The Softest Part | Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice

The Softest Part

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Content warning: The following submission includes mentions and first-hand experiences of suicidality, incarceration, homophobia, substance use, and sexual assault.

The softest thing on earth overtakes the hardest thing on earth.

—*Daodejing*, Ancient Taoist text

Dear Uncle Ben,

There is a writer—a thinker, maybe a social worker—who said something deeply important to me. I only read it once: it struck the core of me and planted itself there. I have since forgotten the writer-thinker-truth-teller's name but have remembered their words.

They said, "the hardest part of my work comes from the softest part of me."

The hardest part of me is the part most iron-clad, most outspoken, the angriest. It is the part that is chomping at the bit, anxious to uproot systems and tear down walls. And it was born from the part of me most tender, most feeling—the part of me that smiles when I remember playing hide-and-seek with you as a child. It comes from the part that aches as I play back our interview, transcribing your words. The part that knows, as I rewind the tape and you repeat your story, how it felt to hear you tell it—to watch you, years ago, live it. As I wrestle each recorded breath and sigh and gasp onto this page, I feel your feelings in my body.

The hardest part of me is the part from which I fight, the part for whose survival I would give up kinder, gentler parts of me.

The hardest part of me is an abolitionist.

Or maybe it's the softest.

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Of course, all of this would have been avoided had I just kept my nose clean.

That's your voice, Uncle Ben: italicized. A hard story made slanted, like I'm squinting at it. A little blurry, a little ethereal—maybe, then, a little softer. Mine will be straight up and down, grounding us here together.

Easier said than done, of course—I not only didn't seem to have the wherewithal, but also didn't seem to have the desire. I was so angry about what had happened. I think it was mostly anger at self, but it was definitely directed outward. It was the "system," it was the probation agent, and all that stuff that I was blaming.

I was so angry that I was defiant: I was like, "I'm gonna live my life the way I'm gonna live my life." Well, they definitely showed me how far I would get with that program.

Which is not very far.

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I have a theory. I have been taught to have a lot of theories, Uncle Ben, so that I have one now probably doesn't surprise you. My theory is that our softest parts are the same.

I remember being six, or maybe eight, peeking around the corner of the yellow kitchen wall, hiding from my sister—the seeker—hoping that when she got to *eight, nine, TEN!* I would indeed be *ready-or-not.* I imagine you there, also, twenty years earlier, back pressed tight against the cornflower paint. I imagine you dashing toward refuge

under the dining table, squealing as your own sister—my mom, with legs longer than yours—corners you as you come around the island, your feet skidding on slick linoleum.

I remember being eight, or maybe ten, peeking around that yellow corner, hiding from the stranger-of-an-uncle who was finally coming home. I was afraid you would be mean, or high—with needles sticking out of your arms—or big and furry, like the other monsters I'd heard of being in jail. I wondered whether you had read any of the books we'd picked out at Borders to send to you and whether reading those had made you nicer than all the other criminals. I hoped so. I hoped I was *ready-or-not* to meet you again.

You rang the doorbell. I pulled my head back around the corner, out of sight, as Mom jumped up to answer the door. Butterflies in my soft stomach, maybe fear: *Eight, nine, ten.*

My theory is that our softest parts are the same. My theory is that growing up with you in my life made my hardest part into an abolitionist.

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Our softest parts are the same.

I'd been in the closet in high school and college, and then, when I did *come out when I was 23, I felt like a complete outsider. I didn't really have any gay friends. I would go out to gay bars or gay events, and I'd see these groups of people together and I couldn't figure out how on earth they knew each other already. It was very cliquey. I felt like a* complete *outsider, felt just like a fly on the wall. I felt like I was ugly and fat and gross and all these other feelings.*

I feel that, too.

I feel your feeling of *outsider*, of *fly on the wall;* I feel your *ugly and fat and gross* as if they are my own.

You came out at 23; I did at 22. I listen to you say these words and I picture you on the periphery of a dance floor: hovering around the outer edge, barely visible in the dim light. I feel your *outsider*, feel the unbearable itch of whatever weight you think you shouldn't carry. I see you inching slowly deeper into the mass of bodies, gulping air as if you hope it is confidence. I watch as some sly smile reaches out a hand to you, glittering white. All you have to do is take it and the weight is gone: I watch as the room explodes into light and heat and rainbow reflections off a disco ball and as you sink deeper, feeing the bodies press into your body and the bass press into your bones.

I feel the bass, too, reverberating in me: twenty years later, in the living room of my college house, thrift store couches shoved tightly against the walls, roommates pressed together on our makeshift dance floor. Beyoncé bumps and Galentines swathed in pink sway away the minutes until midnight, when the clock will strike February 14 and all the gals become beholden to their boy "pals" and no longer to one another. Queen B. will keep singing but the dance floor will thin out until only us—the single and queer—are left, trying to decide whether it will feel worse to dance alone or to be still.

