sermon

When I was twelve, I dressed up as Clara Barton for Halloween. I had long hair which my mother braided and looped into a snood-like coil, a long blue skirt, white shirt, and blue bib. My costume was the result of a years-long fascination with her story. Here was an independent girl, the youngest of four siblings, who learned some of her most valuable skills from her brother David: how to run like a deer, how to throw like a boy, and how to ride a horse bareback. Her century was the century of the American Civil War, the century of the abolitionists, the century of Amelia Bloomer and our own Iowa Sisterhood of women ministers. It was the era of Little Women with Jo at the helm, and Dorothea Dix and the beginning of a suffragette movement that wouldn't see success until 1921. I was fascinated by everyone, but Clara Barton was my favorite...*and* she had been a Universalist.

I picked Clara Barton because I had read about her, because I knew her story well enough to tell it, and because I greatly admired the way she had done things. When told that the battlefield was no place for a woman, she went anyway; when the boys she was teaching in school didn't mind her, and she didn't want to whip them, she went out and played baseball with them to win their respect. And when she wanted to keep nursing soldiers from both sides of the Civil War until the moment that the battle arrived, she waited as long as she could and then threw herself on a horse and rode astride to catch the nearest train. There is a sign in my office that says, "Those who say it cannot be done should not interrupt the person doing it." She was the person doing it. She was a leader in a century of leaders.

We're not doing so well for leaders right now. It's hard to find people we can look up to; people we can admire; people we can emulate. We're running short of heroes, and our standards --for our heroes and for ourselves--are slipping.

That shouldn't be happening. We, independent nation of innovators and inventors, thinkers and dreamers and revolutionaries, should be able to hold onto our ideals for a generation or two of less-than-stellar leadership. But in order to do that we have to rely on each other—we have to believe that everyone has the ability to lead, to set an example, to see that we continue to be our very best selves.

But what happens when someone needs support? What happens when someone needs help? What happens when we see that a member of the team is slipping?

We can't abandon each other in our times of need. Navy SEALS are trained to function as a team, taught during training that if one teammate doesn't make it, none of them do. Marines refuse to leave the bodies of their own behind on the battlefield. We can take a page from their training. How do we lift each other up, carry each other's packs, make sure we all get home to be mourned and buried in our homeland? And how do we uphold the standards *we* hold dear?

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The Lorax speaks for the trees, for the trees have no tongues. That's an important line. Like Clara Barton, he's standing up for what he believes. And in his case the animals and plants he's representing truly cannot represent themselves. In the world of the Once-Ler, they are unable to protest, unable to act in their own interest. So the Lorax pops out of the stump of a tree that's cut down and he starts giving speeches.

When the cause you represent involves people who DO have tongues, the issues are somewhat different. Unlike the trees and the brown bar-ba-loots, you've got to work WITH people. You've got to find out if your ideals and theirs are the same, and you have to work as an ally, careful not to presume that because you have the power to speak you know what should be said. The work of allies is tricky. Too quiet, and you're not supportive; not quiet enough and it

becomes your journey, your fight with a borrowed cause. Somewhere in the middle lies justice, which is the work we try to do.
The role of ally is vital. Without male support, women would never have won the vote. Without free and white support, abolition might never have happened. Without straight allies for the BGLT cause we would never have seen civil unions in Vermont or gay marriage in Massachusetts, in Canada, in HOW MANY other countries around the world. But it's easy for people who believe in a cause to become the spokespeople for it, even if it's not their cause. The balancing act is tricky, but worth the trouble.
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Ani DiFranco is a musician, singer, songwriter, producer, and activist. At eighteen she moved from upstate to New York, New York. On one of her albums she talks about the learning curve, just moved to New York City, mouth's been hanging open for about three days, talking about the prostitutes working the cobblestones outside her window, No honey, those are not women. They *look* a lot like women…
She was only a few years ahead of my best friend, who also decided that home was too suffocating, that suburban air was too thick to breathe. My friend went to college at Columbia, on the edge of Harlem, because she wanted the grit, the fire and spit of the city. She wanted real, and she didn't think that our tidy suburb, even with the drugs in the bathrooms and the knifings in the hallways of our high school, was gritty enough.
It was too gritty for me: I went to Northfield, Minnesota. But I, too, was seeking something real, something not constructed, something I could believe in. No college campus is entirely without its carefully crafted character, but I spent hours and hours walking the streets, going into all the shops, meeting the people who worked there. It was easy, being a college student in a Midwestern town, to start conversations. People were curious, I was curious, I stepped right into their curiosity to hear their stories, because I wanted to have a strong sense of place, a sense of really *being* somewhere.
One of DiFranco's songs says, "I'm in a small town in…WHERE…and they stare at me wherever I go. I don't think they like my haircut; I don't think they like my clothes. I can't wait to get back to New York City where at least when I walk down the street, nobody ever hesitates to tell me exactly what they think of me."
That's one kind of reality. It was probably the Midwestern aversion to being blunt that let me get to know the people in Northfield. That's another kind of reality. They are extremes on a continuum of interpersonal communication, extremes that define a middle ground where we never know what we can say or to whom we can say it, and we struggle to claim our own discomfort, because somehow the message is that we should never be uncomfortable with each other, never disoriented or ill-at-ease.
What are we thinking? We live in a volatile, mobile society where we no longer know everything about everyone's family back four generations—although in some places if you know a last name you can still make a decent guess at what the person does for money and where they hang their coat at day's end. Still, it's pretty rare to know what we used to know—the days of Our Town are fading—and even then there were unknowns, but they were hard-kept secrets, not incidental casualties of corporate restructuring and scarce resources.
We're going to be uncomfortable with each other sometimes. We're not always going to know everything about each other before we've met. What we need are the skills to navigate that reality, not a falsified intimacy. Part of getting that information is knowing each other. Not too

