ourselves to see these subtle connections. In any case, it's time for one of my strong opinions, phrased in Hallisey-ian terms.

Opinion 1: We literally do not know what we are

ALL THINGS ARE SUBTLY INTERCONNECTED

ABHIJITH RAVINUTALA
MTS '19

talking about when we talk about spirituality. I am confused about spirituality. As far as I have seen, one person's definition or understanding of spirituality can directly contradict another's, and they could both be right. In that way, it is a term similar to the term Hinduism, which I am also confused about, but I embrace it nonetheless because I think Hinduism or spirituality both should give me cause to question and see anew, instead of seek comfort in things that I hope to be true. Spirituality has become such a nebulous term that instead of marking a particular belief it might be more indicative of marking a particular time in history, the one we inhabit, when people define their belief systems in contradiction to what has come before through the demarcation of "spiritual" as opposed to "religious." In other words, spirituality has to mean something different than religion because it is so desperately trying to mean something different. Mind you, we don't know what we are talking about when we talk about religion either. To me, it has always seemed that the category of Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) is a bit like the person who refers to himself as Joe because his given name Joseph is not as appealing to him. Joe could not exist without Joseph, as after all it's unlikely someone named Thomas would go by Joe, and so I think it is with SBNR.

I hope it is clear how confused I am about this term. My thinking is yet highly underdeveloped in regards to all that spirituality can or should mean, so I hope those of you with more developed understandings will forgive me. Despite this relative ignorance, I have found it necessary to define a system of spirituality that works for me. Such a system, if represented as a tree, would be deeply rooted in my Hindu upbringing, and its trunk would be the Hindu education and understanding I've accumulated separate from my upbringing. Of course, it draws from many other elements as well, namely early Buddhist and Zen thought among many others—these are the branches leading out of the tree trunk, grasping for what else the tree might reach, intertwine with, and ultimately become. Trees, we

should remember, are living, growing things that are necessarily affected by the actions taking place around them—actions that are of nature and those that are of human intention (both good and bad). That is to say, my system is subject to changes in the rain that affect the soil, but it is simultaneously subject to being chopped down with a heavy axe.



Photo: Stephanie Mitchell

In the traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism that I am born from, people often receive revelations whilst sitting under trees (specifically the pipal tree, or sacred fig). So it is fitting to describe my spiritual system with that metaphor because it is only under its peaceful shadow that I begin to make sense of the world around me and my place in it. Let me not give the impression that I have received anything remotely resembling a revelation, but instead that I am striving to think and question my existence thanks to the nurture and vocabulary offered by my tree. In other words, even if my grasp of spirituality is yet inchoate, I have to start somewhere. Which leads me to my second opinion.

Opinion 2: We are all part of a universal Brahman. The particular strain of Hinduism that I am closest

ALL THINGS ARE SUBTLY INTERCONNECTED

ABHIJITH RAVINUTALA
MTS '19

to, for those who know their Hindu philosophy or prefer to categorize things, is Advaita Vedanta. This is otherwise known as non-dualist thinking. Nondualist thinking in this tradition says that the universe in its entirety is comprised of a formless, infinite Brahman (with a capital B, not to be confused with the priestly caste in Hindu society). The corollary is that all of us have an individual soul called an Atman, which is a piece of the overall Brahman. The Atman is a soul that is everlasting and takes bodily form again and again as we reincarnate on Earth, until we've reached a state of liberation. At which point, we no longer reincarnate and instead remain as one with Brahman. Of course, we were already all part of Brahman to begin with, so this can be incredibly confusing. I like to think that the sages who came up with this philosophy in the past were debating one day and realized that this opacity could occur. And instead of coming to a final resolution, they decided to let future generations figure something out from this generative tension. I wish more people thought about ancient religious thought in this way—it might save us a lot of arguments in the present.

