

Keeping Promises
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Cheap words are easily given, cost nothing.
And the subject of our story today -
let's call her Robbie -
she knew it well.
Cheap words easily spent.
She made promises with ease,
and kept them rarely.
Cheap words easily spent.

Robbie had lots of broken promises hanging out on her lawn.
Lots and lots.
And like the poet, she didn't understand why they didn't love her.
She had given them birth,
so many of them.
Broken promises.

They included broken promises to herself:
yes, I'll eat more vegetables and less sugar.
Yes, I'll walk a half-hour each day.
Oh, I'll read more and watch less TV.
I won't buy things I don't need.

But they also included broken promises she'd made to others:
everything from "sure, I'll be there"

to, "of course, I'll love you forever."
They included commitments to be a certain kind of person,
and to not be another kind of person.
And sometimes she kept them for a few years,
and sometimes for a few days,
and sometimes they were gone the moment she uttered them.

Cheap words, easily given.
It's not a new phenomenon; the anthem words are 500 years old.
Hypocrisy, broken promises, well,
in some religious traditions it goes right back to the beginning:
of course, we won't eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.
We give you our word. We promise.

We've long grabbled with the reality of broken promises and cheap words.

Robbie grabbled with this deeply.
Some days, she felt incredible shame about it, a sense that she wasn't good enough to make or keep them and never would be.
Other days, she lived in blissful ignorance.
"Live in the moment!" she'd say,
as if that was an excuse.

On occasion, she'd realize that part of her problem was
she made too many promises,
and she'd try to only make promises she knew she'd
keep,
which meant, sometimes, none at all.

And sometimes, she saw clearly that forces conspired
against her.

She wanted to keep that promise, she really did.

But there was an accident on the highway, and the
detour took forever.

She fell out of love, and tried to get it back, but honesty
was stronger than denial.

She tried to resist the impulse to buy stuff,
but the culture in which we swim makes it so hard to
resist.

So hard to hold an unpopular opinion,
to resist the ridicule and the pressure of a structure that
was so much larger than she was.

Robbie wasn't an addict. But she knows folks who were.
Some in recovery, some who aren't.

And she resonated, sometimes, with their description of
their experience:

they do not want another drink.

It doesn't make them happy.

But they do it anyway.

A physical compulsion.

She understood.

Broken promises littered her yard while she slept:
regrets and wishes to be different.

So she tried harder.
She tried so hard to keep promises.
She'd make daily check-lists and reminders.
Joined circles of accountability,
tied string around her wrist.
Worked hard at it.

She was the cowboy, the robot, the clown.
She tried so hard.
She'd make promises to be someone different,
to live a different kind of life,
and then, inevitably, it didn't work.
The elephant was not cheered up.
Not brought out of her sadness.

The promises were not kept.
And Robbie was not known as a "woman of her word."
Cheap words, substance of wind.

Any of you ever felt like this?
Like you want to be different, you make resolutions, or
plans, or goals,
promises to yourself and others,
but you don't keep them?
Maybe not, like Robbie, all the time, but every once in a
while?
Anyone ever feel like that?

I know I have.
I've made promises I haven't kept.
And I had my reasons, usually.
Sometimes I couldn't tell you the reason, I just didn't do
it.
Said I would, didn't.

Any of you ever been there?

It's so frustrating.
Shameful, debilitating.
And you wonder, how will my life ever improve,
when I can't keep my commitments?

Robbie grew increasingly frustrated with herself.
Felt that not just her words were cheap,
but that she herself was cheap.
Worthless as her broken promises.

So one day, she did something she hadn't done more
than a dozen times in two dozen years:
she walked into church.
She hadn't make a promise to anyone to do it,
just did it on a whim, as much as anything.

And the preacher that day - it wasn't a Unitarian
Universalist church,
it was some other kind of place, more orthodox -
the preacher that day read the passage from Genesis

about Abraham and the covenant -

you know the one, some of you:

This is my covenant: you will be my people, and I will be your god.

A big promise.

And the minister talked in the sermon about this covenant,

and told everyone, Robbie included:

God is bad at keeping promises. So were the Israelites.

Robbie's ears perked up.

She was bad at promises, too.

The minister talked about how God forgot the people and they were sold into slavery in Egypt,

how the people forgot God and worshiped the golden calf, or the gods of Rome and Greece,

how the leaders forgot the poor,

and God let the enemies overrun the people.

A history of broken promises.

Robbie felt less alone.

The preacher then started talking about how we, and by that he meant, it seemed, his congregation, were different, how they kept their promises, and Robbie tuned out.

I guess this isn't the place for me.

I'm not good enough.

She slipped out after the last hymn and never returned.

About three days later, she sat in front of her window as the snow, gently fell from the sky.

She had nowhere to be, and the snow was lovely.

Soft and gentle and covering over the brown scrub, the littered trash, the scars of the earth, in a soft and lovely blanket of beauty.

She held in her hands a mug of tea, and watched.

The world was quiet.

And her heart was quiet.

Her mind was quiet.

And a thought, gently, entered her mind:

About that sermon.

It occurred to her that God broke god's promises,

it occurred to her that the people broke their promises.

And yet, they didn't write each other off.

They came back, over and over and over and over again.

They made amends, they tried again.

They forgave and began again in love.

It occurred to her, and she didn't have a fancy theological education,

but it occurred to her that maybe the point of the reading

wasn't about how the Jews screwed it up,

the point was about something they got right:

that covenant remained even when you weren't perfect about keeping the promises.

