“The world breaks everyone and afterward some are strong at the broken places,” wrote Ernest Hemingway.

Pesha Gertler, says “holy, holy” to the untended wounds and red and purple scars.

“Determined,” like Mary Oliver, “to save the only life you could save.”

I’m sure many of you can testify to that truth personally, like Shelley. Or because you know someone who has survived a particularly tragic event or series of events, and this person who comes to mind is particularly strong and deep, thoughtful, compassionate and wise.

Or you are, from having grappled with life’s tragedies. You may have survived abuse as a child, or a fire that took all of your possessions, or the death of a parent at a vulnerable age, or any series of life’s tragedies—mundane or extraordinary kind - which can befall us.

Kathleen Greider, in a book called Reckoning with Aggression, turns Hemingway’s statement over, and says that as true as it is that “the world breaks everyone and afterward some are strong at the broken places” it is also just as true “that the world breaks everyone, and afterward, many are broken at the strong places.” (page 13)

My purpose this morning is to encourage the strength, the transformation that allows us to be stronger and to not remain broken by the world. Because when life’s tragedies take away your spirit, you are not able to participate in saving the world. “you gotta be spirit, you can’t be no ghost.” is Amiri Baraka’s refrain from one of my favorite movies, Bulworth.

Bulworth, came out in 1998, the year I made a significant life change and entered seminary. The movie was not without some controversy. It deals with issues of race, and class, and power.

It opens with white liberal politician, the Senator Jay Billington Bulworth sitting in his office, obviously distraught, clearly losing it, as he hasn’t eaten or slept in three days. He watches his campaign ad on the television set over and over. You quickly learn that he is feeling like a failure. He is feeling helpless and hopeless, like all the work he has put into becoming and being Senator, has resulted in little good in the world, and even has perpetuated some evil.

If there was a word to describe his state, it would be “despair.” He is suicidal, and takes a contract out on himself. What I want you to feel is his despair, and, most importantly, his rise out of it.

He has dedicated his life to trying to make the world a better place. On the walls of his office are pictures of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, and there is one where he is in the picture with Bobby Kennedy. These photos tell of his past, but in this moment, watching his political ad on television over and over again, he realizes that his efforts, his actions, have not only not made the world a better place, but have even perhaps made the world worse.
It is a classic mid-life crisis breakdown – stereotypical – and I think this movie makes many people uncomfortable with its stereotypes – but, believe it or not, it is a comedy, and comedy often depends upon exaggeration to make its point.

So here he is, Bulworth, in the middle of another election campaign, and his staff is clearly worried about him, but also needing him to snap out of it and get on the road, read his speeches and shake some hands. And we, watching him, can predict that he is not up to it. Not up to it at all.

So his first stop is a black church, Grace Church, in South Central LA. He gets to the pulpit right on cue, is handed his speech by his staff, and begins reading it... stops, flips through the pages, and says “that’s about it. any questions?” The first question is about the riots – why the politicians who had promised to help rebuild the city hadn’t actually done so.

His response is something to the effect – “well, we all came down here, knew it would be in the headlines for awhile, made a lot of promises and then forgot about it.” To which the follow up is, “Are you saying the Democratic party doesn’t care about the African American community,” to which he replies, “isn’t it obvious?” then, he is asked why he wouldn’t support a bill to help ordinary folks get insurance, and his reply is again brutally honest –“the insurance companies pour a lot of money into our campaigns and they pretty much count on us to tie up a bill like that in committee and keep them from getting passed.”

His staff is freaking out, but Bulworth comments afterward, “That felt good.” and that’s the set-up for the movie. Bulworth begins telling the truth after years of politicking and sliding down the slippery slope of compromise and deception. This is, in effect, how he begins to get his spirit back.

The words spirit and spiritual are sometimes hard for me to grasp. I don’t always know what people mean when they say they want something spiritual – but in this context, in this movie, I felt like I understood what Amiri Baraka was saying when he repeated the lines, “You gotta be a spirit. You can’t be no ghost.” He is talking about vitality, life-force, and energy.

Poet, writer, teacher, and political activist Amiri Baraka, made a special appearance in this movie. Baraka died 5 years ago at the age of 79. But he is no ghost. His line, “you gotta be a spirit, you can’t be no ghost” haunts this film, and reminds me of what sociologist Robert Wuthnow says about spiritual practice.

"The point of spiritual practice is not to elevate an isolated set of activities over the rest of life but to electrify the spiritual impulse that animates all of life," Bulworth despairs at the beginning but is transformed and becomes electrified and is animated again, coming back to life.

Now the character Bulworth seems to have this one-time spiritual breakthrough, an experience that shifts his perspective. And some of you may have had such a transformative experience. But for most of us, personal change does not come so suddenly. It takes time and hard work and, yes, practice. Most of us are just trying to make sense of the changes that occur around us.

Zen teacher Alan Watts says “The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.”
This life-force makes us stronger in the broken places – moving from the position of strength in the world. Being firm about your convictions and telling the truth. Doing what Bulworth finally learned to do and saying afterwards, “that felt good.”

