

Yes!

A Sermon by Rev. Betty Kornitzer

January 9, 2005

I began to prepare this service several weeks ago. I had planned to talk with you this morning about exuberance – about the energy and the joy of throwing your arms open wide and saying “Yes!” to life. It was upbeat and jubilant, just the thing for a wintery Sunday morning. Even the little quote at the top of your Order of Worship reads: “Exuberance is beauty.” Sunshine and joy, it seemed like a good plan at the time.

And then came December 26th. On that morning we arose, sleepy eyed and perhaps still grinning a bit with the afterglow of Christmas. As the day began, the news reports of the tsunami started rolling in.

Throughout the world, as if in unison, our hearts broke as one.

Over breakfast I heard that 11,000 were lost. By lunchtime it was 20,000. Throughout the day, like a runaway train, the numbers escalated relentlessly. There was no stepping on the brake of this train. Thirty thousand, fifty, seventy thousand, lost. I felt like I was running a marathon with no end, I couldn't catch my breath. The numbers kept increasing by tens of thousands. It seemed surreal. But it was all too real. Two weeks later there are 150,000 lost, we don't know where it will end.

Friends, now we are remembering how to breathe. And in South Asia, broken lands and hearts and lives will begin to mend.

William Blake wrote: “Exuberance is beauty.” This is not a time of exuberance, our world is raw.

Today we will talk, instead, about the beauty of resilience.

This is a beauty of a deeper, richer hue. The beauty of a blood red rose. It is fashioned in the belly of our lives and, arises from the wreckage of our broken hearts.

Resilience say “Yes” to life, against all odds, and in the very belly of the beast it says “Yes.”

I open with the words of James Broughton, from his poem *I Asked The Sea*:

*I asked the sea
how to cope with my life.*

Yes, she said, Yes...

*No, no said I,
I want to know
How to be strong like you.*

*Yes, she said, Yes-
Kissing the arm of the cove.*

And from the writing of Oriah Mountain Dreamer:

The Invitation

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for, and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are. I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dream, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon. I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain! I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide it or fade it, or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own, if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, to be realistic, to remember the limitations of being human.

I want to know if you can see beauty even when it's not pretty, every day, and if you can source your own life from its presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine, and still stand

on the edge of the lake and shout to the silver of the full moon, "Yes!"

It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have. I want to know if you can get up, after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done to feed the children.

It doesn't interest me who you know or how you came to be here. I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied. I want to know what sustains you, from the inside, when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone with yourself and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.

My Friends, can we see the beauty even when it's not pretty every day? I believe we can. It requires resilience, an ability to find rose petals among the ruins.

On November 10, 2002 a *New York Times* article related this story of beauty in the midst of devastation.

"The lights in the hall dimmed. The musicians walked in, and took their seats. Eight music stands stood empty, to honor their dead colleagues. The actors followed, and, without a word of introduction, began to sing. The audience rose to its feet in respect.

Two weeks to the day after the terrorist siege of a theater in Moscow ended with a reckless, deadly rescue by Russian commandos, the cast of *Nord-Ost* returned to the stage – a new stage – for a show that had been originally intended to celebrate its role in bringing Broadway to Moscow. Instead, the performance on November 9th became a memorial, a fund-raiser, and a declaration of the resilience of artists, and art, and audiences – the resilience of the human spirit – in the wake of tragedy and loss.

The cast had been held hostage for 57 hours. Seventeen of the 76 cast members – the 8 musicians, 2 child actors, and 7 stage hands – died in the rescue, while most of the rest were hospitalized from the effects of the narcotic gas used to subdue the guerilla fighters who had taken them hostage. Many of the sets and costumes were destroyed.

Aleksandr Y. Tsekalo, the executive producer of *Nord-Ost*, said, " We want to show we are alive (Steven Lee Myers, *The New York Times*, 11/10/02)

Resilience finds the beauty, even when it's not so pretty.

Dear friends, I want to know **if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dream, for the adventure of being alive.**

We called my in-laws Anyuka and Apuka - Mom and Dad in Hungarian. They knew what it is to choose life. Anyuka and Apuka were holocaust survivors who made it to New York in 1956. There they rebuilt their lives. When they retired, they moved to Massachusetts be near us. Our youngest son, Benjamin, was born shortly after their move. They were crazy in love with that little boy. In short, no question about it, they were willing to risk looking like a fool for love. They had been caring for Benjamin daily while I worked. I remember Benjamin's first day of nursery school, this was a sad day in his grandparents' lives. At 10:00AM, Apuka stood up, put on his coat and said, "Come on, Anyuka – let's go visit the school." And so they did. They had lasted all of two hours without Ben – surely, they were fools for love, and what a great thing to be. I learned so much from these good and kindly people who said "yes" to life. They picked the rose petals from the ruins.

Trappist monk, Thomas Merton wrote: "There is in all things a hidden wholeness." This hidden wholeness is that stuff resilience is made of, it is the beauty we are looking for when it is not so pretty. We look for it in the haunting faces of the children of Sri Lanka. In our hearts we hold their wide moon-round eyes. Those eyes that stare vacantly at a world changed in an instant from hone to hell. Can we find a hidden wholeness there?

Doing so can be part of our spiritual practice. It is a spiritual practice to sustain the spark that can ignite the fire of resilience within us. This is especially important when life is not so pretty, when the perils of war and floods, pollution, disease and human torture challenge our energy and our very vision of humanity. When moon-round eyes pierce our hearts.

What keeps the spark of resilience alive?
What ignites the fire that lights the world and says Yes to life?
I believe that through all of existence, and permeating even the darkest corners, is the presence of something sacred and powerful.

Its power arises from Love and engagement with life, from connections and being a part of a oneness greater than ourselves.

Resilience is an inner condition that is a balm to an ailing world.
It is healing and uplifting, heartening and protective.

Resilience does not blind our eyes to others, it is not a form of denial.
Rather it leads us to embrace the world -
With all its agonies and all its mystery.

“It doesn’t interest me to know where you live
or how much money you have.
I want to know if you can get up
After the night of grief and despair,
Weary and bruised to the bone
And do what needs to be done to feed the children.

It doesn’t interest me who you know,
Or how you came to be here.
I want to know if you can live with failure,
Yours and mine,
And still stand on the edge of the lake
And shout to the silver of the full moon, “YES!”

Dear friends, today,
I pray that we keep alive
The flame of resilience.
May we each be a candle unto
This hurting world.
I pray that we remember that even in the face
Of calamity and misery, we are called to Love and Resilience.
May we find the rose petals among the ruins.

L’Chaim, dear friends, to life!
Blessed Be and Amen