

The Vows You Have To Break
Rev. David A. Morris
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks
January 6, 2019

On New Year's Day, when I looked at my online New York Times, the first three articles I came across were: "6 Ways to Eat Better in 2019," "7 Ways to Age Well in 2019," and "4 Ways to Be Happier in 2019."

This sermon is not about New Year's resolutions, although those are promises we often have to be emotionally prepared to break. I can tell you my own "be more punctual in 2019" resolution has already suffered substantial damage. Do you have any like that? If so, you may want to offer yourself the grace of hearing this note a friend shared from the wonderful street minister Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber: "Yearly reminder: There is no resolution that if kept will make you more worthy of love. You, as your actual self, not as some made-up ideal self, are already worthy."

So the vows we have to break aren't the annual kind. Nor are they the kind of promises that are so often part of public life—casually made, fingers-crossed promises that both speakers and listeners know aren't going to be fulfilled in reality. Whether it's "Mexico will pay for the wall," or "I'm going to provide universal, single-payer healthcare for all Americans," political promises are statements of aspiration. They are not meant to be taken literally, as commitments to actually accomplish something—only to try.

Personal promises can be like this, too—the kind of promise that either silently or out loud includes prefatory words like "I'm going to do my best to" or postscripts like "to the best of my ability." Aspirational statements like this aren't necessarily insincere; they're often statements of very genuine intention or hope, but they are *aspirations*—promises we *mean* and *want* to keep, but know we might not. When we fall short on such promises, it's relatively easy to ask forgiveness or absolve ourselves of responsibility—we tried our best, but sometimes things just don't work out. I don't mean this sarcastically or judgmentally. We genuinely can't help breaking some promises; limitations are a fundamental aspect of humanity.

Yesterday afternoon I spent a wonderful couple of hours watching "Mary, Queen of Scots," a story that is absolutely littered with broken promises. Vows of undying loyalty; marriage vows; promises of lifetime protection; commitments to alliances—in the political world of the Tudor and Stuart royal families, such promises fell left and right, easy prey to ambition, power, religious bigotry, or fear. This kind of broken promise is also all too common in our contemporary world: promises that were made to gain advantage in the first place, promises that are broken because they're no longer convenient or profitable.

There's a difference between these promises people break all the time and the ones poet David Whyte describes as the promises we need to break. The vows we have to break are promises that we've made and kept, promises we're still keeping now, promises that we earnestly, genuinely keep faith with. When we made these promises, we were more than sincere; we were devoted. We identify ourselves by them; we believe they make us who we are. Whether they were ever spoken aloud or not, we're living by them, and keeping them feels like a matter of integrity.

Perhaps you've made a promise like one of these; perhaps you're keeping faith with one like them now.

I promise that I'll always put your needs first.

I promise to provide for my family the way my father or mother did—or the way my father or mother never were able to do.

I promise to make up for all the hurt you've felt in your life.

I promise that I'll never let myself get angry.

I promise that I will take care of you at home, no matter what happens.

To make amends for what I've done, I promise never to resist what you say you need from me.

I will always take you back.

I will always love you just the way I do now, no matter how either of us may change.

I will always be there for you.

Do you know the kind of promise I'm talking about? Do you have any promises like that in your life? When we make them, they seem healthy, right, and good; they can lead us to do good things.

But sometimes, these are the promises David Whyte warns we may have to break because even as we're living by them, they may not be serving the life that is inviting us. Such promises can become prisons, chaining us to habits, to situations, or to people that don't serve the deep needs of our own lives—and if we're truthful, probably aren't best anymore for the person we made them to, either.

David Whyte speaks of this deeper life, which he describes as our true life, in a poem called "All the True Vows."

All the true vows
are secret vows

the ones we speak out loud
are the ones we break.

There is only one life
you can call your own
and a thousand others
you can call by any name you want.

Hold to the truth you make
every day with your own body,
don't turn your face away.

Hold to your own truth
at the center of the image
you were born with.

Those who do not understand
their destiny will never understand
the friends they have made
nor the work they have chosen

nor the one life that waits
beyond all the others.

By the lake in the wood
in the shadows
you can
whisper that truth
to the quiet reflection
you see in the water.

Whatever you hear from
the water, remember,
it wants you to carry
the sound of its truth on your lips. . . .

. . . . I know what I am saying.
Time almost forsook me
and I looked again.

Seeing my reflection
I broke a promise
and spoke

for the first time
after all these years

in my own voice,

before it was too late
to turn my face again.

When an old promise has come to stand in the way of our true vows, Whyte says, we must learn how to break a promise with integrity—not meanly or casually, but gently and firmly, because our true life depends on it. “Let the promise go with the river. Have faith. Walk away.”

The true vows, as Whyte calls them, or the original vows, usually aren’t promises we consciously make. They’re truths we discover about ourselves as we learn to listen deeply to our own unfolding life, our own experience, our own conversation with the great Mystery that surrounds and fills this Universe we live in. They come to us more often than not as questions. What am I doing here? What really matters most to me? Is this really what I am living for? What is this deep desire, this powerful longing that is calling to me, that has been calling to me for as long as I can remember, now that I come to think of it? Is this how I am really meant to move and act in this world, among the people whose lives touch mine?

“Sometimes,” Whyte says in another poem,

*Sometimes
if you move carefully
through the forest,

breathing
like the ones
in the old stories,

who could cross
a shimmering bed of leaves
without a sound,

you come to a place
whose only task

is to trouble you
with tiny
but frightening requests,*

*conceived out of nowhere
but in this place
beginning to lead everywhere.*

*Requests to stop what
you are doing right now,
and*

*to stop what you
are becoming
while you do it,*

*questions
that can make
or unmake
a life,*

*questions
that have patiently
waited for you,*

*questions
that have no right
to go away.*

We find our true vows, our true lives, David Whyte believes, in these “questions that have no right to go away.” These are the questions that are answered, sometimes, by a decision to set aside a safe and secure life path for something far more risky that makes us feel alive in a way we can’t remember ever feeling before. They’re answered, sometimes, by a call to ministry. They’re answered, sometimes, by accepting the seemingly unbearable truth that we can’t fix someone’s life for them—even if they’re our beloved, even if they’re our child, or our parent—that our own survival demands that we stop letting them inflict their anger, their addiction, their suffering on us instead of coming to terms with it for themselves. And the patiently waiting questions are answered, sometimes, by letting someone into our life in a way that we’ve never dared to do before.

The questions our true life asks of us can sometimes only be answered by choosing to break a promise we thought we would never break, a promise we thought we could not break. We break the vows we have to break so that we can keep faith with the true vows that will bring us more fully alive, more fully awake to the immense and beautiful possibilities we can only find on the journey toward “the one life that waits beyond all the others.”

Is there a question waiting for you “. . . by the lake in the wood in the shadows” today? Is there a “tiny but frightening request” that wants to lead you toward something you’re not quite sure of, something that might unmake or make *your* life? Is there a promise keeping you prisoner in a life that’s no longer yours? If so, I offer you these thoughts from another poetic guide, Mary Oliver, in her poem “The Journey.”

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do

the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.

“One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began.”

Blessed be.