

“What I Have Learned”

A Sermon by Molly Housh

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Molly Housh, MDiv. That’s me! The degree has been conferred... I have been assured that they can’t take it back! And I am left having promised rather brashly that I would tell you, in twenty minutes or less, what I have learned.

I begin to realize that it will probably take the next 40 years, God-willing, to understand what I have learned, myself. So I will have to be satisfied to share with you just one way that I think the past three years of theological education have changed me.

And to do so, if you’ll bear with me, I’d like to take you briefly back 15 to 20 years, to the time of my youth.

My family will attest (and they’re sitting right there, so you can ask them) that I was a very active child. Our living room became my ballet studio, the long aisles of the grocery store, much to my mother’s chagrin, called to be filled with cartwheels and twirls, and I once got in a bit of trouble in math class for showing a friend a gymnastics trick... on top of the table.

As I grew older, I learned how to contain my movements, how to train and discipline them through ballet and other forms of dance. Blessed with a wonderful education, I learned the thrill of the quick movement of intellect, as well-- of the mind leaping between ideas and drawing them together. I learned the pleasure of moving through a story, into another time and place and world. I learned the odd movements of the tongue forming words of other languages.

In my college application essays, which I'm sure I would be very embarrassed to read now, I cringe to tell you that briefly compared myself to a monkey, swinging through the branches in the forest of knowledge.

So I have moved with great joy through the education of my mind and body. I have read great books and danced great dances.

All of it, I discover now, rehearsal for the majesty of *being moved*.

All of it prelude to the education of that deeper place in me that you might call spirit. Or maybe you call it heart or gut. Maybe it is the place where body and mind join most seamlessly and where leaping and swinging and striving give way to a still center waiting to *be moved*.

We are moved by great art. We are moved by injustice. We are moved by loss. We are moved by beauty. We are moved by our passions. And it is in being moved that we are able to bring new good into the world.

I am using the phrase being moved in a couple of different ways here. One carries the sense of action. As in: My friend was moved by the injustice of the new immigration law in Arizona to travel there and march in protest. This meaning keeps ever in mind the essential question: How are you called right now to live your life in this world?

The other meaning carries the sense of emotion. As in: I was moved to tears by my grandmother's heartfelt expression of pride and love at my graduation. This meaning keeps ever in mind the central question: What in this moment feeds your inner life and thus moves through you into the lived expression of your values?

If religion is about, as Forrest Church puts it, living well in the face of death, and, as I would add, helping to nurture the flourishing of life on earth, then these are some of the questions that matter, that can be our north star in the ever-changing adventure of living.

In reflecting on how I have been changed, I realize that I have since my youth been very well practiced at moving, but often only to find myself trekking south or east or west, away from that north star. It took a divinity school education for me to finally sit with these questions, to find the openness necessary to *be moved*.

This may be what I most value having learned. Certainly I gained important knowledge. I read many philosophers and theologians, and I learned practical skills too, but what took me by surprise, and what *changed me* was the call to grow in the capacity of the heart and hand to be moved.

A divinity school colleague and friend of mine recently wrote: “Our culture denies suffering and frailty with a million devices; our great religious traditions, more realistically, stare them in the face and invite us to make sense right there.” Years after my stint performing tabletop gymnastics, I became a master also of mental gymnastics, keeping the mind busy with this and that, moving deftly past the trouble areas in my psyche and in the world of ideas, avoiding questions of suffering and frailty, and in doing so, essentially closing myself off to any impetus for real movement.

Don't get me wrong. Mental gymnastics are a valuable tool, in their time and place. The leaping and swinging and striving of the mind can help us survive and can yield great value. The problem arises when we come to believe that we can exert total control over its movements. Ideas and problem solving and invention require inspiration, which cannot be controlled or fabricated. Finding or making meaning of life's suffering and frailty requires *openness* to life's suffering and frailty and to the spirit that moves through them. It requires finally recognizing that we do not direct the movement in our life, but instead are inspired and animated by many forces and people around us, in a give and take of mutual influence. We move and are moved.

Somewhere midway through my degree, I realized that if I was ever going to connect with my own spirituality, and to use the best of my religious tradition (no small goals, I realize), I needed a fundamental change in the questions I was asking of my divinity school education. I came in with questions about belief and truth and obscure philosophical notions. Actually I came in thinking I would be a scholar, and so believe me when I say that I feel that there is great importance in philosophical notions and questions of truth.

And I also know that somewhere along the way, I encountered people in struggle and courage, in faith and in doubt, and my questions began to shift. Somewhere along the way I found myself in a hospital room where any thought of philosophy was subsumed by the great need for expressed love and courage. Somewhere I realized that my intellectual assent doesn't always match the reaching out of my heart. And so I leave asking myself, and you too what may be the more pressing question, "What moves you?"

