

Struggle and Hope

Jacob was a man on the run. He had his reasons. Chronic dysfunctions and deep hostilities characterized Jacob's family history. Because his parents Isaac and Rebekkah played favourites, he and his fraternal twin Esau grew up hating each other. Jacob also swindled Esau out of his family birthright, which entitled him to a double share of the family inheritance. Later, he and his mother lied to swindle the family blessing from his blind and dying father.

When Esau threatened to murder him, Jacob fled to his uncle Laban in Haran, the very place his grandfather Abraham had departed. There he married his cousins Rachel and Leah, and eventually fathered thirteen children with them and his two slaves Zilpah and Bilhah. Sick of his father-in-law's manipulations, Jacob fled Laban, only to encounter his long lost and embittered brother Esau. The consummate deal-maker, Jacob concocted a bribe and sent a caravan of gifts along with his women and children across the river Jabbok. Perhaps that would pacify his brother's murderous threats?

Physically exhausted and deeply anxious about Esau, alone in the isolated wilderness, stripped of all his worldly possessions, at long last powerless to control his fate, Jacob collapsed into a deep sleep on the banks of the Jabbok River. With Laban behind him and Esau before him, he was too spent to struggle any longer. Darkness descended.

Then his real struggle began. Fleeing his family history had been bad enough; wrestling with God was a different matter altogether. That long and lonely night an angelic stranger visited Jacob. They wrestled through the night hours until daybreak, at which point the stranger crippled Jacob with a blow to his hip that disabled him with a limp for the rest of his life. By then Jacob knew what had happened, declaring, “I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared”.

When it was over, the Deceiver, for such is the meaning of “Jacob” in Hebrew, received a new name, Israel, which means “he struggles with God.” Most important and paradoxical of all, at the conclusion of that riverbank struggle, God “blessed him there”. Yes, God blessed the deceiver who struggled in darkness.

We abhor and fear weakness, failure, struggle, and doubt. Even though we know that a measure of vulnerability, fear, discouragement and depression accompany most normal lives, we construe these as signs of failure or even a lack of faith. Sooner or later reality catches up with most of us. In her book *Scarred By Struggle, Transformed By Hope*, the Benedictine nun and writer Joan Chittister uses the Jacob story as a paradigm for a “spirituality of struggle.” She has inspired and contributed to much of this sermon.

Joan states: “Struggle is part of life. In fact struggle is an unavoidable part of life. It comes with birth and it takes its toll at every stage of development. In each of them we strive for something new at the price of something gained. We tussle

between the dark and the daylight moments of the soul. If we stop struggling, we may die. But if we struggle and lose, we stand to die as well. So how are we to think of struggle? Is it loss or is it gain?

“Life itself is the answer. If no one can escape struggle, then it must serve some purpose in life. It is a function of the spirit. It is an organic part of the adventure of development that comes only through the soul-stretching process of struggle. No other dimension of life can possibly offer it because no other process in life requires so much so deeply of us. Struggle bores down into the deepest part of the human soul like cirrus tendrils, bringing new life, contravening old truisms. The problem is that struggle requires the most of us just when we expect it least.

Struggle comes when we face unexpected disappointment and change. It is the change that breaks our hearts and smothers our souls and haunts us all. “The divorce we do not want, the addiction we can’t beat, family scars we cannot face, the personal humiliations we cannot endure, the community catastrophes we could not avert and cannot undo leave us hollow to the core. How do we explain such things? How do we bear them? How do we survive them? And most of all, what happens to us – spiritually – as a result?”

We are scarred by struggle, but there can be hope. As your Cluster Animator, I can testify to this and I can lead you and support you. Joan goes on to write: “Every once in a while we get glimpses into the sundry elements, the

complex core of the spirituality of struggle. We see it in the character of someone we know who has gone through it and been softened or strengthened or wized by the doing of it. We recognize it in a piece of folklore that is suddenly confirmed by the truisms of our own lives. ‘No winter lasts forever’ we say (except maybe this week?!). ‘No spring skips its turn’. ‘While there is life there is hope’, we remember. ‘Despair is the price one pays for setting an impossible aim,’ we remind ourselves. We recognize it, too, in the great wisdom stories of the past that raise for public reflection the great questions and insights garnered over time by those before us. They are stories that sharpen our own perceptions and shape our futures as well as tell us our past. They are everywhere, these narratives of hope. They emerge in every culture; they rest in the hearts of every people. It is the Jacob story that best exposes the nature of struggle. Jacob and I – Jacob and you, perhaps – trod the same road of loss and isolation, darkness and fear, powerlessness and vulnerability, exhaustion and scarring. In the Jacob story are embedded all the dimensions of depression and despair – and all the seeds of growth and hope as well.

