

GREENFIELD GROUP FALL 1999 TOPIC: SUFFERING AND HOPE

A Paper by Rosemarie Smurzynski, November 29- December 1

TOPIC: Using the concepts found in Brueggemann and the Hebrew Scriptures discuss how they engage with the concepts of hope and suffering.

PRELUDE. It was I who brought this book, *The Hopeful Imagination*, to our Greenfield Group reading list. It was David Usher who added the *Book of Exodus* to the scope of the paper. In hindsight I wondered if we ought not to have read, as well, Brueggemann's, *The Prophetic Imagination*. That and *The Hopeful Imagination* seem like companion volumes. The latter was written in 1978 (and was a topic of the Greenfield Group); the former, equally old, was written in 1986. Both books are prophetic works, themselves, of the latter part of the 20th century. Looking back to the 70's and 80's, both books seem to have been written for a time, Brueggemann notes, when "God is ending our known world and inviting us to a new world of obedience and praise." (Page 5 *THI*) The phrase "obedience and praise" may chafe some UUs, but the theme of Brueggemann's books is nevertheless relevant: how are we to be when one world view is dismantling, and another is yet to be born. Brueggemann notes about the day:

A variety of scholars are calling attention to the prospect that Enlightenment modes of power and Enlightenment modes of knowledge are at the end of their effective rule among us. The cultural reality of the last 250 years has brought us enormous gifts of human reason, human freedom and human possibility. None of us would want to undo those gifts, but they are gifts not without cost. The reality of the Enlightenment has also resulted in the concentration of power in monopolistic ways which have been uncriticized. Moreover, it has generated dominating models of knowledge which have been thought to be objective rather than dominating. (Page 5 *THI*)

It is this dominating reality that Brueggemann says must be dismantled and make way for the new. One of my favorite authors, William Manchester, in a favorite book, *A World*

Lit Only by Fire, reminds us of a similar dismantling and newness when the world moved from the Medieval Mind to the Renaissance Mind. Manchester writes of the time:

all
the
When we look back across five centuries, the implications of the Renaissance appear to be obvious. It seems astonishing that no one saw where it was leading, anticipating what lay round the next bend in the road then over the horizon. But they lacked our perspective; they could not hold a mirror up to the future. Like people at all times, they were confronted each day by the present, which always arrives in a promiscuous rush, with the significant, the trivial, the profound and factuous all tangled together.... Even the wisest of them, were at a hopeless disadvantage, for their only guide in sorting it all out-- the only guide anyone ever has-- was the past, and precedents are more than useless when facing something new. (Page 26)

But in *The Hopeful Imagination*, Brueggemann says that once long ago three prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, saw and named for a culture, the Hebrew people, how to move in a world view no longer working, that is, how to move a people out of pain and suffering when the old no longer works, to newness; how to move them in Brueggemann's words, from grief to exile, then out of exile, to hope. Both Brueggemann and Manchester hold a piece of the truth about transition times: most people don't see, they numb themselves, but some see, and some say they see because God shows them. Three prophets saw and they spoke of a way out of a culture that trapped. The process for hope and healing is the same for individual or community: one needs to be supported in leaving what is not working, one has to close a door, to open another, one has to face and go through suffering, to grieve. Brueggemann's thesis: only grieving brings newness.

The Ancient Hebrews had to leave Egypt, the Israelites Babylonia. The Medieval Mind had to give up thinking like Medievals, give up structures and forms, organization, to

move into the Renaissance. My theory about today's transition is that when in the 70's we saw the Earth from the moon, looking like a blue green brown marble in a black sky, our world view tumbled. We haven't yet caught up with the meaning of the tumble nor made the changes necessary if we are to move to newness, vitality and hope in a new world. The change needed by us seems clearer today than in the 70's and 80's when Brueggemann wrote these twin books, and for that I am energized and hopeful. Ah yes! we still have to find two matching socks in the morning, the lawn still needs to be mowed, the bulbs planted. But the world numb as we try to keep its old ways. Colonialism has died; third world nations want the goodies. Muslims say "Please understand me." The Royal Consciousness, the power that wants to keep the status quo, would like us to try harder in the old form. Yet, like for Israel in 587 BC, the only salvation, Brueggemann says, lies in a move to dismantle, to exile, which is a theological term as much as it is a geographical term, as a prelude to newness, to hope and to coming home to what is our true selves.

