

Let's Start Here

A Sermon delivered at the First Parish in Wayland, MA

By John-Eric Robinson

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There is so much to talk about. The siege in Bethlehem is over. It's Mother's Day. The flowers in back of the church are in bloom and looking beautiful. The Annual Church Rummage sale was yesterday, and I'd never even been to a rummage sale before, and there I was, in charge of Bric-A-Brac and witness to one of the best-organized community-building and community-serving events I've ever seen. It's my last sermon of the church year, and our ten months together are nearly over. There is so much I can't put words to, and so much I would like to say. So I've cobbled together this service and this sermon out of some of my favorite things. It's more a potpourri than a thesis. And somewhere in the midst of poetry and dance and hymns and music and these words is my offering to you: some things I find beautiful and helpful and that I share with you today.

Transformation is possible. People change. We grow and we grow up. Story after story in literature and in our lives speak to the power we have to change ourselves. And we do change. There we all were, once upon a time, babies, every one of us. Every one of us a toddler at some point. A kid. We may have the same genetic make-up over our whole lives, but that's just a pattern we start with. Our families, teachers, friends, colleagues, life itself, and we ourselves take part in shaping who we are. And whoever we are at any one moment can change in the next. Life is like that. A sudden tragedy. A job opportunity. Meeting a new friend. A computer virus. A change of heart.

Some of these changes can happen in an instant. I'm coming to believe, though, that it takes time and energy to change one's heart. Much more time, say, than a James Joyce epiphany or an Ebenezer Scrooge series of visions. One event may tip the scales. But internal change takes time. It adds up. One event can change our lives forever, but the effect of any event takes time to play itself out. The loss of a relationship or a home or a job means something different over the years looking back. Our childhood continues to affect us and to provide us with resources for self-understanding and for self-transformation throughout our lives, especially when we find ourselves able to take responsibility for who we are today. At a certain point it is no longer fruitful to blame people or events deep in our past for who we are today. Who we are today is our responsibility. And all self-help books to the contrary, the first thing we have to accept is ourselves just as we are. Change is possible, but it not a place to begin. This is what we have to work with — this body, this mind, this history, this set of relationships, the one we have right now — so let's start here.

One guide on this path is Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist nun and Director of Gampo Abbey, Nova Scotia, the first Tibetan monastery in North America established for Westerners.¹ In

¹From the book jacket of *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living*.

the opening chapter of her book *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living*, Chödrön writes, “There is no need for self-improvement. All these trips we lay on ourselves — the heavy-duty fearing that we’re bad and hoping that we’re good, the identities that we so dearly cling to, the rage, the jealousy and the addictions of all kinds — never touch our basic wealth.... You can feel like the world’s most hopeless basket case, but that feeling is your wealth, not something to be thrown out or improved upon. There is a richness to all of the smelly stuff that we so dislike and so little desire. The delightful things — what we love so dearly about ourselves, the places in which we feel some sense of pride or inspiration — these are also our wealth.” She goes on to argue that it is our faults, when we recognize them, that help us grow in compassion towards other people, with their faults. In my own life, I have noticed that it is the very things I find hard to accept in myself that drive me the craziest when I encounter them in someone else. At least, I find that it helps if I take some time to look inside to see what some strong reaction I’m having is about, to see what it reminds me of in my life and my history, before I jump to a conclusion or react. And the best resource I have in offering compassion to other people is the compassion I show myself when I mess up.

And often it’s not just what we do with our own mistakes, but what we do when life throws us for a loop that matters. I’m not knocking despair. Sometimes it is all we can do to put one foot in front of another, or to get out of bed in the morning, or to just to hold on to life for another day. But sometimes, when we are ready, when we have some help and support, we can move forward to a place of new life and renewed hope. Sometimes we find ways to turn our own pain into something helpful for someone else.

So I’d like to spend most of the rest of this sermon telling a story from another favorite author of mine, Rachel Naomi Remen. Remen is cofounder and medical director of the Commonweal Cancer Help Program (featured on Bill Moyers PBS special *Healing the Mind*) and a Clinical Professor at the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine.²

She tells of a young man who I’ll call Sam. Sam was an athlete, a popular and successful college football player. Then he developed osteogenic sarcoma in his right leg. Two weeks after the diagnosis, surgeons removed his right leg above the knee. Remen writes, “This surgery, which saved his life, also ended his life. Playing ball was a thing of the past. He refused to return to school. He began to drink heavily, to use drugs, to alienate his former admirers and friends, and to have one automobile accident after another.” After the second of these car accidents, his coach referred him to Remen, who was working as a counselor with cancer patients.