Still, they did not leave us with a completely blank slate, and there are certain ways of understanding this spirituality that I have held dear over the years. From one of the primary textual collections of this thinking in Hinduism, the Upanisads, let us consider a small example.

A son, eager to learn more about the nature of the world, approaches his father who is spiritually learned. The son asks his father, “what is the nature of Brahman? How can I understand?” The father, instead of answering him directly, tells his son to bring him a glass of water and a chunk of salt. So the son does it, probably thinking his old man is toying with him. The father asks the son to then empty the salt into the water.

The father says, “alright! Come back in a few hours!” So the son goes off to do whatever people did in ancient times—reading, watching the monkeys

swing around, etc.

The son comes back, impatient to see where this is going, and asks the father again: “what is the nature of Brahman?”

The father says, “son, can you see the salt in that glass?”

“No,” the son says. It had dissolved of course.

“Okay, taste it from the bottom left part of the glass. What do you taste?”

“Salt!” the son says.

“Hmm, okay, what about the top right part?”

“Salt!” the son says.

“What about right in the center?”

He sticks his tongue in and says, “Salt!”

“Pour out the water and come back in a few hours,” the father says. The son does that and comes back, and the father asks, “do you see anything?”

“I can see the salt,” the son says.

“Such is Brahman, my son, like the salt in the water that is this world. And such are you, as well.”□

Now, even though that's a fun example, it can still be a bit difficult to derive any spiritual feeling from it. Let me offer yet another way to understand this opinion of mine. Consider all of us, sitting here together. Reality presents itself such that we appear as entirely distinct forms with entirely distinct bodies and minds. My body is separate from yours and I can even reach out from within my body and touch your body, thus really knowing that we are two separate things. Yet, what is beneath these bodies? Beneath are organs, and organs made up of molecules. If you want to go deeper you can know that molecules are made up of atoms, atoms are made up of protons, neutrons, electrons. Subatomic

ALL THINGS ARE SUBTLY INTERCONNECTED

ABHIJITH RAVINUTALA
MTS '19

particles are made up of quarks, quarks are made up of... and so on and so on until eventually, when you drill all the way down all you get is formless, indistinct energy. So even though reality presents itself as our forms being distinct, we know that the building blocks of these forms are made up of the same material all the way down. A quote from Robert Musil, in *The Man Without Qualities*, but which I read in Didier Fassin's *Life: A Critical User's Manual*. "Life forms a surface that acts as if it could not be otherwise, but under its skin things are pounding and pulsing."

Finally, let me try to explain this spiritual concept of Brahman in one more manner, in one line. *All things are subtly interconnected.*

Now, a last opinion:

Opinion 3: If I believe what I have outlined above, regarding the interconnectedness of things, and I am provided the proper impetus, I have no other moral choice but to become a mental health advocate. I was given that impetus, even though I wish to this day that it had come earlier, and come in a different way. My second story is next, but before continuing I must share a quote from Dr. Hallisey: "What I know about myself to be true is that I'm a danger to other people."

Story 2:

When I was 6 years old, I flew from India to Dallas. I don't remember much from those early days in America, but I remember being lonely. I was an only child, and I didn't know how I was going to adjust in the new country, new school. Hey, I couldn't even tie my own shoes yet! Luckily, I met a friend who lived in my apartment complex. His name was Ajay, he was 4 years older than me, and also an only child. Naturally, we became inseparable, and Ajay taught me how to thrive as a nerdy kid in late 90's America.

It was Ajay who showed me Pokemon for the first time, effectively guaranteeing that my brain would think of nothing else for the next few years. We

would find ourselves rushing home from elementary school, making it to his home just in time to see Ash win another battle. It was Ajay who showed me how to roller-skate, to zip through our apartment complex making friends with the other tenants. We did our best to emulate the scenes from our favorite video games, assigning each other secret agent numbers and playing advanced hide-and-seek. We'd go to the temple with our families, and Ajay would teach me the art of passing temple time. You see, temple time passes much slower than any other time you spend waiting for your parents, like Dillard's time and Home Depot time (just to give a few particularly boring examples). We grew up together in those days, and always closer, despite him being four years older than me in age.

