

## Sacred Imperfection by Bonnie Rose

[Below is the transcript of a talk that Rev. Bonnie Rose delivered at an Awakin Circle in the summer of 2018.]

I think I am going to speak about "Sacred Imperfection" today. I was sitting here meditating, thinking why did I pick something so hard?

It occurred to me that my whole life, particularly as a minister, there's been a lot of pressure to be a certain way my whole life. I've been trying to get it right and finally be perfect enough to be a really good minister. And what I've discovered in the last couple of years as I've grown more and meditated more deeply -- also through a lot of the values that I've practiced because of ServiceSpace -- that a lot of the secret of my success is failure. Which is odd. It's a paradox. And actually getting it wrong is as good as getting it right in many ways. Perhaps that theme would be relevant to someone here that might feel like they struggle sometimes with their inadequacy in some way or feel like they're not enough or that life is not showing up the way that they want.

If all goes according to plan, I want to share that there is actually a perfection in every appearance of imperfection.

Early on in my life, I was a nurse for a long time and an actress and a singer. I had no intention of having a church whatsoever. I just didn't think it was for me. I thought you had to be really perfect and holy to have a church and I'm not perfect and I'm, I'm actually not very holy. I'm sort of irreverent much of the time. And then, one day, I was walking my dog, Stella, on the beach in Ventura and I met a woman who said she attended the church. Somehow I just said to myself, "You know, if that church ever opened up, I might consider being a minister in a church."

So I looked at the listings for ministers in my denomination, and two weeks later, the minister quit and I said to myself, "Wow, I'm screwed. Now I have to really do something about this." I applied for the job and I might've been the only one left standing after all the auditions and they took me.

My first two years were absolutely horrible and there was an exodus from church membership because people just didn't like me very much. I had a very different style than the previous minister. The church was shrinking and the money was leaving but bit by bit, my people who resonated with me started coming in and now it's a really beautiful and wonderful spiritual center that goes very deep and as is incredibly functional. And I would say that it's now what most of the Church world would call successful. But I don't think we would have had that success without the failure that

happened before.

Lot of times people in our Church settings tap on spiritual principle to manifest the life that they want. Like that book and movie Secret. It basically says that if you think about it, you can have what you want; that you can use your thought to control your external reality. There's a certain value to that, but I find that it only gets us so far. And really behind everything that we want to feel is a sense of love, sense of meaning and a sense of contribution. So I would rather start there than trying to manifest a Mercedes or a man or what have you. I'd rather just cut to the chase and go to love.

Much of the teaching at our Center is to look at the world through the lens of what I would call absolute reality.

I believe that the ultimate reality underlying all things is love and that there is this unbroken wholeness. And that one thing that the founder of Religious Science said that I think is very profound -- there is nothing to be healed, only wholeness to be revealed. And so a lot of our work we do in my center is about revealing wholeness, seeing past the appearance of brokenness and seeing wholeness.

There are several ways that I use to explain what I mean by absolute reality. One of them is goats. :) Anybody here ever have a goat before? One person! Okay, good.

Well, it's Christmas at our church. At the very end of the evening, the choir sings very triumphant songs and sometimes, we'll include farm animals to march on stage and celebrate the joy of being alive! There was this one year when we decided to get a goat. My husband and I went searching for a goat and we rescued a goat who was about to be turned into meat, since she was too old. So we took her home with us and we're not really allowed to have goats where we live, but we kind of hid her in the backyard. And then, on Christmas Eve, she went on stage and she did her performance and she was kinda like one of those actresses who is destined for instant success. :)

The very next morning, she buttered her way out of the fence while we weren't looking. And I went in the backyard to find her -- Blondie -- she wasn't there. Now, I live in a very small town in Ventura County but I grew up in the suburbs of Manhattan. For a long time, I was always complaining about my town about how it was so small because there was no way, you know, that you could get Sushi in the middle of the night and there's no opera in Santa Paula. But when the goat got out, all of a sudden, Santa Paula was huge because there was so many places at this goat could have gone to nibble on grass. So that's how I explained absolute and relative. It's a matter of perspective. :) When there's no opera, Santa Paula feels tiny, but when your goat has escaped, it's huge. Right?

So we did find the goat eventually -- she'd gone over to my neighbor's house because she really liked children. But that's how I describe absolute and relative. When you start thinking about good and evil, is that also part of the unbroken wholeness? Joy and sorrow? Is that held in the holy absolute?

I would say yes again -- because of another experience that I had with the animal kingdom. :)

We have a cat named Molly, and Molly is a bit of a hunter. She mainly hunts rodents, and often drops a mouse in our bed, in the middle of the night! Typically she'll leave birds alone, but one day, I was looking outside and she was lying on her patio and there

were these blue jays that were just dive bombing her and trying to peck at her. I went out there and I started yelling at the birds and I was like, "You stupid birds. Leave my cat alone. What does she ever done to you?"

Then the next day, as I was leaving, I saw the birds attacking a hawk that was trying to get into their nest and all of a sudden everything changed. I didn't know whose side I was on. Hawks wanted something to eat and all living things need to eat. And yet the birds want to protect, wanted to protect their babies. And all living things want to protect their babies. So all of a sudden good and evil, bad and good, black and white, it didn't seem quite so clear anymore. That, to me, is absolute reality. It's a matter of perspective.

Perspective is often where we get in trouble. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan mystic, says to live like the truth is true. And so we live like the truth is true, but is it absolute truth or is it relative truth, our perspective? That's something for us to examine. Part of the process of awakening is looking at ourselves and seeing where we're living.