Not uncoincidentally, as we experience a surge in visitors in the country church I serve, the congregation is taxed by the numbers coming, lacks structure to absorb them. The long time and medium membership is overwhelmed; the biggest issue is that some in the Royal Consciousness of the congregation are invested in keeping things as they are. Maybe, the enemy is even I. Some sense a blow up can rid us of the new comer; others are damned if they will play that game again. Beside, a voice in me names the need to change. Sometimes I do feel like a Jeremiah.

BRUEGGEMANN'S BOOKS. I love Brueggemann's twin books. They will sit on the shelf of books in my library that announces: you have had an influence on my mind and heart and soul. First of all what I love is that Brueggemann, himself, is imaginative. Second that he is poetic. Third, a good writer: no wading through obtuse sentences. Brueggemann speaks clearly on a difficult subject and insists that the writings of old have something to say today. The meanings of the Bible are two, he says, what it meant to the people who created it, and what it means today. In theological terms he announces what is psychologically sound: before you can receive, you have to relinquish. Before there can be newness, you must let go. Before you can be raised to new life, you have to die to the old.

This summer as I sold my 1988 Red Burgundy Volvo and bought a new car, I knew Brueggemann's words held true for the work I needed to do to buy a new car. Seems like a small thing but, it wasn't. All of the steps of relinquishing, letting go, and entering the new were present in this small event. That is, I had to realize that the old car didn't serve me well. Every time I took it on a long trip, which I did often, my family worried. The clutch was almost gone and the car was getting very expensive to keep. At first I thought, maybe I can keep the old and get the new. Didn't the Ancient Hebrews crave their home in Egypt, even as they wanted to be out of bondage? Why should I be different? But they couldn't have both. They had to risk the Exodus, even as they craved and yearned for the world they left behind, bondage and all. And the transition was not always easy as their murmuring in the desert attested to. And some never realized a

newness for themselves even though they left behind the old-- think of the Pilgrims as well who died in their journey to newness. The new car is in the parking lot--I love it equally. My family rests more comfortably when I am gone. And if I could admit it, me too. The new thing is great!

Another message I love from Brueggemann: he has related the sin of the Israelite to the sin of our modern hearts: psychic numbing; denial. Way back in Egypt land the Ancient Israelites felt comfortable in "De Nile," even when they were in Babylonia. (Couldn't resist.)

PROCESS. I have focused on the three readings Brueggemann presents as chapters in his book, *The Hopeful Imagination*, and engage them as spiritual texts-- a sort of *lectio divina* reading-- a focus on how the sacred texts connect with my spirit. And I need to say that my theology is not Brueggemann's theology, but my spirit moves with these texts as his does. The texts he chooses as key to understanding the hopeful imagination, yesterday and today are Jeremiah 30: 12-17, Ezekiel 36:22-32: and Isaiah 54: 1-17.

MY IMAGINATION. As for my own imagination it has been so long in Jeremiah that it is hard to move to Isaiah. I have been Jeremiah and the people, announcing and announced to "wake out of the amnesia." The Ancient Hebrew didn't welcome Jeremiah. Sometimes as I speak "truth" I feel like for Jeremiah the people wish I would go away or like for Jonah, they do turn and then don't understand what the fuss was all about. Woe is me!