As the years went by and we changed schools and addresses, we always kept in touch. I would look forward to the weekends when I could sleepover at Ajay's apartment, learning about cool video games, good movies, and bad words. My early taste in Quentin Tarantino movies and Weezer songs both came from Ajay. Of course, our favorite pastime was going to CiCi's Pizza for any special occasion or excuse that we could think of. I guess you could say we made sure to grow chubby together, just as we grew up together.

Eventually, Ajay moved on to college at UT Austin, the same year that I started high school. And for the first time, we were cities apart. Left on our own, we made new friends and grew busy, but I still looked up to Ajay and hoped to follow in his footsteps to UT.

Until one day in my junior year of high school, Ajay first started showing signs of a condition that would come to consume him. I remember the night too vividly when his parents called my father in agony, dumbfounded by Ajay's behavior, and desperately asked for his help. According to Ajay's father, Ajay had come home from college for summer break and acted like a different person altogether. His grades had dropped and he suffered from the guilt and

ALL THINGS ARE SUBTLY INTERCONNECTED

ABHIJITH RAVINUTALA
MTS '19

pressure that all Indian children know when it comes to academics. He was yelling at his parents and throwing food at them. I was shocked, my parents were stunned. My father and I jumped in the car to go meet Ajay and his father, and I kept thinking during the car ride that there must be some huge mistake or overreaction. When we reached the parking lot of the Target that Ajay's father had called us from in panic, when I opened the car door, I realized he wasn't overreacting. I saw it in Ajay's eyes: bloodshot, wide open with a look of guilt, like he knew he'd done something wrong but he couldn't have controlled it. My parents brought him to our house and tried to counsel him.

Eventually, Ajay did pull himself together, and his parents, who had become like a second family to me, thanked us and took him back to Austin. I would eventually join him there and restart our friendship during my freshman year at UT. It was time again to learn from Ajay—this time about the best tofu places on campus, and where to find the free t-shirts.

In my second year, just before winter break, I called Ajay to ask for a ride home for the holidays. He agreed, but fabricated stories about my roommate and caused drama that drove a rift in our friendship. I was angry at him for lying and I drove him away. Our friendship frayed and eventually tore apart, and even when I tried to sow it back together in the future, he was wary of me. When I rode with Ajay to Dallas for that 2010 winter break, it would be one of the last days I spent quality time with him. I didn't realize then that Ajay was exhibiting symptoms of schizophrenia. He didn't tell me, his best friend, about what he was going through. He didn't tell his dad, he didn't tell his mom, he suffered in silence. For years. He passed away in the fall of 2015, and I can't help but feel that his life could've taken an entirely different path if it weren't for the stigma that silenced him and kept me ignorant.

I wonder what went through Ajay's head in the past few years. Maybe he had forgotten our times

together, the laughs we shared and all that he had taught me. If that's what his illness could do, then I hate it. I hate that Ajay had to go through such an internal battle. I hate that he couldn't be the jovial, brilliant kid I had always known. I hate that he died without being my friend again, without letting me share one more slice of pizza with him or lecturing me on his opinions about the latest internet meme. Because, Ajay was my best friend and he always will be.

Now, a painful fact.
Fact 1:

My friend's story is far from an anomaly. It took a shock like that for me to have the compassion necessary, but in reality, mental health already affects us all. Some statistics can paint a broader picture: the Government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) declared that nearly 20 percent of American adults suffer from some mental illness.

Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. And according to the Association for Suicide Prevention, there is an average of 123 suicides per day in America.