Remen asked Sam to draw a picture of his body. He drew a vase, just an outline, and then drew a crack in it. He went over and over the crack with his crayon, “gritting his teeth and ripping the paper. He had tears in his eyes.... It was clear that this broken vase could never hold water, could never function as a vase again.” Remen saved the drawing. It seemed too important to throw away.

²From the book jacket. The story that follows is quoted and adapted from Remen’s chapter “The Container” in *Kitchen Table Wisdom* (114-118).

One day, after weeks of recovery and meetings with Remen, Sam brought in an article he'd clipped from the newspaper. It was about a young man who had lost his leg in a motorcycle accident. The man's doctors were quoted extensively. "They don't know the first thing about it," Sam said.

"Over the next month he brought in more of these articles, some from the papers and some from magazines," Remen writes. "A girl who had been severely burned in a house fire, a boy whose hand had been partially destroyed in the explosion of his chemistry set." Sam's reaction was always the same. "These doctors don't know what to do with these people," he said. Remen looked at him thoughtfully. "Would you like to talk with them?" she asked. Sam looked at her doubtfully.

But then he asked if there were any patients in the hospital there with those sorts of issues. And, with the permission of their doctors and with Remen's help, he started to visit people on the surgical wards with problems similar to his own. Sometimes he could reach them when no one else could. Delighted, doctors began to refer more people to him.

One hot summer day Sam visited a 21-year-old woman whose mother and sister had both died of breast cancer. She had opted for the only treatment available to her at the time, and had had both of her breasts removed. She was lying there on her hospital bed just staring into space. A radio in the room was on, quietly playing rock music. Now, the day was hot, as I said, and Sam was wearing shorts with his artificial leg clearly in view. He tried everything he could to connect with this woman. Remen writes, "He said things to her that only another person with an altered body would dare say. He made jokes. He even got angry." Nothing worked. She just lay there, not even looking at him. Finally, he unstrapped his artificial leg and let it fall with a loud clunk to the floor. She looked over at him, and he started hopping around the room snapping his fingers along with the music and laughing out loud. "After a moment," Remen says, "she burst out laughing too. 'Fella,' she said, 'if you can dance, maybe I can sing.'"

The two gradually became friends, and she encouraged Sam to go back to school to study psychology and to continue the work he was doing with patients. Eventually they fell in love and married. Long before this, though, Sam had his final session with Remen. "We were reviewing the way he had come," Remen writes, "the sticking points and the turning points. I opened his chart and found the picture of the broken vase that he had drawn two years before. Unfolding it, I asked him if he remembered the drawing he had made of his body. He took it in his hands and looked at it for some time. 'You know,' he said, 'it's really not finished.'" Surprised, Remen held out her basket of crayons to him. "Taking a yellow crayon, he began to draw lines radiating from the crack in the vase to the very edges of the paper. Thick yellow lines. [Remen] watched, puzzled. [Sam] was smiling. Finally, he put his finger on the crack, looked at her, and said softly, 'This is where the light comes through.'"

This is where the light comes through. This, here, where we are, with all of our hurts and joys and history, here. It's more than mothers or fathers or siblings or friends or even ourselves, and it's all of us, watching over one another all through the nights of our

illnesses, our celebrations, and simply our nights of rest. We can't change everything, and we don't need to. Some parts of ourselves and our lives and our world are here to stay. They provide us with a structure and a starting place. It's what Wendell Berry calls "law" in the poem we heard earlier, *The Law that Marries All Things*. "In law is rest," he writes, "if you love the law,/ if you enter, singing, into it/ as water in its descent."

It's not easy to love who and where we are. Sometimes the best thing is to get up and go, when a place is unsafe or when we've stopped growing in healthy ways and need to move on. And sometimes the best thing is to dig in deeper, to go deeper right where we are and to dance with it. Just the ways the trees dance in the rain in our opening words from Mary Oliver:

"... may you have many such days
flinging your bodies in silver circles shaking your heads
over the swamps and the pastures
rimming the fields and the long roads hurrying by."

So may it be.

Amen.