And while God is different for me than for the Ancient Hebrews or Moses, I still resonate with the words God is said to speak, because I believe they are therapeutically sound. I respond to God's words as God begins God's history with the Ancient Hebrew people:

I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians. (Exodus 3:7-8)

How beautiful is that intervention! How beautiful to know that the very universe knows your suffering and will accompany you on your journey out of suffering! You don't have to be Jewish to appreciate this kind of holding in the bosom of God. The words bring energy. Energy brings hope. I see this hope even in the direst of situations, pastorally: I have seen Mary, 82, in the hospital since April when she lost consciousness and slammed into a truck coming at her in the opposite lane. A head on collision. But something *other* has seen Mary and is by her side as she comes back from that close to being a paraplegic. I have seen that other in her energy to feed and dress herself through her tears. I have seen her accept her condition, (could I?) and energize herself to move into a new place, accepting the limits of life now. And I have seen a talented, lovely man die of Lou Gehrig's disease. I have felt my own hand and soul gain energy as I saw him accept with realism the progress of the illness, but to die energized that every minute he could breathe, and that is what was difficult at the end, he would live. (How many do the same even when breath comes easily?) I have noticed that hope comes where "energy for life" is, not in living on the sunny side of the street. I am blessed everyday to be a minister, to witness the connection between suffering and hope in the people I serve. This witnessing

reminds me that I, too, live there. Different reasons of suffering, but the path to hope the same.

JEREMIAH. My own cycle of suffering and hope doesn't leave me immune from Jeremiah's question as I challenge Royal Consciousness: "Why am I always embroiled even though I am to blame for nothing?" is my observation of myself as well. Like Jeremiah I feel summoned by an interior movement to tell the truth about a false organization of life. I fumble and I stumble. And Jeremiah's poetry speaks to me in the night such truth for I am at once Jeremiah and also the people to whom he speaks. I know these words:

Your hurt is incurable,
and your wound is grievous.
There is none to uphold your cause,
and no medicine for your wound
no healing for you.

It is where we walk, but know not that we are walking there. Have you been there, too?

The place where you want someone to say: "I know, I know," to just affirm the reality of where you are? Nothing more for now. And have you been there because you have fallen out from your "larger self," and you have been unfaithful, like Israel, to the spirit that moves in you?

And in the poem, Jeremiah 30: 12-17, the author makes a move with the scariest word in the Bible. *Therefore.* Watch out when therefore is on the move. It is scarier than

Halloween Night. But nothing bad is prophesized after this therefore, though what is expressed is not expected and new:

Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured
and all of your foes, everyone of them, shall go into captivity;
those who despoil you shall become a spoil,
and all who prey on you I will make a prey
For, I will restore health to you
and your wounds I will heal, says the Lord.

What wonderful poetry! And promise and hope. What Jeremiah says is this: though ostensibly incurable, wounded and deserted, because of sinfulness Israel will be healed and the oppressors despoiled. Totally incomprehensible concept, except for poetry.

Brueggemann says about poetry: "Every center of power fears poets, because poets never fight fair." (Page 41 *THI*) And the good thing is that Jeremiah's poem holds meaning holds promise for us.

We may ask whom this poem attacks and who would like to silence this poem. After all, this is only a poem. It is not theology or morality or a political proposal. Only a poem, but therefore so dangerous and so powerful.... I submit that the enemies of this poem are the managers of the status quo who deceive themselves and others into pretending there is no illness. (Page 41-42 *THI*)

The poem mediates our brokenness; healing happens in it. Jeremiah says- come out, come out into the sun, come out into Exile. You know Exile, your fore parents took that journey once long ago. Tell me your pain, let your wounds be seen and heard for real hope comes not in being tough about them, but in and with and under articulated grief. It is the articulated pain, Jeremiah says, that offers possibility.

EZEKIEL. I must admit up front that I can't find my way in Ezekiel. Maybe because Ezekiel writes in prose and I find poetry more compelling. Maybe it is this independence side that God shows to Ezekiel, maybe it is God's statement: "I'm God; you, little ones." Here's God, the parent who will forgive you because you know not better. " This God says:

Therefore... it is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. (Ezekiel 36:22)

Maybe it is God holding onto what I am interested in too--my good name and work. Don't I want my church to act in such a way that enhances my "good" name? Doesn't this chapter speak to me directly of my ministry, that I be "deeply concerned for and utterly free from the people I serve" ? (Page 51 *THI*) Isn't that freedom and where vitality for ministry comes from? Don't these words tell us how we can act, when we can't get others to act?

Brueggemann reminds us that Jeremiah was destroyed by his passion. What can you expect from one who writes poetry? But Ezekiel is not called to be destroyed by passion. He is called to make people aware-- to warn and to wait while the people hear the word of God's support. Wish I could do it: Wait for the denial to pass, the amnesia to lift, for the people to move out on a new leg of the journey where they can hear God's promise of the gift of life, of energy, of vitality. Powerful statement in Ezekiel that hope rests in God's arms. My old enlightenment humanist UUism nags: "In my hands, God, in my

hands, too!" God says "No. In my hands and for my sake." The egoist in me can't easily let go. "Who is God to say that?" I question.

But the text offers promise and hope. Things may be bad, but someone is watching the store and here's the promise. It sounds good, to me, too.

I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers and you shall be my people and I will be your God. (Ezekiel 36:26-28)

WOW! Right there in Ezekiel God is re-covenanting with those harlots, the membership of Israel, and me. Right there, God says: I am not done with you yet. Yes, yes, yes, I cry out as I walk these October days (when the paper was written) of slipping Autumn loveliness, trees golden-red, leaves moving to the breeze. The garden that looked so desolate in late August, now looks splendidly soft as the wilting greens turn yellow golds. The world before my eyes is transformed from a tired fading green to a new thing, a new season. And, by truth, I had nothing to do with this turning, not my gardening skills, spotty anyway these days, not my magic wand either. So Ezekiel is at some level believable. Not by my hand (I have to add alone) will this world be renewed.

And not by their hand alone did the Ancient Hebrews exit their way into the Sinai and out.

It was with a little help from the God who said:

I am the Lord, and I will bring you out of Egypt from under the burdens of the Egyptians and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment, and I will take you for my people and I will be your God. (*EXODUS 6:6-7*)

ISAIAH. What promise in Isaiah and don't I love those words that open Isaiah's world.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that her warfare is ended
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins. (*Isaiah 40:1-2*)

It reminds me of the story in the New Testament, *The Prodigal Son*, except more so, since nothing is requested in Isaiah and, yet, everything still is given. The promise: comfort, for the Exile is almost over.

Behold, the Lord God comes with might
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd,
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and gently lead those that are with young. (*Isaiah 40: 10-11*)

And this promise is given with the knowledge that God has known Israel before s *worm*:

Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel!
I will help you, says the Lord;
your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. (*Isaiah 41: 14*)

And (God) the writer must also know the Ancient story, acted out over and over again.

The story of humanity that wonders these things:

Why should I leave behind my suffering and pain when that is what I know?
Who am I without my pain and suffering?
What will I complain about if my pathway is smooth?
How can I bond with others when all I know how to talk about is my angst?
My angst-- now that is what defines me. I won't give it up for all the comfort in
the world.

But the word comes along: "Fear Not" for I will guide you in hope even as I have guided you in suffering. And that is truly a new thing! Free from Exile. Rejoice. And now folks it is time to work, yes work, in the world. No more dysfunction. No more denial, no more amnesia. Wake up and smell the roses and work. But I will get to this part later, the part that tells us what the new thing will require now that we are out of Exile and home, because it isn't going to be roses and cafe latte every day. But I'll get to that part soon, soon.

Before we get to mission and vision we need to let the people know they are "free" and Isaiah preaches it. Preach it Isaiah. Preach it colleagues And here is a gem about preaching from Brueggemann.

(Sermons don't talk about economic interests or moral limits but) redescribe the world. The central task of ministry is the formation of a community with an alternative, liberated imagination that has the courage and the freedom to act in a different vision and a different perception of reality. (Page 99 *THI*)

The third reading and second poem, Isaiah 54: 1-17, that Brueggemann asks us to consider in *The Hopeful Imagination*, is a "song of assurance." (Annotated Revised Standard Bible, Page 890). The poetry moves as a good sermon does and Brueggemann sees that movement as one from reality to possibility. The reality in the passage affirms the past as barrenness and forsakenness, and shame. No amnesia, no denial, no under the rug for this poet, prophet. And also the passage has an admission by God of God's role in the past.

For a brief moment I forsook you,

but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have
compassion on you says the Lord, your redeemer. (Isaiah 54: 7-8)

It's a love song from God to the people. It is a making again of the covenant broken a story that goes as far back as Noah.

"Sing, O barren one, who did not bear;

break forth into singing and cry aloud" (Isaiah 54: 1)

Reconciliation is imminent and hope, where does it come from? It comes from the very universe, not indifferent, but on your side. It comes from a God that hears cries and acts, from a God in relationship with a people, who though God does forsake, God comes back to acknowledge that the relationship is what is important, and lest we forget it , to protect God's great name, as well!

What amazes me as a Unitarian Universalist is the parental character of this God as punishing and yet affirming. There is not infinite patience in this God. This God tells the people you are harlots, I will have nothing to do with you. But this God can be persuaded to remain steadfast, as Moses paid dearly to accomplish. And this God returns on God's own accord. Why? Because it is lonely being God without a people. I mean, what's the point of lolling around in that huge mystery without people?

What part do people play in this later history, the history of the Exile and Homecoming? My inclination is to say, "little." Yet here are the prophets, listening to the universe and speaking the truth they hear. Hounding, distant and compassionate men, they are. (Wish there was a woman, too. Maybe Isaiah was a woman!) As I said earlier my theology is not this theology. I don't see God as situational as the Israelites did; but I do see that the mysterious enters our lives over and over again. There is universal wisdom in what is written here. The universe does bend to justice and it is a justice that works in our hands and is inspired by something far deeper than ourselves. Call it "Larger Self," as Henry James does in *Varieties of Religious Experiences*, there is something that calls us to take the next step in life.

The important message in Isaiah comes to this UU minister in chapter 61. Here. Listen. This is what happens when you are free: no more poor me. Freedom is a call to work with the universe. How many UU ministers, like myself, choose as a reading the poem,

Isaiah 61: 1-3, at their ordination? This is the call of the prophet to Zion, but can't it be the call as well to the mission of Zion as it turns in our hymnal in *We'll Build a Land*?

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me
because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted,
he has sent me to bind up the
brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison
to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God
to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn in Zion
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called the oaks of righteousness
the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

CONCLUSION. This is a sermon I have written, not an analytical paper. Maybe James Luther Adams, founder of this group and in whose name I am part of a team trying to raise money to have a room at Harvard Divinity School Library named after him, is turning. This is not a scholar speaking but a minister and a human being engaging with faith issues. (Though the paper is informed by scholarship.) It is not a sermon I will ever preach to my congregation, except as its pieces affect my spiritual journey. This is a sad time for me too, because I will move from Brueggemann's wisdom, find another book, another author. My own life will replicate, again and again, world history. I will be in denial at times, I will celebrate with amnesia when it suits me. I may come out of denial into Exile. The pain may be too much to bear, but the lack of energy may be too much to live with. What I hope from this paper is that engagement with Brueggemann's books

would help me break the "glass ceiling" that keeps me in bondage without knowing it, that it will help me go on to a new level, to be willing and capable of the hard work God's (and my) world demands. This I know will happen with friends to hold me when I fall, but beyond that I have a need for friends to remind me there is more energy and vitality when we heed the movement of the spirit working in our lives and other people's lives. Not to forget that latter part as well.