much, not too little. Every place, every town, every culture has its own rules about how much information is too much information, and how much is too little. Every person, does, too.
DiFranco sings:
I know I can't be the only ***whatever I am*** *in the room.*
Why am I so lonely?
Why am I so tired?
I need backup; I need company; I need to be inspired.
We all need backup, but it doesn't have to come from someone just like us. In fact, often someone else brings just the skills or characteristics we need to complement our own, so that together we're more effective than either of us alone. We need to find ways to work together, in alliance, not me-with-all-the-power helping you-with-none, but back and forth, in an elaborate dance that's more Shaddach and less waltz. It looks familiar, it looks graceful, but it's a pretty specialized kind of knowledge. Fortunately, like dance, it's learnable.
Step one: We need to be mindful. The Buddhists really have something there. Mindfulness, a kind of persistent awareness, means that we notice when the clouds are going smoggy and the trees are getting clear-cut faster than the forest can recover. We know the brown bar-ba-loots and we, too, worry when they're getting the crummies. We want to know why they have gas and no food in their tummies. In short, we know when something is wrong because we are always attending to how right everything is.
There's a fine line between that and focusing on the disasters. With most of our news media hard at work to keep our full attention it can be hard to remember that the tail-end-human-interest-fluff-story is in fact as important as everything else, and that there's plenty right to focus on. Every leaf, every blade of grass, every smile between friends and strangers, is part of the possible landscape of our awareness. Because most things that grab our attention are shockingly bad, there's nowhere to go but up if we start paying more attention.
Step two: We need to be adventurous. I don't mean we need to go kayak the Yukon or backpack the Appalachian Trail, although those are indisputably adventures. We need much smaller adventure, like what happens when we stop talking business in coffee hour and start talking love and belief and welcome and theology and identity. We need the adventure of reaching out to people beyond our comfortable circle of seven, knowing that even if we cannot be intimate with twenty, knowing twenty-one stories will expand our worldview threefold, and we will know better if the fabric of our world is rippling in a way that foretells a storm just over the horizon and coming in fast. When people ask us questions we need to trust their motives, to hope that they know enough not to push too hard and to back off gracefully when we gently draw the line; to set boundaries and then enter into the conversation in the middle. The space between the words is important—just as important as the words themselves. We have to use that mindfulness we cultivate to help us navigate the conversations that move us into a place of adventure. We need to stow our disdain and unearth our curiosity, and we need to know our motives: a genuine interest is the best way to avoid seeming false.
Step three: we need to use our newfound glimmers of comprehension as toeholds for the mile-high rock climb in someone else's shoes. We can't actually know what it is to live someone else's life, and we cannot presume to understand it deeply, but we can at least stand at the bottom, perched on the edge of the outcropping that is just the beginning, and stare in awe and wonder at the sheer rock face that someone else is scaling. Even if you tried to climb it, you'd find different handholds and different cracks to wedge your shoes in; you'd put your left foot where others' right hands fit, and you'd go sideways where another person went straight up.

Every step is a mini-puzzle, and the ones you don't notice are likely the ones that others stared at for hours before finding their next move.

When you're climbing, it is the belayer that makes your adventure possible, but not by doing it for you. The belayer holds a safety rope that goes from their hands to the top of the rock, around a fixed support, and back down to the climber. All the belay rope does is keep the climber safe. But standing there, watching them climb, you can notice where their stature or their skills were a help and where they were a hindrance; you can learn how they shift their weight and how they overcome the insurmountable. And that means you can make a better guess at how you might be helpful.

After a while, you learn what they can do easily and what will stretch them, and you learn how to get inside their heads enough to shout something useful. Everyone's useful is different, and sometimes the best thing is to keep your mouth shut and your hands on the rope. But belaying for anyone will eventually teach you awe.