I bring up the stark numbers of this reality because it shows that any of us could deal with mental health. See, mental health exists on a spectrum, from healthy to severely ill, just like physical health. Being stressed, for example, is an instance of being mentally unwell. But stigma blinds us to this



Photo: Kristie Welsh

ALL THINGS ARE SUBTLY INTERCONNECTED

ABHIJITH RAVINUTALA
MTS '19

viewpoint: At the turn of the millennium, the U.S. Surgeon General said stigma was the biggest barrier to mental health care. We have been effectively socialized to hold negative attitudes toward mental illness in a vicious circle: First, we do not understand mental illness because we are unaware. Then, we fear what we do not understand. Third, we distance those who we fear, we reject them from our society. Fourth, this social rejection worsens the well-being of those with mental illness—they closet their symptoms and themselves because of stigma, sometimes leading to early mortality, like the case of Ajay. And finally, we continue to not understand as a result!

But this doesn't merely happen on a personal level—the CDC recently reported that stigma results in a lower prioritization of public resources and worse quality of care. Research has shown that stigma and embarrassment were top reasons why those with mental illness did not engage in medication adherence or help-seeking behaviors.

Mental health has affected, does affect, and will continue to affect all of us. So if we want to avoid stereotypes and defeat stigma, the first step is to be more aware. There's no other way. Then we want to move from a state of being aware to a state of care. We want to replace a system of stigma with a system of support. And the thing about stigma is, the simple act of caring can solve the problem!

See, I live a blessed life. Each day, literally every day without fail, I thank the universe/ God for what I have been given. When I lost my friend, it was one of the first times I dealt with a death like that: undeserved, indiscriminating, and cold. Faced with that pain, I had a choice to make between turning it into negative or positive energy, and I chose positive. I wanted to do something so that what happened to my friend did not need to happen to others in my community. I wanted to create within others a view of compassion for those with mental health issues. Crucially, I also wanted to make myself a better person, someone who could

understand, empathize with, and support those with mental illness. Because: all things are subtly interconnected.

Time for a last story.

Story 3:

As a result of all I have shared with you, I got together with friends and created an organization called [MannMukti](#), which translates to “mental liberation” in Hindi. Our mission is to encourage healthy, open dialogue of South Asian mental health in an effort to remove stigma, improve awareness, and promote self-care. From our first meeting in July 2016, to launching our website in May 2017, to now, I have experienced incredible ups and downs in my advocacy journey. I have been fortunate enough to speak about Ajay and the need for compassion on a TEDx stage, today on the Harvard campus, and many other locales.

Most importantly, this past April MannMukti had its first annual retreat, where we welcomed members from all over to Austin, Texas—and spent a weekend together. We clubbed that together with an event hosted by our volunteers called Slam the Stigma, which was an evening of speeches about mental health, followed by an open mic. The stories that people shared at that open mic, still give me chills when I think about them. I saw deep, deep vulnerability and pain. But then when I got back to the retreat house (I had arrived later than most), there was literally a Bollywood dance party going on in the house. These people were actively defying the stereotypes around mental illness that declared how they were supposed to act.

At brunch the next morning, sitting outside on a patio that overlooked Lake Austin, we started to debrief about the previous night's event. Every time someone said they wished that such a safe space/ event existed when they were in college, a profound doubt swelled up inside me: Could this have prevented Ajay from passing away? Was he proud of what we were doing down here? People went on to

ALL THINGS ARE SUBTLY INTERCONNECTED

ABHIJITH RAVINUTALA
MTS '19

share how much MannMukti had meant to them. It had given someone cause to control their suicidal thoughts. Given another reason to keep going when times were tough. Given another the hope that people are out there who really will support them. Needless to say, the floodgates in our eyes had opened by this point. Against the serene backdrop of sandstone hills and trees sloping down to Lake Austin, the hot Texas sun beating down on our skin, there was a torrent of emotion inside each of us. I felt that I had enough tears to fill the lake. Long after others had left the table, I remained there crying unstopably. Reflecting back on that experience gave me cause to write the first and only poem I've written:

