

“What’s Stopping Us?”

A Sermon Offered to the Peterborough Unitarian Universalist Church

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The Rev. Shayna Appel

Autobiography in Five Short Chapters, adapted

By Portia Nelson

I

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
I fall in.

I am lost ... I am helpless.
[I am not responsible for being here.]
It takes me forever to find a way out.

II

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.

I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place...
[I am still not responsible for being here.]
It still takes a long time to get out.

III

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.

I still fall in ... it's a habit.
my eyes are open
I know where I am.
[I take responsibility for being here.]
I get out immediately.

IV

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

V

I walk down another street.

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In the slightly imperfect world of Portia Nelson's Autobiography in Five Chapters, there are holes in the sidewalks of life. We fall into them now and again, and are destined to fall into them again, until we learn to take responsibility for our part in being there in the first place. Once we learn to take responsibility for winding up in these holes we are able to get out more quickly until wisdom finally takes hold and guides us first around the hole in the sidewalk, and eventually down another street.

In the slightly imperfect world of Portia Nelson's Autobiography, there is a learning curve. Its progress is gradual but steady, and we are all presumably somewhere on that curve. If I were to venture a guess, it would be that many of us have experienced something of Portia's Autobiography – breakthrough moments in life where something vaguely familiar was holding us back and suddenly, just like that, we were set free. The thing that was stopping us seemed to disappear, in the process of life itself.

Those moments in life are wonderful, and lightening...enlightening even. But those are not the moments I want to talk about this morning, as you may have discerned from the title of this sermon. What I want to talk about this morning is what stops us. What are some of the things that stop us from getting out of the holes we occasionally find ourselves in. Why do we occasionally find ourselves trapped in Chapter Two of Portia's Autobiography, wherein we find ourselves in a familiar hole, but do not know where we are or how we got there and it "still take a long time to get out"?

Over the course of my fifteen plus years in ministry I have had the chance to speak with lots and lots of stopped people and I have been blessed to be part of lots of different stopped systems within churches and other communities. This morning, I'd like to share with you some of what I have learned from those stopped people and those stopped communities, as well as my own experience, in the hopes that we might begin a common, shared, conversation about getting out of the proverbial holes we find ourselves in from time to time.

The three stops I'm going to address this morning are:

- 1) Hearing voices, and thinking they are us!
- 2) Lousy filing systems that result in our past being mis-filed into the present, and;
- 3) Confusion regarding whether we are on the court or in the stands.

To begin, let us confess to one another that we all walk around with a voice in our head. Some of us have more than one and, well, let's just be perfectly honest here...some of us walk around with an entire cast of characters up there! Let's just take a moment and listen for them. How many of you can locate those voices? O.K...for some of you it's the voice asking, "What voice is she talking about?" Got it now?

There's nothing to be ashamed of here. We all have at least one voice. It developed with us from the time we were little children trying to figure out right from wrong, good from bad, trustworthy from not trustworthy. It's the voice that helped protect us from making fools of ourselves - the second time. Because after we did something foolish the first time the voice said, "We're never going to do that again." It's the voice that kept us safe - the second time. Because after we touched the hot stove once, the voice had that all worked out. The next time we got close the voice would yell, "Don't do it!"

My late mother, Gertrude, used to love to re-tell the horror stories she would hear from friends or on the news. She would say something like, "Echh. Likee's son-in-law Marvin got in the car the other day to drive to the store - right around the corner from his house. Anyway, he didn't put on his seatbelt and he was in an accident, and echhh, what a mess they have now." The town dump in Milford, where I live, is right around the corner from my house, and do you know? I cannot drive there without putting my seatbelt on. And do you want to know why? Right. My sweet Yiddisha Momma, olew hascholem, may she rest in peace, now lives inside my head!

But, let's not kid ourselves, we can carry some pretty destructive voices in our heads as well. It's amazing how deeply embedded the voices can be who have uttered the most degrading and hurtful things to us.

The important take-away here is that we HAVE voices in our heads...we ARE NOT the voices in our heads. We forget this and they take over because THEY think they are the experts on everything. Has this ever happened to anyone else here? You wake up in the morning and you're getting ready for your morning shower when you discover a little rash or a bump on your leg and suddenly the voices think they've been to med school and they say something like, "Well, you know what that is don't you? You're a goner!" And suddenly you actually feel sick?

Because we've been walking around with these voices in our heads thinking they are us. They are not us. They don't know anything. They've never lived a day outside of our heads! I'll prove it to you. Next time the voices kick in and say something lovely like, "You don't deserve that, you're not up to that, you couldn't possibly do that," ask the voice(s), "What's your source of information?" Then listen to the silence. It's like turning on a light in a room full of cockroaches! Foom! Just like that, they're gone!

Moral of the story here: we have voices in our heads. They are not us. They would prefer we did not know that. Now we do. So, let's have those voices in our heads without letting them have us. O.K?

Next stop, bad filing systems. When we think of the past, where is that "file", if you will, in relation to us? Behind us, right? And the present is right here, right now.

And the future? Where's that? In front of us, right? The past is behind us, the present is here and now and the future is in front of us, yet to come. Intellectually we get that. Intellectually that makes sense. Intellectually it all lines up in a neat row.