What moves you? What literally animates your being in the world? Because that is what needs living out. The word animate comes from the latin animare, which means "give breath to" and also "to endow with a particular spirit, to give courage to." And I suspect that when we can recognize what moves us and let it in, that is exactly what we gain-- a life full of breath, endowed with spirit, enlivened with courage.

Of course, recognizing what moves us first requires the vulnerability to let quite a lot in. It requires that we to be open enough to life that the breath of its winds will blow us around, that it's hard knocks will blow us down, that it's moments of wonder and awe will lift us up.

And here is another thing that happens when we learn how to be moved. We recognize that we are not the Gods who carved out the rivers, but rather small living things, awakened in the stream. We experience the life that moves through the gill of our heart and hope to find meaning there.

Being moved requires being stripped of causes and plans and things to strive for. It means understanding and accepting what you already have, right here, right now, in flawed abundance, and feeling the call to use it as best you can.

God knows being moved does not require a degree in divinity. This is a place where our Unitarian Universalist history gives us clear theological resources. After all, a father of our faith, William Ellery Channing tells us that the great end in religious instruction is not to gain control over the mind and heart, but rather to stir up the mind and awaken the soul and to excite and cherish spiritual life. Our tradition calls us to be moved. And I have seen this happening in this very congregation far more than I have succeeded in living it myself. The soul is awakened in youth group members when our kids give themselves over to be changed by their service work. The spiritual life is cherished in small groups or classes when we share our own stories and are moved by the experiences of each other. It is excited in our justice-making when we are moved to work for change.

I was having a conversation recently about spirituality, and what exactly this nebulous thing called the spiritual life might look like. And my conversation partner and I agreed that awakening the soul is not something you do by force. It is very difficult to just set out to have a spiritual experience. Instead, these experiences of transcendence and connection tend to catch you in unexpected moments when you're open to being moved.

Modern dancer Martha Graham, who knows a little bit about movement, explains this spiritual openness in another way. She tells us that there is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through us into action.

Perhaps you would call that quickening a movement of the divine. Perhaps you would not. But the message is clear. *We* are the means by which that vitality enters the world. And, as she tells us, it may well be our deepest task to keep the channels open, to let it move through us into the world. If we do not allow ourselves to be moved, we are depriving the world of the inspiration, the animas, the life, that we have in us to give.

The more I talk about the two, the more moving and being moved begin to sound the same, or at least intertwined, and so perhaps another thing I have learned is how to lean in to paradox. The paradox that Mark Nepo leaves us with at the end of his poem expresses it nicely. “There is nothing to do and nowhere to go. Accepting this, we can do anything and go anywhere.” Accepting the limits of our control, new movement becomes possible. Committed to open ourselves to inspiration, new movement becomes possible.

Your minister and my mentor John Buehrens often invokes a favorite passage from the prophet Micah: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” I hope he won’t mind sharing a favorite with me because I love this passage, and I light upon something new about it each time I give it some thought. This time I am struck by the call to walk humbly with your God. The idea of walking humbly with the Ultimate gets at the heart of the paradox we’ve been approaching. It requires our movement, our assent and participation. But it also requires that our steps be in service of the something larger that is calling us forward. We walk because we *are moved*, by the divine, by the aim of human good, by the still small voice inside. And we walk humbly, knowing that we will never be able to predict our path or its final outcome. Our agency is engaged even as we realize that we were never in complete control in the first place. Being moved requires openness to the movement of the spirit, or the conscience, or the heart, and faith that we will be led in the direction of greater flourishing.

These lessons are not easily learned. There's something about divinity school, when it's good, and something about our churches, when we're doing it right, that forces us to ask: Who am I really? And what gifts do I have to share with the world?

And we won't always like the answers to these questions. This person called "who I really am" sometimes avoids unpleasant things. She tends to hurt people that she loves. She wants to be good at one thing, but instead is good at another thing she doesn't particularly value. You see, the thing about walking humbly with your God is that all of you has to come along. The you that is petty and small comes along. The you that is jealous and greedy comes along. The great hope is that you are transformed by the walking.

And even as we are transformed by the walking, we know in humility that each of us will not have all of the gifts that are needed. Then the great hope is that inspiration combined with kindness moves us to do what we can. We cannot eliminate hunger, but we can feed each other. We cannot eliminate loneliness, but we can hold each other. We cannot eliminate pain, but we can live a life of compassion. We can open ourselves to that quickening which moves through us bringing more life and vitality into the world. Moved by hope, moved by love, moved by life in all its frailty, we can keep walking. We will take one more step, then one more again, until we have learned to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

May it be so.