Step three is the trickiest: we have to negotiate that space in someone's life, ask for a belay, suggest that we could use a hand or that we are able and willing to help. There's a certain presumptuousness in the negotiation: that the other person wants you involved in their life, that you have something to offer even if you're the one asking for help, that the arrangement has even a prayer of working. It might be easier if we could go back to elementary school and ask the obvious question: "Will you be my friend?"

But it's not always about friendship. Sometimes it's just about alliance, based on principle or the best possible combination of skills for a common goal, or an honest desire to help and an honest willingness to accept help. Especially here we see people struggle with accepting help, asking for visits, taking a hand to keep from falling, metaphorically or literally. Help must be freely given to be truly helpful—we can't expect anything in return. We have to believe in what I call the trickle around theory of energy and economics—that everything we give will eventually come back when we need it, that it's all part of a giant cycle of gifts given and received. No one wants to owe someone else anything, but maybe the spiritual discipline is to recognize that we already owe our lives to the world around us.

> Clad as always in black, Clara Barton moved about the chambers of the United States Senate like a tiny dark dot, flitting from one wounded soldier to another until Charles Mason, her friend and mentor from the Patent Office, found her to deliver an important letter.
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> "It's from the Surgeon General, Clara, so I thought you would want it brought to you."
>
> They shared a knowing look before she tore it open. She read only the first paragraph before wadding it into a ball and parading out of the Senate. Almost at a run she marched to the Surgeon General's office, demanded an immediate audience, seated herself in the waiting room, and didn't budge for two solid hours.
>
> The Surgeon General stood over six feet tall, and she stood barely five, but she lit into him like a badger attacking a bear. She opened her fist to show him the wadded-up letter.
>
> "I will *not* accept this as a final answer."
>
> He smiled his most gracious smile and nodded at the little lady.
>
> "Now Miss Barton, I'm sure you understand..."

"I understand only this: [step] I understand that our wounded men are being poorly cared for." [step] I understand that those poor boys have more to fear from your 'doctors' than they do the Rebels!" [step] I further understand that, because I am a woman, regardless of my proven abilities to care for these men you have determined that my presence at the battlefield is 'inappropriate'.
"Well, General Hammond, you are not the first pigheaded bureaucrat who has stood in my way and you will not be the first to be gotten around."
Hammond finally exploded. "Let me assure you, Madam, that the battlefield is *no place* for a woman!"

"And let me assure *you*, General Hammond, that the battlefield is no place for a *man*!"
"…but you have had no medical training..."
"No offense, Doctor..." The word dripped with sarcasm, "...but your profession is not nearly so perfect as you think. My training is as good or better than many of the men you've got out there."
After a long pause and a struggle to find the appropriate word Hammond spoke softly. "Are you not concerned, Miss Barton, that a single woman traveling with an army might be thought to be a...camp follower?"
Clara's face blushed beet red. She responded with a whisper.
"It is not important what might be thought, General. It is a risk I am prepared to take."
--edited for reading from To Make Men Free: A Novel of the Battle of Antietam by Richard Croker p. 17-19

We must take the risks that come with principled action. Good intentions won't always save us, but risk just might.
We have gotten to the point where we put people in places at the tables of our conversations so we can see their smiling faces because it makes us feel better. We like to think we want to see diversity at every table, at every level from the cleaning closet to the boardroom but I don't think we're doing the job that we could, I don't think we're being the people that we could be; I don't think we have really learned what it means to have an open door and an extra chair *every single night* and every single morning for the rest of our lives. Inviting people in is something that takes a small measure of courage, but what happens when you are no longer in charge of that table and someone else does the inviting? Are you really willing to be the guest at someone else's whim? How much power will you really give, and how much are you prepared to accept? Because it doesn't matter what kind of power you hold, it gives you authority somehow, somewhere. And when that authority is up for grabs it's harder to let go of it the fewer alternatives you have. So if you have five kinds of authority you'll give up one pretty fast, but when you're down to one place where you rule the roost, it takes a pretty deep breath to give up the very last. Especially if you're used to authority. Especially if you're used to power. And it takes a very special kind of grace to move aside without trying to undermine whoever is coming in after you.
Do you have that grace?

None of us are perfect. But in this diverse world, this is one star we have to reach for as hard and as fast as we can, because there are all kinds of people out there.
And there are all kinds of people in here.
And you never know who you're talking to unless they tell you, but they shouldn't have to, because we believe in dignity for dignity's sake, and as a congregation we affirm and promote the inherent worth of every person,
and so it doesn't matter whether we can see the diversity here or not. It's here because it's everywhere, and we must honor everyone.
every
one.
blessed be,
and amen.