But sometimes the past gets mis-filed and winds up in the present. You know this is happening in your congregation when you hear the seven last words of the church. Anyone know what those are? The seven last words of the church? "We've-never-done-it-that-way-before."

Hey, I've got an idea. In preparation for calling the most awesome settled minister ever to this church, let's shatter our former pattern of giving by, oh, say 35%.

"That's ridiculous!" say the voices in our heads, who now think they are experts in the areas of Stewardship and Development. "You can't do that. It's not REASONABLE," say the voices of reason. Which is funny in and of itself because I'm talking about voices in our heads and there's really nothing reasonable about that, but there you have it. The voices speak, we think they are us, they say it can't be done and so now we need to come up with a reason. And here it is. We'll just grab this file from our past, stick it into our present, and the outcome of our stewardship campaign will look just like it did last year.

"I walk down the street, there's a hole in the sidewalk, I fall in, I am lost...I am helpless."

Or, you know, there's this job opening for a position that we'd really like to have. It's a great opportunity and it's right there in our future like a possibility, if we could only stand here in the present and reach for it. But then the choir of HR specialists starts singing from the rafters of our minds, "That's never going to happen. Forget it. Why bother trying. There are other people more qualified than you." The choir of HR experts sings its little song, we think they are us and so we are off to find a reason they are right. Most of us don't have to go too far to find a historic file of failures...let's just grab that from our past, file it here in our present and insure that tomorrow looks just like yesterday.

At least, that's the way we used to function. But after today, we'll have new options.

"There's a hole in the sidewalk, I see it is there, I still fall in...it's a habit, my eyes are open, I know where I am, I take responsibility for being here and I get out immediately"!

O.K. Final stop. In this season of March Madness, let us consider the game of basketball. Can anyone tell me where this game is played? [On the court.] The game is played on a court. And what happens in the stands? [Watching, judging, complaining, opinionating.] Where are the points scored? [On the court.] Where is

the game won or lost? [On the court.] Can the game be won or lost in the stands? [No.] No. It can not because all the points must be scored or not scored on the court.

Quick question. How many of you just heard the voice in your head say, "Yeah, but people in the stands can influence the game!" Now, what do we say to the voice? "What's your source of information?" May we continue?

The game of basketball is like the game of life. They are both played on the court. Most of the time we sit up in the stands, commenting on the game, judging the game, listening to the little NBA officials in our heads out officiate the actual officials. And there's nothing wrong with being in the stands. It's fun. There's hot dogs and cold beer up there and what's more, you don't get all sweaty or risk taking an elbow to the mouth up there. I love being in the stands, in basketball and in life. And there's nothing wrong with being there.

The problem comes when we don't make the distinction. The difficulty arises when we think we are affecting the game's outcome by simply offering our opinions, our judgments, our criticisms. When we're in the stands thinking we're on the court, it's like driving our cars and steering with the rearview mirror.

"There's a hole in the sidewalk, I saw it was there, I tried to drive around it..."

No, actually you didn't. Your hands were on the rearview mirror! That's why the car went into the hole.

I recently sat in a church meeting with a congregation that is contemplating making physical changes to their sanctuary. The worship committee had laid out a beautiful vision for worship – that it be accessible, flexible, attractive, contemporary. The group was asked to reflect on the vision set forth by the worship committee and discuss the proposed changes in light of that vision. In other words, here's the vision, now tell us how to step into it given the proposed changes that are on deck. But that's not what happened. What happened was that for the next 90 minutes or so we went around the circle as everyone shared their opinion. "I like the pews." Great, but how do the pews help us be accessible, flexible, attractive and contemporary. "I don't think we really need projection capability." Great, but how does that help us be accessible, flexible...you get the drift. Instead of staying on the court and working together to move the vision forward, everyone retreated to the stands, clung to their individual opinions, and at the end of the meeting it could be said that everyone was heard, but absolutely nothing moved forward.

Friends, here's the thing. I hope we've had some fun this morning talking about some of the things that stop us in life. But there's a whole other side to this that's not funny at all. When we get stopped in the game of life, over and over and over again – if we never figure out the part we play in winding up in the hole – if we don't

silence the mind monkeys, get our filing systems in order, and learn the difference between being on the court vs. being in the stands, the cost to our aliveness and our ability to be fully self-expressed is going to be severely hampered, and our capacity to love seriously diminished.

We were not created stopped. We were born into a movement of time that has existed for millions of years. Our capacity to love, to create, to repair, and build up is as endless as we say it is. Our capacity for greatness is as yet unknown. So let's climb up out of those holes we've been hanging out in and let's nurture, let's witness, let's serve and inspire.

Won't you pray with me?

Holy One
Who has given us the breath of life
Today we remember to
Breathe deeply
To rest
To take in
To pause
Before we act...
And then to take in another deep breath poised on the edge
And risk jumping in
Risk taking action
Risk speaking up
Risk using the gifts we have been given
So that at the end of our life we can say with absolute clarity that
No part of our existence was wasted in fear of failure
Or fear of success.
Hold us,
Prepare us the way to begin to offer the gift of our
Awakened presence
Full of love and light today.
These and the prayers of our hearts we lift up now
In the silence...
Amen

By Tamara Lebak

