

These words from poet Joy Harjo:

“I take myself back, fear.
You are not my shadow any longer.
I won’t hold you in my hands.
You can’t live in my eyes, my ears,
my voice, my belly, or in my heart,
my heart, my heart, my heart.”

There’s what a poet can do with the music of words: my heart, my heart, my heart,
echoing the drum that lives just under the breast-bone of each one here.

When I was a child in the 1950’s, a family trip to Philadelphia took us to the Franklin Institute, home of the Giant Heart. It was called the “Engine of Life” exhibit—a brand new exhibit back then, and meant to be temporary, but it was such a hit, “temporary” has turned into sixty-plus years. It’s a four-ton heart, made out of lumber, chicken wire & paper mache—two stories high—a heart that would fit a human being 220 feet tall, twice as tall as our Statue of Liberty lady. You can still go there and climb up into that heart and follow the path of the blood through the four huge chambers while the soundtrack all around you, and resonating through you, is the booming of a four-ton heartbeat.

Now, of course, you can go on Youtube and see kids scrambling through the Giant Heart—exclaiming as they explore the room-like ventricles and auricles and the major arteries and getting way ahead of their parents, who are often slowed down by the stairs and narrow turns.

A Giant Heart. It welcomes everyone, and shows us what’s going on right here, inside—because we can’t look at our own hearts, close as they are, though we go through our days depending on them.

You can almost get a view of your heart, if you’ve ever had an echocardiogram. It’s a kind of ultrasound procedure. Maybe some of you have experienced that. You’re lying down, watching the screen and suddenly a rather ghostly image appears—an image of your heart in motion.

I did that once. And there it was—the little pump that’s kept me alive through it all—the awakening years, the searching years, the rigorous years; the awful aching and the joyful leaping.

There it was, with its delicate quartet of valves that flutter a hundred-thousand times a day—busy valves with charming names (mitral, tricuspid, aortic, pulmonic) and that, after all these years, still pulse in tempo: “my heart, my heart, my heart.”

I was overtaken by a kind of reverence. I said to the image on the screen, “Thank you. Bless you. How steadfast you are.”

It was a moment of gratitude and also of something else...what? Promise? Rededication? Maybe, simply, a hope—that this heart might be what it is meant to be, learn to do what it’s meant to do in this brief lifetime.

In Ezekiel, God says: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

There are three things I know about our hearts.

First: I know they will, one day, stop. Hard as it is to grasp, each of our hearts will—sooner or later—just quit. Remembering this is very clarifying...I had a ministry colleague who kept a sign hidden inside her pulpit, where only she could see it, a sign like the sign poet-cleric John Donne had inside his pulpit in the 1600’s: It said “Preach as one dying, to others who will also die”—which means, essentially, “Cut to the chase. Lean in.” Keep the main thing the main thing.

Second thing I know: Well before our hearts stop pumping, they will break. Many times, most likely. Because life breaks the heart. Does it not. Hearts are broken by loss, failure, sorrow, violence, betrayal, grief, regret. And as Parker Palmer—Quaker teacher and author of Healing the Heart of Democracy—as Palmer says, there are two ways a heart can break.

A heart can blow apart. It can explode like a hand grenade, blast into a million pieces like shrapnel, hurting yourself and everyone around. (Is that what happens when a “heart of stone” breaks?)

And then, Palmer says, there’s another way a heart can break—where it doesn’t shatter, but it opens. It softens and opens. Maybe this is how a “heart of flesh” breaks. More like when a ripe garden tomato splits its skin, or like what happens to the knees of your favorite jeans after they’ve been washed & worn, washed & worn till the denim “gives”—like dampened Kleenex.

A heart can break in that way. In such a way that it becomes more capacious, more able, more able to hold both the terrible pain and the breathtaking goodness in our world.

Years ago, the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker told her own story about this. It's a story that, for me, shines a light on this second way—the way of the broken-open, capacious heart.

Rebecca was in a time of heartbreak—divorce, depression, anger and self-loathing—a constriction of the heart she couldn't fight or think her way out of. She decided the only solution—was death.