And only our wholeness brings the kind of strength in the strong places that allow us to actively stand up against injustice, measure our action in the world, and to move forward.

You’ve got a politician, a man, who lives in the world of reason and of words, who makes speeches and passes bills, or ties them up in committee. He lives in a “rational” world making what seem to be practical compromises, cutting deals and brokering agreements. But at this moment he is having an emotional breakdown. He is sobbing, not eating or sleeping, watching himself on television obsessively and clearly emotionally off kilter.

This emotional outburst and outpouring leads him to say things that others might not consider rational, even though they may be entirely true. They are “out of character” for the politician, but he does it anyway. In the course of the rest of the movie, he learns how it is to act with both his head and his heart.

I heard Parker Palmer once define spiritual as the connecting link – that which ties our head and heart together, and allows us to move forward with integrity. I really like that definition. The Hebrew word for spirit, ruwach (roo'-akh), is most often translated as breath or wind. And in many spiritual practices – yoga, for example, the breath is the link between the mind and body, the rational and emotional. “Your gotta be a spirit” says Baraka, and I think, yes, you got to breathe, you gotta be connected.

I wonder if fear is what keeps us from moving forward at times. Fear of making a wrong move, making a mistake, hurting someone by accident or of being hurt ourselves.

When Bulworth takes a contract out on himself, makes the decision to die, he has nothing left to lose. It is at this point that he begins to really live. He begins to tell the truth, quits worrying about what others might think, or who he might offend politically. He really tastes the food he is eating, for the first time in a long time, and finally has a good night’s sleep.

That is what brokenness does sometimes for us; when we face our own mortality, or that of someone we love, or the loss of something we thought was necessary, imperative. If we survive, we can become more courageous and one of the things that make all the difference in the world is the support we get in the crisis.

When I talk about the world breaking us, I don’t just mean in the extreme examples I gave – violence, death, destruction. There are the little indignities we suffer every day. The miniscule miscommunications which can keep us up at night. Those, too, can break us, if we are not careful and if we are not cared for.

Many are broken in the strong places. Overwhelmed is a word I hear a lot, to describe how many people feel with the pressures of work, family, society. How do you prioritize when there are so many demands? How do you connect when there is so little time together? How do you take back your life, so that it feels like yours and not the ghost of a life manipulated and out-of-control?
Well, I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know, but I, at least, need the reminder now and again. Do something you love. Do something just for you, and with those you love. Allow yourself to feel. Breakdown and cry, if that’s how you feel inside. Don’t let others rationalize away your pain, or your joy. Experience it. The wonderful thing about our emotional states is that they are almost always temporary. And if it’s not temporary, please reach out and get help.

It occurred to me that if more people who had suicidal thoughts were forced to wait like Bulworth, rather than acting impulsively in the moment, they might survive another day to finally get a good night’s sleep and save their families and friends a great deal of heartache and pain. Believe me, I don’t take suicide lightly. The humor of this film allows us to take in this kind of despair in tolerable doses in order to examine our own lives and our own brokenness.

Feel it in the moment, so you can feel something else in the next moment. The more we hold at bay, the greater the breakdown later.

Breathe. Use the spirit to check in right now. Breathe, and rest, and make room for healing.

The desires for connection and for movement are basic to our species. We are cared for by others at our birth, and are in constant motion from birth. Sometimes our movement, our actions, rub up against someone else, and exposes our differences, and if we’ve been hurt in the past – our freeze, fight or flight response might kick in. We can fight back, or give up. But there is another option. We can stand firm. We can say, yes, we differ here, we don’t agree, but I still want to be connected with you, or I still want to be in relationship.

The world is messed up. We accept that football players make more money than daycare providers, that people and kids are homeless in the richest country in the world, hospitals send people home before they are well because insurance companies won’t pay, etc. etc I could go on.

It is my conviction that these big injustices are built upon, depend upon, the little injustices of our lives. That is the cause of Bulworth’s breakdown at the beginning of this movie. He recognizes how his own decline of truth-telling and slow sinking into compromise and deceit has contributed to the injustice of the world. He is not the cause of it, but he has not helped it either.

You gotta be a spirit, you can’t be no ghost! Wake up, say all the great religious leaders. Wake up, said Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Wangari Maathai, Oscar Romero, and Thich Nhat Hanh. Wake up, said Moses, and Jesus, and Buddha, and Mohammed, and Lao Tse.

These are spiritual leaders who teach and taught that we must be awake and aware to be truly alive. Don’t let life’s tragedies take away your spirit “you gotta be spirit, you can’t be no ghost.” says Amiri Baraka.

Wake up. You gotta be a spirit. You can’t be no ghost. Others have walked this path and survived and grown and thrived. Change is possible. You gotta do when the spirit says do.

Will you please rise in body or in voice to sing with me and with spirit?
Wake up. You gotta be a spirit. You can’t be no ghost. Others have walked this path and survived and grown and thrived. Change is possible. Just remember to do when the spirit says do.

*Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.