*Tears not from our eyes, taps
Direct connect to project
Hurt, with so much history
From the soul out to the sun
Rivers flow - words waiting for release
If we could only make this stigma cease
We swim through the tears
To meet with our fears
Know that on this day we are
We simply are
No designations of disorders
Nor shame from judgmental orders
When I was born, my eyes
They looked like this
My smile,
It curved like this
My heart,
That pounded like this
Know me for these or know me not at all
Either way, I just
Exist.*

I can confidently say that creating this organization and keeping even one life from feeling alone or uncared for, from ending too early, is the best thing I have ever done with this life. I was chatting with a friend of mine, Ibrahim Kamal, who graduated from here last year. Because we are Divinity School students and have nothing better to

discuss, we were talking about what kind of impact we want to have on the world. Ibrahim phrased it in a way that has stuck with me: "I want to change the world by changing how people see the world." I am on that same spiritual journey.

Still, I have limitations. As much as I want to save everyone, I cannot. Just weeks ago, someone who I've never met bared their life experiences to me over Facebook messenger. I offered what support I could and directed them to MannMukti's resources, but they kept chatting me with increasingly worrisome messages. Eventually, they confided in me that they'd had a suicide attempt. I'm not a medical professional and my abilities, MannMukti's abilities, cease at that juncture. All I can do at that point is tell them to check themselves into a hospital or call the police on their behalf so they'll be taken to a hospital.

I'll never know whether the existence of MannMukti could've kept my friend alive for longer. But I can hope that my advocacy will change the course of events of even one person's life so they don't experience what Ajay did. And even after knowing that my advocacy has helped people, I have to question myself, under the shade of my spiritual tree. Am I now compassionate enough? Am I a different person from everything that came before?

Compassion and awareness have no magic switches. Each day I must commit to understanding someone else's story, I have to commit to listening, caring, and supporting. All of you listening to this today, I hope you take a step with me toward a stigma-free world. Then take a thousand more steps with me. I'll try to support you if ever your foot falters. I'll hug you when it seems too cold to go on. Because a friend of mine taught me how to care. Because my tree taught me to become better. Because all things are subtly interconnected.

I'd like to conclude with a poem titled "November 3rd," by Kenji Miyazawa, found folded and tucked away in his pocket when he passed from this world,

ALL THINGS ARE SUBTLY INTERCONNECTED

ABHIJITH RAVINUTALA
MTS '19

as if he were reading and reminding himself of it every day. It is a poem that occupies a prominent place on my wall and one that I only know, of course, through Dr. Hallisey:

*Neither yielding to rain
nor yielding to wind
yielding neither to
snow nor to summer heat
with a stout body
like that
without greed
never getting angry
always smiling quietly
eating one and a half pints of brown rice
and bean paste and a bit of
vegetables a day
in everything
not taking oneself
into account
looking listening understanding well
and not forgetting
living in the shadow of pine trees in a field
in a small
hut thatched with miscanthus
if in the east there's a
sick child
going and nursing
him
if in the west there is a tired mother
going and carrying
for her
bundles of rice
if in the south
there's someone
dying
going
and saying
you don't have to be
afraid
if in the north
there's a quarrel
or a lawsuit
saying it's not worth it
stop it*

*in a drought
shedding tears
in a cold summer
pacing back and forth lost
called
a good-for-nothing
by everyone
neither praised
nor thought a pain
someone
like that
is what I want
to be*

BELIEVING FIERCELY

SARAH FLEMING
MDiv '21



Sarah Fleming delivered this homily at the weekly Tuesday Morning Eucharist at HDS on October 2, 2018.

Job is in a tough place in this chapter: so much so that the only option that he sees is to curse his very existence and pray for everything to come to an end. His only sense of joy comes from the thought of his death—he would dig for it more than for treasure—and he is questioning his faith. In the chapters following this one, Eliphaz attempts to answer Job's questions, staunchly defending God by asking, "Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?" and shifting the blame to Job. Bildad and Zophar go even further, implying that Job is lucky to get off so easily: his sins probably merit even worse punishment than what he has received. In response, Job calls them "worthless physicians," and he has a point. Who could

listen to all of that and feel better?

