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## BOUNCE

a sermon given by the Rev. Rosemary Lloyd  
at the First Church in Boston  
Sunday, November 16, 2008

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Just the other night I heard this story told by the Rev. Ray Hammond, pastor of the Bethel AME church in Boston. It's a story about Chippie the parakeet.

"Chippie never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage, sending a song into the air; the next second he was sucked in, washed up, and blown dry.

"His problem began when his owner decided to clean his cage with a vacuum. She stuck the nozzle in to suck up the seeds and feathers at the bottom of the cage. Then the phone rang. Instinctively she turned to pick it up. She had barely said hello when--  
ssswwwwpppppp! Chippie got sucked in!

She gasped, let the phone drop, and switched off the vacuum. With her heart in her mouth, she opened the dust bag.

"There was Chippie--alive but stunned—and covered with heavy gray dust. She grabbed the bird and rushed to the bathtub, turned on the faucet full blast, and held Chippie under a torrent of water, power washing him clean.

Poor Chippie was soaking wet and shivering. So she did what any compassionate pet owner would do: she snatched up the hair dryer and blasted him with hot air.

Did Chippie survive?

Yes, but he doesn't sing much anymore. He just sits on his perch and stares. It's not hard to see why..."

Life is like that sometimes. You never see it coming...and suddenly...  
ssswwwwpppppp!!

In the aftermath, you may feel like just sitting there, staring off into the distance... without much of a song in your heart.

Fortunately, there are a couple of things we human beings have that Chippie the Parakeet—being a parakeet—did not have available to him. And these things make all the difference—they can help us get off our perches and, eventually, begin to feel the song in our hearts rise again....

We have the ability to cultivate resiliency--to recover from illness, change or misfortune. We have the ability regain our human shape after we've been bent, stretched, or squished by circumstances.

Bouncing back does not happen instantly, like a ball rebounding from the floor. Resiliency is built up, gradually, like one of those rubber band balls. There is something at the core, and then, experience by experience, like band upon rubber band—our resiliency grows...Gradually, eventually, we can bounce back.

Some of us are more wired for resiliency than others, but we can all learn to be more resilient. We can get better at it every decade. I'm thinking about creating a workshop this winter to explore how we can strengthen our ability to rebound. If you have some skills in this area, please think about sharing them with our community...We'll talk....

In the meantime—between getting hit by life and bouncing back--sometimes the best we can do is just to hold on. To endure.

One of the heroic figures in the annals of endurance is Sir Ernest Shackleton, the leader of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century voyage to Antarctica.

In the earliest days of World War One, twenty seven men sailed off in a ship named The Endurance with the ambition to be the first expedition to cross the frozen continent on foot.

But just a month after setting sail, the ship was trapped in ice, and remained trapped for 10 months. Though Shackleton hoped to be able to wait out the weather and sail on, the ice prevailed, and eventually crushed and sank the wooden ship.

The entire crew escaped the wreck and established a camp on drifting ice floes. With dwindling supplies, no radio--no polar fleece or high tech gear--no idea how they would be rescued, they endured sub-zero temperatures and winds that gusted to 200 mph. After five months in disastrous conditions, it got worse. The ice began to splinter, there was no stable surface... so the stressed crew climbed into three small, life boats and sailed for 7 days—without any protection from the dangerously frigid water and air--in almost continuous darkness, until they landed on remote Elephant Island. There were no hotels or stores there either. There was nothing but ice and wind...

After few days of rest, Shackleton and five men climbed back into the largest of the lifeboats and set out again, determined to cross 1000 miles of wild currents in open sea to reach a whaling station on South Georgia Island. Nearly two years after they began, they were heading back to where they started, never having reached the frozen continent, and fighting for all their lives... Would you be ready to give up?

They didn't. They sailed for 15 days in the dark, through a hurricane that (they later learned) sank a 500-ton steamer, until--against the greatest navigational odds--they landed. But since they had landed on the far (that is, the wrong) end of the island, now they had to walk... across a frozen plain covered in knee high snow, over a mountain and down a glacier, until three impossible days later, ragged and frozen and near collapse, they reached their destination.

Meanwhile, back on Elephant Island, twenty-one men were “living” in a shelter made of two overturned lifeboats. As they laid on fraying blankets in the relentless polar darkness, their body heat melted the ice beneath them—so they were constantly wet and cold.... I can't begin to imagine the stench. They had estimated that their leader would reach the whaling station in 4 weeks, and indeed they had... But their rescue was foiled three times by bad weather and the dastardly ice! It took four more months-- before help finally arrived...

In the end, no one gave up. No one walked off into the dark cold to die. No one killed anyone else. They all endured.

How did they do it? How did they hang on, keep going and live? Even though their ship was sucked under the water, they were washed up on the splitting ice, and constantly blown by the whipping, frozen, salt-stinging winds?

I don't know.

There are diaries of their travels and trials that survive. They recount the surprising daily-ness of their lives. The routine. There are reflections on loved ones back home, and reports of the stresses and dangers of their days. There are entries about singing and silliness. About discipline and duty.

Like all of us here, they had three things: They had the power of human imagination. They had choice. And they had one another.

Poor Chippie the parakeet: No imagination there...nuh-uh. He not only never saw it coming, he probably couldn't imagine that it would ever be different.

Chippie also couldn't reflect and draw some lesson or hidden gift from his experience.

I'm not saying anyone would or should willingly choose to have distressing, toxic, painful or life-threatening experiences. But I have heard enough people with cancer, for example, say things like, while they would have preferred not to have had cancer and all the suffering that goes with that, they wouldn't want to have to give up what they've learned...In many ways, I've heard people say, cancer was a gift.

And how many of us have heard someone who has cared for and accompanied a loved one on their final journey say through their grief and their tears, "I am so grateful I could be there. It was a privilege..."

I am not trying to wrest some silver lining or happy ending for us out of suffering. I am sharing this perspective because I have borne witness to its truth among you. I have learned from your lives that as hard as anything in this life is, there is still--through the power of human imagination and grace--the ability to unleash possibility and strength from deep within.

When life hits hard and we need to hang on, the second great human-defining quality available to us is the ability to choose. Human imagination and choice. And the choice is as simple as it is stark: we can choose to be weak. Or we can choose to be strong.

Every research study, every testimony to survival and example of coming through an impossible-sounding situation, lifts up the prevailing choice: to be strong. That choice can be motivated by love. It also could arise out of sheer defiance or resolve.

In the late 1980s, the Jewish Community Federation in Rochester, NY sponsored exhibitions and lectures about the Holocaust, Auschwitz and Anne Frank. I worked with a group of older Jewish men and women who had survived the concentration camps. For two years, I was deeply immersed in that history, their stories, the pictures, and I became depressed. And very serious about everything...

One day, I heard Hannah laughing. I knew her story—I had heard her tell it to school children and government officials who visited the exhibition. She was 15 years old when she was sent to Auschwitz. And yet, there she was, standing in the midst of this deeply disturbing exhibition, and she was laughing.

Later, I asked her: How can you do it? How can you still tell a joke? How can you still laugh?

She looked at me and met my seriousness with her own and said: "He took everything from me. My parents, my family, my friends, my youth. When I was rescued from that camp, I was determined that he would never take anything else from me. I choose to laugh. I choose to live my life."

Psychiatrist Viktor Frankel mined his experience in the concentration camps for an understanding of how we make meaning—even in dire suffering. We cannot choose all our experiences. Life happens. Terrible things can happen. But, he observes, we can choose how to respond. He calls it "the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

To choose is also our Unitarian Universalist heritage. In a time of Trinitarian hegemony, there were those who thought differently about the nature of God. These free thinkers bravely asserted their belief. They chose freedom of thought, freedom to seek truth. They were called heretics. One definition of heretic is “one who chooses.” To choose freedom and truth. To choose to endure and to cultivate resiliency are, to my thinking, expressions of our faith.

Hannah gave me back a part of my life that day...

Our encounter illustrates the third thing we need to endure: we need one another.

Poor Chippie didn't have another parakeet to compare notes with about careless owners or surviving being sucked into a vacuum cleaner. (Of course, if he did have an audience, he might have been quite funny in the telling....)

But we do have each other. To tell our stories to. To reach out to. To lean on...

We can borrow faith and strength from one another when it feels as though we just don't have enough to get us through...

That's what we do for each other in community...

So in case you were wondering, there is no better place to be than right here, in this community of faith, when your challenge is simply to endure.

Even if you haven't reached out yet, know that you can. The possibility is there—you can imagine it—that someone will be there for you...

While faith is the belief in things not yet seen, I want to strengthen your faith in the possibility, in the gift, of community right now.

I want to thank Pastor Ray for this exercise as well as the Chippie story. If a room full of strangers at the Boston Foundation annual meeting can do this exercise, we can, too.

I ask you to turn to your neighbor and look them right in the eye. Really look them in the eye. And now say to your neighbor, together:

I choose to be strong.

I know I can reach out.

Good. Now, this is really pushing the envelope. I want you to take your neighbor's hand. And keep looking them in the eye. And now, together, please say to your neighbor:

I will reach out when I need to.

I will share my strength with you.

We will endure together.

Thank you.

When life hits hard—when it sucks us up, washes us out, or blows us dry—we have a choice.

We can reach out for support. We can choose to be strong. We can share our strength with one another. We can endure. And we can keep a song in our hearts.

Yes we can. Yes we will.

Amen.