Remember the story.... Jacob was left alone in the night, wrestles, prevails and is renamed. “We shake our heads, mystified at the telling of this story. It appears in the middle of the Genesis text, unprovoked and unclear. It appears out of nowhere and does nothing to advance the plot, it seems. It resolves nothing. And

so we commonly ignore it. We consider it of very little importance. The best it does, it seems, is to raise great irritating questions in us: What is this scene doing here? What is it about? Who is wrestling with Jacob? What are they wrestling about? Why is this happening now? What, if anything, can it possibly mean to me? The questions are legitimate.

“It is an annoying little story, plucked out of nowhere, apparently, and wedged into the middle of a narrative about the rise and return of the heir triumphant. But I have an idea that in this story lies the whole stuff of struggle, the real presence of change, the secrets of a spirituality of letting go and going on despite pain, despite the extinction of what our heart tells us is the essential of our lives, struggle resolved, new gifts in hand.

The story is a simple one and, like many a life-changing event, comes along unexpected, unwanted and unexplained. Similar to letting go of Presbytery and the systems of the church we were familiar with and moving to a cluster format. In that dark night, Jacob, tired and alone, with no warning whatsoever, finds himself in a struggle, wrestling with the unknown, with a figure not of human origin – as we all do when we confront within ourselves either our demons or our God.

“Just as the Jacob story seems to break the flow of the text, our own struggles begin at those junctures of life where the past disappears and the future seems both unclear and totally unacceptable. We are on an unsure, unknown path,

but I am here to support you and our cluster. Similar to other life transitions: the loved one dies. The job fails. The marriage ends. The money disappears. The promise is broken. The illness fells us. The inner lights of life fizzle and dim, dullness sets in, and joy goes dry.

“The situation is classic: It’s not a matter of finding something difficult. It’s a matter of feeling faced with the impossible. Just when we’re least prepared we find ourselves lost to one world and unsure of the next. Sound familiar? Just when it seems likely, the great hiatus comes and life as we once knew it is ruptured forever. Just when good things seem more possible than they’ve been for a long, long time, perhaps, we’re faced with the awareness that we stand to lose it all. Just when we are most vulnerable, just when we most want to let go, to give up, to quit, we find ourselves in the struggle of our lives, trying to survive, trying to go on. Why? Because going on is what life is all about. Because there is no other choice. The only question is whether we go on in the fullness of ourselves, or live wounded and dour for the rest of our lives. One way is depression; the other way is new life. One way is defeat; the other way is hope. In the story of Jacob and the heavenly figure with whom he wrestles, we begin to see the elements of struggle.”

As we grieve the changes to our United Church structure, I encourage you to see hope in the possibilities of our Cluster, no matter the struggles it poses. Joan claims: “Struggle tests all the faith in the goodness of God that we have ever

professed. It requires an audacity we didn't know we had. It demands a commitment to the truth. It leads to self-knowledge. It brings a total metamorphosis of the soul. Enduring struggle is the price to be paid for becoming everything we are meant to be in the world. When we engage in the shadows of struggle, we are able to see the flickering light of hope that whispers around the edges of every pitfall in life. "When life changes under our feet, despite our resistance, without our permission, it is an invitation to growth."

Jacob wrestled. He engaged in the struggle, not wanting to give up. He wanted things to stay the same, but he realized change happens and struggle is inevitable and then there was hope. The darkness he was wrestling in became, as Joan puts it, "the incubator of light." Let me, as your animator, help you incubate your light, fan the flame on your ideas, and bring life to your congregation and events.

So Jacob was in the dark, in a sore spot in life. He wrestled with his past. He wrestled with his future. He wrestled with God. Where was the hope in these struggles? "Hope is rooted in the past but believes in the future." According to Joan, "The spirituality of struggle gives birth to the spirituality of hope. When we refuse to give up, either on ourselves or on the world around us, we become our own small sign that God is, that in the end right will prevail, that hope lives. Endurance is the light of hope in a continuing darkness that must somehow,

somewhere give way to the light of Jacob's dawn... Despair is a spiritual disease into which is built its antidote: hope. Hope is a series of small actions that transform darkness into light. The spiritual task of life is to feed the hope that comes out of despair. Hope, for us as a cluster, and for me as your Animator, is to help us wrestle with God, one another and be transformed into the selves we are meant to be, to step beyond the confines of our own congregations and see the greatness of God's creation – in us – around us. Yes, we have changed. Yes, we may grieve, but there is hope. Hope is the gift that rises out of the grave of struggle and despair.

Amen.