

## There Is Blessing in the Leaving

Pentecost 7C—July 3, 2016

*[This transcript was meant for a spoken performance. It is not optimized for a reading experience.]*

*Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don't be impressed with yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.*

—Gal. 6:4–5

Will you pray with me? Brilliant God, we light the light of a new idea. It is the light of our coming together. It is the light of our growing; to know new things, to see new beauty, to feel new love. Amen! May it be so!

Holy Moses! Jan Richardson's poem, which was read a few moments ago, leaped off the page at me when I found it a few days ago. It was my poem. They were my words. I don't mean that Jan Richardson plagiarized my work, but I could have written those same words. They dredged up such deep feelings and memories in me.

It was my story. Do I dare tell it? I even went so far as to speak to Michael (our minister) and asked, "Do I dare share my story from the pulpit this Sunday?" His answer was, "Yes. It is not just your story but also the story of others. The details may be different, but we all have had the difficult choice to stay or to move on at some point in our lives. Tell your story and trust that these people will understand."

So here I go; feeling a bit like being on the edge of a cliff with a bungee cord tied to my waist, trusting that the thin cord will do its job and save me from crashing head-first into the ground.

From Jan Richardson's poem:

*You thought the blessing  
would come  
in the staying.  
In casting your lot  
with this place,  
these people.  
In learning the art  
of remaining,  
of abiding.*

I cast my lot at the tender age of 21. Over the next 26 years I was married, had 4 children and 1 grandchild; I had a home and looked forward to getting older in it with my husband surrounded by our growing family. I figured that I had learned the art of abiding and staying.

But sometimes real life can turn into a soap opera. A simple, pedestrian life can suddenly change through circumstances into a real-life drama. At age 45 I met a woman, a woman who was a lesbian. She came into my life at a time of incredible loneliness and deep need. She befriended me when I most needed a friend. I felt safe with her and leaned on her when days were hard. She listened to my pain, held me when I felt alone and supported me through some of the worst times of my life. The first time that we met face to face should have been the last time because, suddenly, with her, all the love songs I had ever heard in my life made sense.

From Jan Richardson:

*And now you stand  
on the threshold  
again.  
The home you had  
hoped for,  
had ached for,  
is behind you—  
not yours, after all*

I believed that “the blessing would come in the staying,” that an overriding reason for staying would somehow appear and outweigh all the strange, new feelings that I was having. But eventually I arrived at the threshold of remaining in a comfortable place I knew and denying the truth about myself, or of stepping out into an unknown world and living my life with integrity. In the end, integrity won out. The choice to leave, while painful, was the only one with which I could live. And so I moved out of my home of 20 years with very little, no job, no money, and no place to go; as in today’s Gospel, “... like a lamb in the midst of wolves. Carrying no purse, no bag, no sandals...”

Jan Richardson goes on:

*The clarity comes  
as small comfort,  
perhaps,  
but it comes:  
illumination enough  
for the next step.*

How long I waited for clarity, for a sign that I had made the right choice. At times it was sheer agony. I missed my home, being with my children daily and the security of being married. For months, I prayed for the voices that nagged at me constantly to be still. I longed for comfort from the punishing that came from within me and from family and friends without. The future that I had envisioned was gone and now I struggled to see what the future would look like. From time

to time, through my partner's eye, through the new friends I had made and through my adopted community of faith, I would catch a glimpse of the lights enough to light the way just a little so I could go on.

Quoting from Jan Richardson:

*As you go,  
may you feel  
the full weight  
of your gifts  
gathered up  
in your two hands,  
the complete measure  
of their grace  
in your heart that knows  
there is a place  
for them,  
for the treasure  
that you bear?*

As I continued to move ever so slowly forward, the lights, like when you come into the city, became brighter and closer together. In therapy and as I began a time of discernment for ministry, I began, as in today's letter of Paul, "to make a careful exploration of whom [I was] and the work [I had] been given". I started to realize that while the journey I was on looked completely different from what I had anticipated, I was not on the wrong path. In the support and encouragement of community and in the unconditional love of faithful friends and loving family, my heart knew that there was a place for the treasure that I bore. I found that place within the United Church in the service of God's people and ministering to all God's ministers, ordained or not.

From Jan Richardson:

*I promise you  
there is a blessing  
in the leaving,  
in the dust shed  
from your shoes*

Today, when I look at childhood photos of my now-adult children, I (like many parents) wonder, "How did they grow up? When did the change happen? How did so much change and so many years go by unnoticed?" But the same thing was true in my own life.

It is only in the looking back that I can appreciate how far I have come and see that there has been "blessing in the leaving". Had I opted to stay in my comfortable place, I would not have

been challenged to change, to grow and to become. Had I not followed my heart, I would have been like a rosebud that never blooms—pretty but, sadly, never fully blossoming.

In the leaving, I have been introduced a rainbow of people and experiences that have shown me a life far beyond anything I had envisioned for myself. In the leaving, I have experienced the blessing of my children and the love of good and generous women who have taught me that love is not fragile. In the leaving, I have been affirmed by friends and community who have shown me my worth and the boundless goodness of our God.

And Jan Richardson ends:

*as you walk toward home—  
not the one you left  
but the one that waits ahead,  
the one that already  
reaches out for you  
in welcome, in gladness  
for the gifts  
that none but you  
could bring.*

I am eternally thankful for the countless, irreplaceable gifts from my 26 years of “staying” and yet I can’t imagine who or where I would be without the many gifts of the past 12 years of “leaving”. The home which I left now seems like the home of my childhood: a place where I grew up, where I learned much and from where I set out on my own journey. The place where I now dwell is a place where I feel supported and encouraged to be all that I can be.

Today is Pride Sunday when doors are flung open and everyone—however one defines oneself— is welcomed in. It is a day when we, as in today’s first reading, “stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed” and “work for the benefit of all”. The home that “waits ahead” is a home that invites me in and welcomes me, as it does you, to do “my/our creative best” and offers you, me and everyone the shelter of God’s eternal, unconditional love so that, as in the words of Paul, “at the right time we will harvest a good crop”. And this is good news indeed!