

The Things We Hide
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Pity the poor Rev. Barzillai Frost, droning on in his pulpit at the First Parish in Concord, Massachusetts, back in the 1830s. Ralph Waldo Emerson, his most brilliant and soon to be famous parishioner, sits in the upper balcony, peering down and fidgeting restlessly in his discontent. Snow is falling outside, each snowflake a testament to the wonder of creation.

“The snow storm was real; the preacher merely spectral,” Emerson laments.

Poor, poor Barzillai Frost, immortalized forever as a mere ghost of a man who sorely tempted Emerson to go to church no more.

Emerson, ever the gentleman, did not name the offending preacher in his famous Divinity School Address he delivered to the senior class at Harvard in 1838. But there has never been any doubt that Barzillai Frost was the accused. “The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life, -- life passed through the fire of thought.” These were Emerson’s immortal words.

But Frost, this epitome of the false preacher, “He had lived in vain,” Emerson charged. “He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned.”

The capital secret of this profession called ministry is to convert life into truth. This was the core of Emerson’s message to the six soon-to-be ministers of the class of 1838.

Life converted into truth. What a powerful charge to any of us. Words spoken long before life converted into lies and repackaged into memoirs came to be infinitely more marketable than the truth. But oh what a struggle we have known since Emerson’s days. Should we get touchy feeling? Should we break hearts open? How much of our own guts do we spill before there’s a mess that can’t be cleaned up?

We live in a time when everything seems to be more on display than not. Everyone blogs now – well, almost everyone. We can share every intimate detail of our lives to millions of strangers through live journals. We can twitter and tweet each mundane waking moment. Is anything left to mystery?

The nineteenth century Swiss philosopher Henri Frederic Amiel writes, “Let mystery have its place in you; do not be always turning up your whole soil with the ploughshare of self-examination, but leave a little fallow corner in your heart ready for any seed the winds may bring, and reserve a nook of shadow for the passing bird; keep a place in your heart for the unexpected guests, an altar for the unknown God. Then if a bird sing among your branches, do not be too eager to take it. If you are conscious of something new – thought or feeling, wakening in the depths of your being – do not be in a hurry to let in light upon it, to look at it; let the

springing germ have the protection of being forgotten, hedge it round with quiet, and do not break in upon its darkness; let it take shape and grow ... Sacred work of nature as it is, all conception should be enwrapped by the triple veil of modesty, silence and night.”

All things that come into being need mystery and modesty. They need darkness and silence, says Amiel. Some things need to be hidden so that they can be left to seed, to be nurtured and then to grow and blossom.

This Friday morning I sat in that same location where Emerson had fidgeted in the balcony and Barzillai Frost had bored his congregation to death. I sat in the pews of the First Parish in Concord where I had been ordained, where I had shared fifteen years of joys and sorrows with a community I loved, where I had heard my first call to ministry. I sat with my own children and mourned as two of my dearest friends said their final goodbyes to their beautiful daughter. This past week, at the age of twenty, their beloved daughter had taken her life.

It was a Jewish service led by a rabbi from a few towns over. But First Parish had graciously opened its doors to my friends when it was clear that the small chapel in the local funeral home would hardly fit the hundreds of people who would come to mourn the loss of one so young. There in the front of the sanctuary, where scores of children normally gather to hear stories during Sunday worship services, stood a lone casket holding the body of one precious child.

Emerson’s ghost whispered to me from the balcony: “Deal out to the people your life passed through the fire of thought.”

I can tell you that I have lived, loved, grieved and cried a river since early Tuesday morning when I received my friend’s e-mail that his daughter, who has been closely connected to my family since she was eleven, had died. I am still in shock. I cannot believe it is real, even though I have seen her casket lowered into the ground, even though my children, my husband and I have each shovelled dirt upon her grave. Still, I hear the music of her voice and her laughter in the background of my life, as it has always been there. Not up close, but always distant, coming from the other room as the children played, and we adults talked long into the night. It was always something I expected to hear deepen and mature as it intertwined with the music of the voices of my own children.

For the past month I’ve been putting together a list of the kinds of things we hide. We come into community and, whether we feel whole or broken, there are always things we hide from each other or from ourselves. Perhaps because, as Amiel writes, there are some things that need silence. Some things require mystery. Yet I wonder about the things that would do better in the light.

There are the addictions and abuse we live with, and the recoveries that we find hard to openly share.

We hide our class and our incomes. We’re embarrassed by our lack of means or by the fact that we have too much. There are members of our own congregation who go silently hungry, who

only come to church when they have enough bus fare or enough change to put into the offering. And there are those among us who live well, yet regret our privilege.

Many of us worry that we will be found out for our lack of education. We fear we are not smart enough to fit in here. Our speech is not eloquent enough; our writing is not good enough; we don't feel well read. I can tell you, that the bar can be painfully high here. You are all so much smarter than me.

We can hide our feelings of inadequacy, and bolster our outward appearance with false self-assurance. How many of us live with the imposter syndrome, fearing that any day now we will be caught and exposed for who we really are?

Then there's the anger, the impatience, the perfectionism and the unwillingness to forgive that we'd rather not expose. There are the silent killers of pain, grief and depression that we hide with fake cheerfulness. "How are you doing?" "Oh, just great!"

What an awful list, eh? Oh blessed are you who have nothing to hide, who know no inadequacies. I'll admit that I am not among you. Just give me a pen and I can place a checkmark next to nearly every item on the list.

I did not realize that I would find myself standing here today holding in my heart unspeakable grief. Do I lay it out before you or do I keep it locked away? I promise you that I am fine, my family is fine and we are grateful for the strength and support we find in each other. Please don't worry about me. I worry more about all of you. To speak of the suicide of a child is to stir up many emotions. I know that far too many of us have had our lives touched – or nearly touched – by such an unspeakable loss. I know that far too many of us have had moments when life was too great a burden to bear.

But I can't sweep all that under the carpet and hide it today. Because I need to tell you this: So many of you have shown me what it means to rise out of the depths of despair and go on living. You have shown me that courage is possible, even while strength remains elusive. You have shown me how to gracefully ride the waves of emotion, because this is what it means to be among the living. There is light and there is darkness, and we live with the partial shadows and the passing clouds.

I do not know what caused my young friend to take her life. She was very loved and very close to her parents. She left behind no clues, except a painful shyness. None of us know what she kept locked inside her heart. Perhaps we can only ever see but a glimmer of what anyone hides inside themselves. How impervious our bodies can be. What masques we can wear.

To convert our lives into truth takes tremendous courage. We have to learn to trust and to take chances. We have to find the balance between self-exposure and the need for the silent places where seeds can grow. I wish I had a formula to offer. But what I've learned is that the answers only come through day-by-day experimentation. You reach out, you uncover a bit, you entrust yourself into beloved community, one small piece at a time. These tiny uncoverings that we share with each other are precious gifts.

When we receive these gifts with gratitude and love we may be saving lives.

I want to ask you to do something for me and for each other today. I want to ask you to take this moment to honour each other's humanity. There is this beautiful word you've often heard me say: Namaste. It means the light within me honours the light within in you. I invite you to share with each other this simple, healing word. Namaste.

May it be so.

Amen. Blessed Be. Namaste.