In my center, we're working a lot with this thing called the Law of Three, made popular by an Armenian scholar named George Gurdjieff. I read a book by Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest, who shared that there are three basic forces in a creative process -- one is an affirming force that wants to express something and one is the denying force that wants to, um, wants to kind of be a barrier or an obstacle. They both are holding in their own way and these two forces are opposing one another all the time. If we are mindful and awake, we can hold the tension of those two paradoxes in holiness. Then we make space, we create spaciousness for a third reconciling force to come in -- which allows something new is born out of that.

A very common example is the idea of planting a seed. The seed is the affirming force to see, wants to create something. The soil in some ways gets in the way, but then if you add the third force of sunlight and water, then something new grows, something that is generally better than something you could have come up with on your own.

And another sign that third force has been in motion is when, in the language of ServiceSpace, you see the ripple effect of the fourth. Fourth coming out of the law of three: new processes, new plant, new seeds and new growth.

If we apply Law of Three to the duality of perfection and imperfection, it becomes very practical. I'll share a recent example of how this comes into play.

At my Church, we have a poop problem. :) We are in downtown Ventura and there are a lot of unsheltered people who wander through our property and they, um, they use our Church as their bathroom. I mean, they poop on the stairs and the wheelchair ramp, all kinds of places like that. And it was getting really distressing for the people that work there, myself included. I was thinking, you know, "You're a minister, you're supposed to be compassionate. Why can't you be more like Jesus or Gandhi? Why can't you be nicer, you know, try and have a little compassion for these people?"

I don't know whether that was my affirming force or denying force, but this obstacle was not going away. I wanted it to change. I wanted something to be different, but the obstacle is not going away. And so then I started reading more about the third force and it was no coincidence that I went to India for Gandhi 3.0 retreat and we were there at Ishwar Patel's place who designed toilets and made a huge impact on India. Through that, I just kept meditating, meditating, meditating on the third force, and finally I recognized

what it was.

I was feeling like I was angry with the homeless people but that wasn't quite it. I was angry with my feeling of helplessness and my feeling of helplessness could actually be transformed into helpfulness!

One morning on one of my long hikes with my dogs, my phone buzzed. It was my board president who had sent me a picture of poop -- and he had put a pen next to it for perspective. I mean, it was huge. So I'm walking and meditating on poop, and all of a sudden, I started feeling great compassion for the person who had created the mess and also for the person that had to clean it up. And I just started getting overwhelmed with this feeling of compassion. And then I remembered that when I was a nurse, I used to actually enjoy taking care of homeless people because I had resources. And so I started, I started thinking about that and I started saying to myself, "Why aren't you the one who has to clean it up? Maybe you should clean it up." Yes. I wanted to clean it up. Next time I'm going to do it. And I got in my car, called the board president and told him, "Next time, I'm going to clean it up, because I want to practice, I want to be in deep service. And he goes, "Bonnie, that was bear poop from my cabin up in the mountains here. It was just a joke." :) Really, in my wildest dreams, I could've never imagined how this would turn out. This irritating, difficult experience was actually a good thing because it gave me insight into my feelings of helplessness and then the ability to transform them and that rippled into creating this whole new ministry in my center where we're actually doing a lot for people without homes right now and it's growing and growing. Sometimes we want like a to-do list of things that we can check off, but instead of trying to force something, we can also stay open to this mystical power that might create a new possibility altogether.

So that's what I would encourage all of us to do is to. If there's something in your life that seems imperfect, maybe that there is a hidden perfection within it, a hidden wholeness. When something feels imperfect, it is possibly only so because of our perspective. Not only our perspective but thinking that our perspective is true. The truth is that our perspective is true, but it's also not true at the same time.

Everyone, touch your elbow. Now, are you touching your body? Yes. Are you touching your entire body? No. Right. So that's very similar to our relationship with absolute reality -- we are touching a relative truth, but we're not touching the entire truth. Our truth exists within the context of a bigger truth. And I picked elbow because I think that we sometimes take our perspective, our relative truth, and we elbow our way through life with it saying that this is real. This is my truth. It's true but also not true at the same time.

Imperfections also have their own purpose. Ajahn Brahm is a Buddhist monk in Australia, who once built this brick wall. With his engineering background, he was extremely precise and meticulous about the way he built this wall. But when he finished, he noticed two bricks that were out of alignment and every time he looked at the wall, that's the only thing he could see. When people would come for tours of the monastery, he would try and be the tour guide so he could avoid that wall or if they wanted to take a picture, he'd like try and stand in front of the brick so nobody can get a picture of it. He was so mortified by these two bricks, until a tourist came in one day and said, "That's a beautiful wall!" "Well, but, those two bricks a little off." "Yes, I also see 998 bricks that are perfect."

That's often how we are with a lot of life. We tend to get hyper-focused on the

imperfections when really they're just a small portion and often are inviting us to a higher purpose.

I'll close with a pseudonym -- PRAY. P is to take a pause if something about you or your life seems imperfect. Step back and take a pause and just asking, can I see this differently? The R is for respect. Respecting that whatever's happening is happening for a reason. Respecting if it's a person that seems against you or a person that seems imperfect, then respect whatever is going on for them as part of a greater scheme. The A is for appreciate, to hold any imperfection within us with loving-kindness, in the larger context of our personal awakening and our collective, planetary awakening. And Y is for yearn -- to yearn for wholeness, to yearn for the homeless. Behind the appearances of brokenness, to stand in Rumi's field, out beyond the ideas of right and wrongdoing, when the soul lies down in that grass and the world is just too full to talk about this and that, perfect and imperfect. Even the phrase each other don't make any sense anymore.

It is really a privilege for all of us to be here in this body called existence, and to be here in this sacred space with the beautiful energy and paradoxes that ServiceSpace holds so beautifully and to receive from the open hearts of Harshida and Dinesh at this circle. To recognize that privilege is yet another way to hold our imperfections with grace. Indeed, it is a privilege to be there. Thank you very much.