It was late winter. She was living near Seattle, on a hill above Lake Union. She would go down to the cold lake, walk into the water, swim out, let go, and go home to God. Here's how Rebecca tells it*:

She said, "I had no second thoughts. I was set on my course...I crested the familiar rise and began the descent to the welcoming water when I was caught short by a barrier that hadn't been there before. It looked like a long line of oddly shaped sawhorses, laid out to the left and to the right...In the dark I couldn't see a way to get around either end, but it looked like I could climb over the middle. I quickened my pace, impelled by grief...As I got closer, the dark forms...seemed to be moving. I squinted to understand what I was seeing.

The odd bunched shapes were a line of human beings bundled up in parkas and hats. The stick shapes weren't sawhorses. They were telescopes. It was the Seattle Astronomy Club.

Before I could make my way through the line, one of them looked up from his eyeglass and, presuming me to be an astronomer, said with enthusiasm, "I've got it focused perfectly on Jupiter. Come, take a look."

I didn't want to be rude or give away my reason for being there, so I bent down and looked through the telescope. There was Jupiter, banded red and glowing! "Isn't it great?" he said. It was great. Jupiter was beautiful through the telescope.

This amateur astronomer...didn't know me...He assumed I was there because the night sky was a wonder to behold. Across the sheen of dark water, the lights of the city shimmered. Overhead, the sky was wild with pinpoints of fire. I couldn't kill myself in the presence of these people who had gotten up in the middle of a cold...night, with their home-built Radio Shack telescopes, to look at the planets and the stars."

Then, what came to Rebecca was a song she had sung in church choir, with words she knew by heart:

"Sure on this shining night/ Of star made shadows round,
Kindness must watch for me/ This side the ground...."

She said: “The music, the amateur scientists, and the splendid night sky, kept me in this world.”

And then she cautions us. She says: “It would be wrong to think of this moment as one in which joy triumphed over despair, or love of life defeated desire for death. Such a view assumes that bad feelings need to be...suppressed by...better feelings...I did not defeat...anguish and despair because I saw something more lovely and good. Rather, I became able to feel more. My feeling broadened. Pain, sadness, and despair were not eliminated or overcome. I embraced them within a larger heart. All the feelings and memories I had couldn't be held by a decision to die. I could only hold everything with a decision to live.”

Rebecca said: “There is a web of connection we live in that is greater than sense can tell.”

The web of connection greater than sense can tell.

This is the heart's domain.

It's the heart that knows how to live in the oneness.

Ego can't get us there. Intellect alone can't either.

Intellect work by division; the heart works by addition.

When God said to Solomon “Ask for something, anything, and it is yours,” Solomon asked for an understanding heart—a “listening heart.” And so it was. As it's written: “God gave Solomon great understanding, and a heart as broad as the sand upon the seashore.” (I Kings 4:29-33)

Maybe at the end of life the question that will be asked of our hearts will be: “How much of the world did you let in?” Your tired, your poor, your refugees, your seekers? How about your angry, your greedy, your hostile, your stoney-hearted? Let them in too? It's a stretch, isn't it?—but it does seem to be the hope that's held out to us

Which brings me to the third thing I know about the heart.

The heart can be cultivated. (And by now you know I'm not talking about the fist-size muscle that will one day quit on us—but our core, our deep self, the spiritual magnetic center in each of us that can align with the electromagnetic field that is God.

This heart can be cultivated. We can practice.

It's what you do together here, regularly, with hands and eyes and ears and voices. It's what we practice in centering prayer when we invite the mind to drop down into our heart center, like a pebble falling into a sacred pool—letting ripples move out into the world.

It's what we do when we pray, as Julie Madden did in the reading we heard early in this worship:

“Let our hearts soften and break and expand and become part of the one, universal heart centered in God’s infinite love.”

It’s a precious possibility—the possibility that the beating of our own hearts can actually be synchronized with the beating of a great universal heart, and that we could go through our days, walk through our world this way—that we could move through this very life—with its switchbacks and narrow turns and surprising vistas, like we’re kids exploring the inside of the Giant Heart of God.

Blessed Be. And amen.

Kathleen Tucker 3/11/2018

*Rebecca Parker’s story from [Proverbs of Ashes](#) by Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock