

Knit Together As One
Rev. Catie Scudera
First Parish in Needham, 11/12/17

What a year it has been, since November 2016.

This week has been a hard one for me, perhaps particularly because I am a progressive woman minister who tends toward optimism and thus often experiences disappointment.

A week like this one, I wonder why gun violence is so rampant in the United States...

A week like this one, I wonder why sexual violence is so rampant in the United States...

A year like this one, I wonder why we have rolled back compassion and competence in our government and its services...

If we look at the lethality of a single mass shooting, or the abuse perpetrated by a single entertainer, or the callousness of a single politician, considering them occurring in historical vacuums, we won't understand what's happening properly. We might mistakenly think that mass shootings are committed by those with mental illness who simply need to be contained. We might mistakenly think that there's something wrong with *Hollywood* men, who simply need to be contained. We might mistakenly think a single politician simply needs to be contained to fix the problem of cruel government cuts and re-legalizing of discrimination.

If we don't understand the interdependent web of all existence, of all history, then we won't find solutions to any of the present moment's worst problems.

Within the first paragraph of his controversial short story collection, *Dubliners*, twentieth-century Irish writer James Joyce used a term from ancient Greek mathematics: the gnomon. The narrator of the first story, reflecting on the death of a local priest, reports "gnomon" is a strange word, like "paralysis" and "simony," and many interpreters believe these terms are key to understanding the whole of *Dubliners*.

Gnomons are perhaps best known as the part of a sundial that casts a shadow, and in Greek itself the word means "one that knows or examines." But this

isn't the definition of "gnomon" Joyce alluded to. Korean professor of English, Dr. Hee-Whan Yun, writes, "[The] gnomon is the part of a parallelogram [which is a rectangle, tilted] which remains after a similar [smaller] parallelogram has been taken away from one of its corners. Gnomon, therefore, is an incomplete parallelogram, a figure that would be whole were it not missing one of its corners. The gaps, ellipses, omissions, absences, and silences in the Joycean text frequently obstruct reader's interpretation. Such a textual 'uncertainty' can make readers feel frustrated in their deciphering process."

Throughout the stories in *Dubliners*, characters are dead or missing, don't turn up where they're supposed to; many everyday objects can't be found or are lost in the course of the stories; and many places and lives are described as empty, lonely, or broken. The reader can become frustrated, as the stories don't always quite make sense, alone or within the collection, and there is often essential information missing from the narratives, like where many of the child characters' parents have gone. Local controversy was stirred over the short story collection, because people's morals were often missing, too; Joyce spared no description of sin in his portrayal of his hometown.

And we are wont to do that, aren't we? We'd often prefer if our errors we kept quiet, both personally and collectively. But, Joyce meant to expose that when we leave out parts of our local history, parts of our community, parts of ourselves, the gnomon is exposed. The careful observer will notice the absence, and work to uncover the hidden history. If we only have a partial understanding of history — if our understanding has a missing gnomon piece — we struggle to move forward toward wholeness and happiness for our society, our congregation, and for every person.

Why is gun violence so rampant in the United States? It's not really about mental illness. There's a history to rediscover. We must not forget our country's history of deep fear of our own government and of our neighbors, nor can we forget European America's historical colonialist entitlement to that which is not ours, but can be and was taken by violence. We must not forget that this shooting at a Texas congregation was not the first — and God help us, may not be the last. Our religious educator Mark mentioned to me on Thursday that some news outlets are claiming that "only now" do houses of worship have to begin considering violence in their sanctuaries... We must not forget that black churches, mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras, and indigenous sacred ceremonies, have all experienced violence for centuries... And, even our

Unitarian Universalist congregation in Knoxville, Tennessee, was terrorized by a gunman not ten years ago.

Why is sexual violence so rampant in our society? It's not really about Hollywood. There's a history to rediscover. We must not forget the longstanding oppression of women and LGBTQ people, the centuries' old toxic societal conceptions of masculinity based on control and aggression, and the ability of power and privilege to both insulate abusers from punishment and bar them from the possibility of confession and transformation.

How did we end up with this strange and awful year of federal policy that discriminated and punished people for who they are, how much money they have, whether they have particular papers...? Well, there's a long history of a capitalist, class-divided, oppressive country we must reckon with.

Whether we like it or want it or not, we are influenced by the past. As Bob Wolfe billed his sermon in 1992, we are indeed "knit together as one," here now to each other in the present moment, and to our ancestors and our descendants through the relational transmission of culture, values, and experiences. Some of this is very good. As we read from the Book of Deuteronomy, we are commanded to remember our ancestors (the Charlottes, we could say) and That Which Is Holy who gifted us the life we have today. First Parish has weathered over three hundred years together, and we are today a loving church community seeking to learn, grow, and serve together. This is amazing, and a credit to the present congregation and the work of those who gave so much to our congregation over the years. The fact that any congregation survives the mixed heritage of history reminds me of the old proverb, "There but for the grace of God, go I."

However, while our inheritance of mission and collective love makes our congregational foundation strong, trauma and discord is passed along too. I'm sure we could each remember something from within our personal, congregational, and communal histories that we might want to forget or keep hidden. But, our own willful ignorance or passing on a gnomon history does not save us or our descendants. Countries and congregations and families pass on behaviors learned in response to varieties of sufferings, even when (and perhaps especially when) the full history remains unexplained. Think back on the generations that have passed through this congregation, all these ministers on the walls, and all the old bad habits we may have accumulated and may be passing on again...

(I honestly don't have some particular bad behavior of the present in mind when I ask that we consider the past, I just think it's a useful exercise...)

As twentieth-century American writer William Faulker wrote in his novel *Requiem for a Nun*, itself replete with stories of old traumas and cover-ups...
“The past is never dead. It's not even past.”

Our denomination published a workbook on this problem of how the past is alive in 2005, writing:

“We explain all manner of things in this way. It is our theory of how things happen. Event A causes event B. B, in turn, causes other events C, D, and so on...”

“[However,] even a cursory review demonstrates that [such a] billiard-ball theory is inadequate. Life is simply far too complex for us ever to be able to say that one thing causes another... Rather, we will do better—certainly in social situations—if we broaden our understanding of causality beyond linear thinking to a system of interrelated events, no one of which accounts for what happens...”

“Systems theory argues that events are co-causal, reciprocal, and interdependent. When it comes to interpersonal relationships, there are many layers of causality and many reasons for things happening the way they do. Focusing on only the immediately apparent causes will not suffice to explain what we see or hear. Indeed, it will give us a faulty and false diagnosis and elicit often unproductive interventions, particularly with regard to conflict. Systems thinking calls for recognizing that everything is related to everything else, often in surprising ways.”

If we don't remember the stories of the past and understand how we relate to our ancestors and to each other, ghostly gnomons will haunt us and how we treat one another. I'm sure we can all think of how in our families, trauma or the behavior of a sibling or parent or child impacts everyone of that generation and the ones before and after, regardless of any efforts to hide the source of discord.

Many of you know that this summer I traveled to my grandfather's hometown in northwest Sicily for the first time, with my whole nuclear family. I learned

two things: First, was that my grandfather was not the eldest child of his parents, but that he had had an older brother who died as a toddler. Second, was that though my grandfather was born in Brooklyn, my great-grandmother took him back to Sicily for eight years, leaving my great-grandfather behind in New York. My father himself had no explanation for this, and it was a gnomon to me, so I started surmising what may have happened. I landed on the idea that, perhaps, there was a disease epidemic in New York when my grandfather was a young child, and my great-grandmother refused to risk another son's death though her husband needed to stay in New York for the work. I began to wonder how this choice impacted my grandfather, and thus me through the generations...

I carried this assumption for about a month until I mentioned my theory to my paternal aunt, who said, "Your great-grandparents got separated for a while. That's what happened." Followed by, "I can't believe your father doesn't remember that!" Mystery solved!

I haven't figured out yet how these stories have impacted my family through the generations. But, it seems impossible that this loss of a child and an eight-year trans-Atlantic separation would have had no impact on my great-grandparents' relationship with each other, with their parents, siblings, cousins, and children, and so on through the generations... Not to mention whatever family traumas and discords have been passed through my paternal grandmother or my maternal line, all interacting with each other in a complex network.

Now, this latest piece of my family's story means I can grapple with my family's myriad dysfunctions (we all have them!) a little more ably. When we strive to remember and rediscover the systems, the network of history, that produced any problems that plague our families and congregation; that produced the Second Amendment and its defenses; that produced cavalier and abusive attitudes about relational consent — if we accurately remember the full history, then we have a chance for transformation in our personal and collective conduct.

This is the gift of our congregation's annual History Sundays, to challenge us both to look back and learn, and to look forward and consider how our actions will influence the future. I wonder what each of us will choose to ponder today, as we look back and look forward.

Knit Together As One
Rev. Catie Scudera
First Parish in Needham, 11/12/17

May we not forget the vast system of ancestors and what they have given us, for good and for ill. May we not unconsciously accept our historic inheritance. May our contributions to the ongoing flow of history bring wholeness and happiness to our descendants.

Blessed be, and amen.