On both ends.

It occurred to her that, maybe, just maybe,

she wasn't the only one who broke promises.

I mean, if God broke God's promises,
then maybe she didn't need to be quite so hard on
herself.
Just maybe.

And she looked at the snow falling outside her window.
And she was still and quiet.
And she breathed in and out.

...

And then something else came to her.
Not a thought as much as a feeling.
A sense sublime, you might call it.
The feeling was this:
She was OK.

She kept making promises to be someone else.
To be thinner, fitter, smarter, stronger, more this or more
that,
different than she was.
To be someone else.
She kept trying to pretend to be a cowboy, a clown, a
robot.

But maybe that wasn't the work.
Maybe that was a mistake.
Maybe, maybe, the work was:
be yourself.
Be Robbie.
Fully, authentically, totally, yourself.

That integrity - that's a big word - integrity wasn't being
some other person.

It was being you.

Being you.

Embracing your own location in the world, your own site
of marginality as a place to challenge the world.

Maybe, she felt, watching the snow come down,
maybe the very reason she hadn't kept her promises to
herself

to be more minimalist, to be this or that,
was that those very promises came from social pressure,
from expectations of others -
and not from her own heart.

She was a weathervane, blowing whichever way the wind
pointed her.

To have integrity meant to be . . . herself.

From her heart.

From her soul.

And she looked out the window, and was terrified.

To be her own person?

That's frightening.

She felt that she didn't really know herself.

Didn't really know who she was or what she was for.

All her life had been seeped in a kind of consumer
mentality.

Buy this thing to be this person.
Do this program, and you'll be like that.
Take a little from here, and a little from there, and then
do what you will with it.
There was no depth.
No rock on which to stand,
no place to say, here I am, this is me.

Integrity. Authenticity. Covenant.
These were big frightening words, and Robbie wasn't
sure what to do with them.
But she knew she needed to stop making promise after
promise after promise.
Needed to stop consuming promises as if they were
cocktail shrimp in the all-you-can-eat buffet.

She needed to make and keep only one promise:
be the person your heart, your core self, wishes yourself
to be.

That's it.
Be the person your heart, your core self, wishes yourself
to be.

That's the one promise, the only one worth making and
the only one worth keeping.

The covenant with your own being.
If you believe in God, you can say that the promise to be
your own true self

is the promise to be the person that God calls you to be.
But if you don't believe, then just leave that part out.
The covenant with your own being.
To hear and head the voice still and small that remains,
in storm and rain, singing.

As Robbie looked out over the snow, she felt a sense of
peace,
but also, release.
She began to cry.
She began to let go of all the broken promises crowding
out her life and her truth.
I will be myself.

And when she entered again the world,
when the snow was blown and school was back on,
she realized this wasn't going to be easy either.
She realized that, sometimes, by being her own true self,
she would have to live a counter-cultural life.
Go against the forces of conformity.
But because she was doing it from her heart,
rather than attraction to another fad,
it was easier than before.
She realized, too, that she would sometimes find herself
on the margins of society - intentionally isolated from the
mainstream values all around her,
and that this margin could be a powerful source of
resilience and resistance,
a place that might actually change the world, or at least,
at least,

invite others to the margins with her.

She realized it was a marginalization of joy, not of oppression.

She realized that she wanted to spend time with people who were authentically themselves, too,

with real friends,

who put aside costumes, and were there in their own skin,

in times of sadness and in times of joy.

And she decided, after a few weeks, to give church a try again.

It still wasn't a Unitarian Universalist church, but it was a liberal, covenantal church.

They explained, when she came in, that they believed in covenant.

That meant, yes, they had expectations and rules, but they weren't perfect.

And sometimes folks screwed up, but if folks would make amends, there was forgiveness.

It meant that the church wasn't a consumer good.

It wasn't a buffet of things to choose from, and you didn't pay a fee for service.

It was a covenant, between the people who gathered, to be there for each other.

Despite and because of everything that would happen.

That people were expected to be real here, to bring their true heart,

and to lay aside their costumes and masks.

To be a people of promise, and who kept that promise:

we will be real. We will love ourselves and each other.
You are somebody.
You are the person, deep down, you should be.
And the promise is to be that somebody.

And in the first snow of the year,
each year, she remembered, for years and years to
follow,
the covenant she had made with herself.
She did not always live up to it.
Let's be clear.
But she made one promise, and understood it as her life-
long work.
To be her own true self,
to be love and to love others as they are, for their own
true self.

And in this way, and through this living, she became what
we would call
a person of integrity.
A whole person. A real person. A real friend. She became
awake to her true calling;
not someone else's, hers.

This morning, I offer you this story as a sign post.
I ask you to make one promise of integrity: to be
yourself, the person your heart calls you to be.
Because of that promise, I ask you to resist the culture
that tells you to be someone else.
To live on the margins in joy.

And I ask you to remember that this church, like the one
Robbie found,
is a covenantal community: not a consumer good.
A place and a people of integrity, where we are ourselves
from a place of love.
I ask you to remember that you are a covenant, a person
of worth, and not a consumer good, either.
I ask you to let go of all the distractions and messages
that arise in service to some other truth,
and be true to the north star of your own conscience and
your own longing for authenticity and love.
To come awake to your own reason, your own heart,
your own ministry, your own power.
To find and love your own core being,
and to love that person, as you are and as you can be.
To make one promise:
to be the person your heart wishes you to be.

May it be so, and may you know that you are loved, and
worthy, of this great work.
Amen.