

A Heart That is Ready for Anything

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First Parish in Brookline

I'm going to start with a bit of a confession. Oh, and that collective sucking in of breath that you just heard all over the sanctuary? That was the search committee going into slight panic mode, so first let me say "Don't worry friends, it's really going to be okay."

But here's the thing: Friday night I had a pretty decent sermon going. I mean one that my preaching professor Dr. Greg Mobley would've called "not half bad," and that was pretty decent praise coming from him! But you know, as the kids say, I just wasn't feeling it. Because, here's the thing, you have invested so much time, so much energy, and, let's be frank, money, into choosing the person you think is just the right candidate for your next senior minister. And, I need to say...I think that too—I think we're a great match! But we're never going to know for sure, if I don't take the first step, the risk to be really vulnerable, to show you the real me. So, yesterday, I just tossed that first sermon and started over. Uh oh, there goes that sucking sound again. Really guys, keep breathing, it's going to be all right.

You see, I *know* how to look good; I was *very, very* well-trained. I grew up in a wealthy, white, suburban, upper middle-class suburb of Boston. My grandparents lived just a few blocks from this church and my favorite aunt and uncle were married right here. The story goes that my aunt's parents, who had an estate around the corner on Warren St., wanted their daughter to be married here, so their guests could walk to the reception. But they were Episcopal. Except, of course, they *knew* people, so they managed to arrange for their Episcopal priest to marry their daughter in the Unitarian church. That's privilege, and entitlement, and that, I have to admit, is how my people roll.

So, I was well-trained by my family, and also attended some expensive private schools, in the culture of wealth and white privilege, the culture of looking really good. Which means I could probably get away with not showing you what's inside. But honestly, that's just not really who I am, (the me you totally deserve to know,) because I have this *conscience*. To give you an example, on the MMPI, one of the many psych tests that you're required to take in preparation for ministry, some of my answers seemed confusing to the examiner. In my interview following the test, I confessed that I stole a lipstick from Woolworths when I was twelve, told white lies occasionally, had been stopped more than once for speeding, and twice was sent to the principal's office. Those incidents still weighed on my conscience. In her report, the psychologist commented that what had appeared to be possible "antisocial tendencies," was actually "a tendency towards an extreme level of honesty." So, integrity, conscience, that's my thing.

You see, I really want to talk about how I came to have this heart that's ready for anything, a heart that has led me into some surprising places for someone from my background. Like, into a women's prison over the past 5 years, where I've developed a close friendship with a young woman whose background could not be more different from my own; starting a charter school (with no school leadership experience) in a poverty-stricken urban area, because I saw the need;

working on behalf of people with serious mental disabilities and immigrants at risk of deportation. It's the very same heart that led me (with my stalwart wife, Zoe) into opening up my life and home to three young people in need, after raising three of my own. I need to tell you how I think my heart came to be that way; it's something I hardly ever talk about, which is that I was born with a hidden disability.

By hidden, I mean, not only is it not visibly evident much of the time now, but it is also something that my family avoided talking about. What was talked about was just to be as normal as possible, to fit in, to not stand out in any way. My disability is a skin blistering condition called Epidermlysis Bulosa Simplex (don't worry it won't be on the final exam!) and it's extremely rare. EB, as it's called, occurs in 1 out of 50,000 people, causing painful skin blisters on any part of the body where there's abrasion. Nine family members of three generations all share this congenital disability, which fortunately improves as we age. It was a real awakening, even a bit shocking, to us when my nieces and nephew were born with EB, and my sister-in-law, a pediatrician, did relentless research, getting her son into a study where the treatment actually seems to be helping him a lot. My family just never thought about shedding light on this disease that way. It was not how we did things.

As a child, EB was hard to hide. I couldn't actively participate in most sports or vigorous activities and it was pretty noticeable, especially on my hands, feet, and face. There was name-calling, laughter, and teasing, of course. No one wanted to hold my hand; the word “cooties” was popular then. I never remember any adult intervening on my behalf; maybe they did, but I don't remember it. And it goes without saying that I never thought of *asking* for help; I definitely never told my parents. I just learned to hide it better. Sucked it up. Avoided a lot of situations and became more introverted. My feelings poured out into journals that became the seeds of my love for writing and storytelling. And my primary feeling was...embarrassment. I wasn't hiding it well enough; I was letting down the team, my imperfection was being noticed.

It wasn't until my 40s that I started to talk about EB openly. I was part of an international anti-bias training organization, the National Coalition Building Institute, where we regularly talked about the ways we had each experienced discrimination, in order to heal from them. The day I got up the nerve, in front of a roomful of people, to tell my story, I openly sobbed for that little girl who didn't have anyone to stand up for her, and I was terrified. But then, the most unexpected thing happened, the applause started; people beamed at me, and thanked me. Witnessing me be that vulnerable allowed them to talk more openly about times *they* had been bullied or felt different, or ashamed of some part of themselves. Something shifted in me that day. I found a place where I belonged; a place where my truth and my big, open heart were not only welcome, they were assets!

“Fitting in and belonging are not the same thing,” says Brene Brown, “and, in fact, fitting in gets in the way of belonging. Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn't require us to *change* who we are; it requires us to *be* who we are.”

The only way for humans to get close enough that we can trust and show up and lean on each other and let things get messy, is to tell our truth, to get real. It is not pretty. But it's the only way

for us to belong to each other. And that’s the only way I know for me to do this work called ministry.

There are so many moments in Naomi Shihab Nye’s story *Gate 4-A* that I love, that move me to tears actually (see story below). I love that Shihab Nye paused before she went to help—so human and so real, right? How she called up other Arabic speakers to talk with the Palestinian woman, just for fun, and found that her father and the woman had ten shared friends...of course! How everyone ate the *mamoul* cookies and they all ended up with powdered sugar all over them. The little girls serving apple juice—that’s the essence of communion, right? Bread and wine, cookies and apple juice, whenever two or three are gathered together in the spirit of love and tenderness. And the medicinal plant sticking out of the woman’s bag, the tradition of staying rooted somewhere. I love that, too.

But the image I can’t get out of my head, the one that I just keep replaying, is the Palestinian woman on the airport floor wailing loudly—she was upset and she was *not afraid to show it*. Something about that picture—the abject, out loud, wailing of anguish and despair—seems marvelous to me. That is *not* the way *my* people are trained. And because of that, what happened? Instead of sitting silently in fear, frozen inside the barrier of language and culture, her wailing, like my sobbing in front of that audience, brought people close to her, brought her help, and community; laughter...even love.

I realize now, that’s the real hidden disability of my people. Our isolation, our embarrassment, and our trying to look good all the time keeps us separate. In that workshop, speaking out in spite of the rules of my upbringing, talking openly about my disability, my heart got a new message. I don’t have to fit in, I belong. Telling my story made me ready for anything. Ready for this. Ready for you.

I heard a great Moth Radio Hour story by Elna Baker, a young Mormon comedian. She talks about how hard it is to be a Mormon in NYC with so many things her religion says “no” to: smoking, drinking, drugs, sex, even coffee. How can a girl have a life in the city without any of that? So, she decides to say “yes” to everything else. She’s at NYU and there are always career fairs for business students, with lots of free trinkets. She discovers that by saying “yes” to their questions she can get really cool stuff! The vendor asks: “Are you an MBA student?” “Yes!” she says. “Are you interested in learning more about Morgan Stanley Dean Whittier?” “Yes!” And by the end she has one of those triangle highlighters with three different colors. She gets so excited that she goes to as many as she can to get free stuff.

Then, one day, she’s at a hotel with a huge conference sponsored by 7-11 stores and she finds a badge on the floor. She puts it on and wanders through the ballroom, where they’re celebrating 75 years of 7-11. She’s making friends and picking up free stuff, when she meets the conference organizer. “Are you having a good time at the conference?” she asks. “Yes!” And she tells the woman she goes to a *lot* of these events and this one is *so well-organized*. She asks if Elna needs tickets to the day’s events and she says “Yes!” So, she gives her tickets to Radio City Music Hall and Madame Toussaud’s and then she asks: “Will I see you on the dinner cruise tonight?” “Yes!

Except that my tickets never came in the mail.” At that, she runs off and brings back four \$150 tickets for a dinner cruise around Manhattan! That night she and three of her friends get all dressed up and go on the cruise—500 7-11 employees...and the four of them. They’re mingling and dancing, doing karaoke, and then there’s this four-course meal.... And at the end of dinner, her friends dare her to make a toast. She doesn’t drink, she’s never made a toast before, but she’s seen movies, so she takes the glass, picks up a knife and “tink, tink, tink.” The whole place goes silent. “I would like to make a toast to 7-11, for giving us 75 years of...*convenience!*” And they yelled: “Woooooooo!!!”

The thing Elna says she loves about saying “yes” is that where you start at the beginning of the day and where you end up can be two totally different places based on the things you say yes to. And that’s kind of the story of my life with a heart that’s ready. I never know where I’m going to end up—coming out as a lesbian in my 40s, going to seminary in my 60s, standing in the pulpit here at First Parish in Brookline! I’ve had so many amazing experiences, gotten close to so many incredible people, and, okay, made plenty of mistakes and my share of messes. But I haven’t missed out, the way I think many of my people have. I haven’t been so careful and polite and reserved. Or paid attention to what’s “just not done,” as my mother would say. And because of that my life has been bigger and richer...in all the best ways!

So, here I am, Brookline, with my disability and my great big heart, my gifts and my flaws, hopeful and a little bit nervous—just ready for anything! I’m beyond excited about this week we will spend together. I can hardly wait to meet all of you and hear your stories, laugh and share, maybe even cry together. All that is needed is to open our hearts...and get ready!

Amen and blessed be.

Gate 4-A, by Naomi Shihab Nye

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been detained four hours, I heard an announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.” Well – one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. “Help,” said the Flight Service Person. “Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.” I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to her haltingly. “*Shu dow-a, Shu-bid- uck Habibti? Stani schway, Min fadlick, Shu-bit- se-wee?*” The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, “You’re fine, you’ll get there, who is picking you up? Let’s call him.” We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her – Southwest.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for fun. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up about two hours. She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies – little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts – out of her bag – and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo – we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie. And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar too. And I noticed my new best friend – by now we were holding hands – had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere. And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate – once the crying of confusion stopped – seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.