I used to read this passage from the perspective of Job. Now I've been thinking of it more from the perspective of Job's comforters, his caregivers. To be fair, they have a difficult task: their friend is in agony, and no matter what counsel they give him, nothing can stop the pain, the hurt, and the desire to cease to exist. And, to be fair, they have spent seven days and seven nights sitting with their miserable friend without saying a word. Job's friends are really trying—they are coming from a place of compassion—but they have no answer that can satisfy him. They may be well-intended, but still, they end up doing more harm than good.

This failure opens up a question that seems especially relevant to us as divinity school students: How can we be compassionate listeners and provide relief to our friends in travail? How can we comfort them as they long for death? Specifically, how can we learn from the example of Job's caregivers about what NOT to do, and how can we do better?

One mistake Job's friends make is to attempt to rationalize his suffering. Yes, they are trying to create some sort of storyline for Job so that he can process and understand what has happened to him—they want his suffering to make sense. This is a very human impulse, since no one wants to believe that suffering is for no purpose. But how productive is it to tell someone that they have suddenly lost everything because of some undetermined sin in their past?

This immediate turn to rationalization shows that, in some sense, they are afraid to just say, "You're right, this sucks," which might be exactly what Job needs to hear.

To some, religion is associated with justifying suffering as punishment for wrong actions, even if totally disconnected, so much so that when a friend doing CPE entered a woman's hospital room, the woman dismissed her at first, remarking, "Oh, my sister's religious, and she keeps telling me that this [referring to her cancer] is all according to God's plan." The woman was shocked when instead of offering such platitudes, my friend instead stated calmly, "It's okay to say this sucks. We can talk about that instead." Sometimes horrible things happen for no reason, and rather than blame the person in pain, we need to take some time to listen and affirm their story.

Rather than interrogating Job and digging through his past to find some sin that could account for the

BELIEVING FIERCELY

SARAH FLEMING
MDiv '21

wrongs that he has been done, seemingly at God's hands or with God's acquiescence, what would have happened if they had listened to him, believed that his suffering was valid, and believed that he was not to blame? That maybe there was no real reason for the misery that plagued him?

And now, in this moment, believing and validating such stories of suffering without first jumping to conclusions is as important as ever. All too often what starts out as trying to find a reason to explain someone's suffering turns into either a reason why their suffering does not apply to us and should not concern us or a reason why they are to blame and are thus not worthy of our compassion. People want to believe in a just world. If we can understand someone's suffering as a result of something they did, some concrete act they committed, then we can feel safe: they did X, but we did not, so we are somehow immune to punishment. We can offer them pity, but little more. The real danger comes with the second approach: if we manage to blame them, then they don't deserve even our pity. They brought about their own suffering, we claim, so they must be held responsible, and we emerge from the situation free from having to care for or even about them.

We've seen this play out again and again, most notably, recently, around survivors of sexual violence: many rush to rationalize why a survivor's actions, no matter how irrelevant to the case at hand, justify the harm that was done to them and why they are at least in part to blame for their assault. Dealing with trauma the first time around is bad enough—why subject someone to needless interrogations and attempts to undercut their authority and credibility? Make them doubt their understanding of their own story and their very sense of self? And force them to relive painful experiences only to then cause them further pain and humiliation?

Thinking about Job this week in particular, we can learn from the inadequacies and dangers inherent in Job's friends' urge to rationalize and explain away and we can instead listen, validate, support, believe fiercely. We can take time to tell those around us bearing burdens seen and unseen that they matter, that their pain matters, and we care about them. And we can take up Jesus' challenge in the gospel for today to welcome the little ones, the least powerful among us, and hold their stories as valid, as valuable, and as sacred.



Photo: Kristie Welsh

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