

## **Learning To Fall**

A sermon by Rev. John Morehouse

Pacific Unitarian Church

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Two weeks ago, before I left for my trip back to the East Coast to perform a wedding, preach and meet with colleagues, I preached a sermon on “Finding Balance.” Well, one of my lovely daughters asked me, “Dad, what happens when you lose your balance?” Hence, the title for today.... As we all know, no one ever learned to ride a bike without taking a few spills.

I have thought a lot about falling this week. It was a picture perfect Chesapeake Fall weekend last week: the hills resplendent with color and falling leaves. A sensuous reminder that only from death comes life. And life and death have been on all of our minds as a community, with the passing over of our own Joyce Knipps on Thursday, and the near miss of one too young, Jake Johns, with his skateboarding accident.

We don't like to think about falling, literally or from fortune or even the fall to death we all must take, but there it is. We want security to face the unknown. But falling is the natural state. “We fall and get hurt, but we also fall from grace, fall from arrogance, fall from fear...Falling is what we need to do in order to find balance, just like riding a bike” (Learning to Fall by Philip Simmons, Bantam Press, 2002).

The title for today's sermon comes from the title of a book by the same name, written by Philip Simmons. Philip Simmons was just thirty five years old when he learned that he had Lou Gehrig's disease. As a young husband and a father, at the start of a promising literary career, he had to suddenly come to grips with the fact that he was dying. As if to add a sad irony to his life, he lives in New Hampshire, among some of the most beautiful hills in the world, hills he once used to climb. For the last ten years he has watched his limbs slowly and unrelentingly cease to function. What is so remarkable about his story is what he was able to do with his tragedy. His lessons, like the lessons of so many of you, are the inspiration for what I want to say today.

I won't be trite. I won't say something sentimental like, “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade”. I, and too many of you, have known the devastating pain of loss, the heartache of divorce, the fear of disease, the

hopelessness of relationships that cannot be rebuilt. We know that when we fall it hurts. And even when we can get up again – and not all of us can - it still hurts. It may never stop hurting. So let me begin by saying that I find no redemption in pain Pain is pain. It hurts. And while we may grow stronger from it, it will always be what we seek to avoid.

I think the lesson might be deeper than this. What we need to do in order to live is to learn to fall. Actors and stuntmen learn to fall. Athletes learn to fall. How do they do it? Surely they hurt. And they do. But what they have learned to do physically, I believe we can learn to do spiritually. (ibid, Simmons)

When an actor or an athlete learns to fall they learn to anticipate the descent. This is a split second decision – although I am told that time slows down in a fall, I have yet to experience that. You look far enough down towards the ground that you can imagine what you will hit first. Falling emotionally is no different. First we look and notice that we are falling. Part of what hurts us emotionally so much is the surprise of the fall. (ibid, Simmons) Like slipping on ice, we are often the last to know our spouse is having an affair. What we thought was a cold, turns out to be cancer.

The best thing to do though, when you know you are going down, is to see where you are going. (ibid, Simmons) It took Philip Simmons years to garner the strength to write his remarkable little book. He admits that he had to come to grips with the fact that he was not going to live much longer. Denial is not a river in Egypt. It is a natural human reaction to a shock. But we need to shake it off as fast as we can because it keeps us from seeing where we are falling to.

And we do need to see where we are falling to. Most of the time, our minds do the job for us. “Oh my God,” we think, once we first learn the news. “I am going to die”. Well, yes, you are, we all are. None of us is getting out of here alive. But when we learn to see where this might take us we can then move on to the next step. Yes, Philip Simmons had Lou Gehrig’s disease, but for the first five years he would be able to function somewhat.

Most importantly, he had his mind that would not leave him. And there is the next part of what we need to know about learning to fall. We need to take some control of how we land. Actors are able to study this we have to learn it first hand. But when you fall physically you sometimes have the

“choice” as to what part gets hurt most. (ibid, Simmons) Instinctually, we cover our heads, or put out our hands. But sometimes you can actually turn your body as you are going down to let the behind take the brunt of it all. Why? Because it’s got the most cushion. There is more control in how we deal with a fall than we might first believe.

Take disease: when we first hear about something terrible we think, oh no! And we go to the worst place possible. We are trying to anticipate the fall. But then, as we are actually falling, we have that moment when we say, o.k., if I try this then that will happen -- we look at the drugs, the therapies, the gurus and we can begin to see we have more choice in how we handle this than we first thought. This is what I mean by choosing how we fall. There is a little – sometimes precious little – we can do to make a difference.

Others can help break your fall. This is the idea behind our Candles of Joys and Sorrows. As I remind us each week, a sorrow shared is a sorrow diminished, and a joy shared is a joy enhanced. When you share where you are going, even if it is death, you are breaking the hurt of the falling. Sure the leaving is tough. Sure, it breaks our heart. Sure we will miss those we love. But by sharing not only our sorrows but also the accomplishments of our lives, we bring joy back into the world and give some positive direction to our falls. Look at it this way – what’s better, seeing your fall as something you have to endure alone or seeing it as something we all endure? Share the pain, and share the joy of why life is still worth living.

Then what? Well, the final part of falling is to fall and roll. Or to put it another way to give up control as you actually hit rock bottom. (ibid, Simmons) It’s a well known fact that when people are drunk and they fall they are less likely to hurt themselves. Why? Because at the critical moment when they actually hit, their response times were so slow their muscles don’t tense up like those of us who are conscious do. Sometimes the best way is to let go of the outcome. I have watched more than a few people die over the years and I know that something changes when the dying let go of their grasp on life, when they don’t tense up. When we see that sometimes it isn’t up to us, and we can’t will it to be otherwise.

Those who survive drug addiction or any other addiction know that what gets you through the day is realizing that you don’t get yourself through the day. Some call that God. But there is a surrender that when it happens it really makes the difference on how you can get back up or how you are

going to leave this world.

Phillip Simmons died on July 27, 2002, from ALS. But look at how he broke his fall, look at how he rolled, look at what he left for the rest of us. I can remember when my mother died some years ago. It was not a good situation. She had been through one surgery and came out of it in incredible pain. She was hallucinating, and she knew she was dying. I held her hand, hoping against all odds that she would pull out, but knowing enough about medicine to know that it wasn't likely. My brother and father were ever hopeful and they looked to me to give them strength. But I knew. And my mother knew. And we knew together. As the last moments of her life were upon us, I whispered to her that it was all right to go. That I would take care of Dad and that there was a light waiting for her to go to. I realize now that I was telling her to roll, not to tense up, to let go. I remember that last moment when her hand lost its tension and then in another minute I could feel her spirit leave as well. She had fallen away.

Spiritually, our lives are full of these moments when we can learn to fall. When we can, if circumstances permit, let go. There are lessons to be learned, amazing grace to experience, by falling. There is a Zen parable about the man who was being chased by a tiger. The man ran and ran and came to the edge of a cliff. He had no choice to leap. As he was going down he saw a branch growing out of the hill. He grabbed it. Not knowing what to do next, he looked down and what did he see? Another tiger. Just then his eye caught sight of a small strawberry growing just within his reach. He plucked it, how sweet it tasted! (ibid, Simmons)

We will all fall. But if we learn to fall, we will find that sometimes, when we least expect it we are borne aloft on the wings of love, if only for the love of life. Amen