Earlier, in my tiny room directly above the biggest speaker, I'd stood facing the mirror, feeling the pregame beat shake into the soles of my feet and the softness of my stomach press into my palms. My eyes traced my outline in the mirror, and I *felt like I was ugly and fat and gross and all these other feelings.* Your feelings*.*

I went downstairs and tried to smile and found the Jungle Juice. I closed my eyes and took a shot against the *outsider*, another one against the *fly on the wall,* as in another lifetime you

tried cocaine. What cocaine gives you, what it does, is that it takes away all of those feelings instantly*. You go from being a fly on the wall to being a social butterfly, go from feeling unpopular to being popular, to* feeling *popular. It was a really* really *powerful transformation that occurred. Just from introducing a little bit of*

cocaine. And if a little bit is good, a little more must be better. It really gave me for the first time a feeling that I had a life, a social *life.*

Drunk among the press of bodies, I wonder if I have found my life, too.

How did that night—the thrum of the bass and pulse of our mirrored self-consciousness—end with me in a UChicago classroom, learning to turn the softness of me into action, and you in a jail cell, naked, wondering whether you'd freeze to death before morning?

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During the times when I was in the Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility I was having a lot of real mental health challenges; I was suicidal. I had two suicide attempts in jail, 'cause I just didn't think I could live with the reality of what was going on.

They found out that I had attempted to take my life by suffocating myself with a trash bag. They found out about it, and one day after lunch they came in and they got me out of my cell and sort of unpleasantly handcuffed me and took me down to segregation. And then they did a strip search, and then I got put into suicide watch.

The problem is there's no distinction between that and "the hole," or what they now call "segregation." You go and you don't get a pillow, you don't get a blanket, you don't get any reading material, you don't get anything at all—you don't even get your glasses if you wear glasses. You get a Bible, that's the only thing.

And there were feces smeared all over the walls. Just disgusting. So that was really the only place where they put me in an any sort of protective custody.

I spent about a week there and then basically had to talk my way out of it and say I wasn't suicidal. I went back up to my normal pod that afternoon. I was so relieved.

And then the counselor was like, "Do you still feel hopeless?" And the truth was I did still feel hopeless—

Of course you did.

—I was still in prison.

I said, "Yeah, I do." I said, "But I'm not gonna kill myself at this point." Well, just saying I was hopeless was enough that right after lunch: [you snap your fingers]*! Right back down, right back to the strip search, right back into protective custody.*

Me, sounding pained: Oh my god.

And that time I had a cell that was right under a vent, blowing ice cold air. You had no blanket or anything, basically, you're just in your underwear. 'Cause they don't want you to have any clothing to—sometimes you're naked. Sometimes they have like a gown that you wear: it's like a quilted, a very heavy cloth that's tear-proof. That was all you got.

I was literally… I was very concerned that one night in particular that I was going to freeze to death. I was uncontrollably shivering for hours. And could not get a blanket. And then finally, finally, *some sergeant came and gave me a blanket.*

It was very unpleasant.

I have never felt afraid for my life.

My softest part is still soft. Did yours harden, shivering until frozen, that night in segregation?

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My theory of our softest parts is supported by evidence. Our lives correspond.

Once upon another time, our college-era dreams don't stick, and our first adult jobs quickly turn into second, more practical ones. I stop performing and get a desk job at a theater, hoping teaching kids to act will feel the same as doing it myself. Your stint as a radio show host still gets you recognized by the moms of Madison when you stop by Kroger on your way home from the police academy. You're in uniform, looking nothing like the old you, but when your briefly-known voice booms across the canned tomatoes: "Excuse me, are you Ben Bradshaw?"

I wonder why you gave up radio, why you decided to go undercover, playing pal before busting people for using the same drugs that would later *feel like they gave me a life.*

I know why I gave up theater: frustration at the selectively stubborn nonprofit system, quick to co-opt progressive language yet slow to change for anyone but wealthy donors. Watching the security guard smile at me while he held up his arm and squinted, blocking my Black and Brown high school students from entering the lobby of the theater for their own performance.

Did you also feel emptiness behind the joy of doing the art you loved, because it didn't mean as much as you thought it would? Did you see someone get hurt and want to help them? Did more school—the police academy, UChicago—feel like the way to learn how? Did the validation of learning, of *smart*, of *helper*, make you feel powerful, too?

The first agent who sent me to jail after my first dirty UA, I felt pretty strongly did not like gay people. She had that reputation. I was pretty pissed about it, you know. If you have issues with your gay husband, go work that out with him—don't work that anger out on me, please. But she has that ability.

People in power do. People are flawed.

My theory has a problem. If our softest parts both sting, and ache to feel better, what will we do when we're given power?

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I can't think of any part of the justice system that helped me. And it almost killed me, frankly. I was also, sort of, minorly sexually assaulted in the Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility. And there was no real help: one of the programs I was in was actually a jail-based drug treatment program, it was like an alternative to revocation. That program was just useless*. They basically gave you a textbook and were like, "Okay, spend the morning reading in the textbook," you know,* if *you can read*.

But, I feel very strongly that there has to be a place for super violent offenders. They just can't be out on the streets. There's so much mental illness, so much drug addiction, and so much anti-social behavior and stuff that there are clearly people that can't be out on the streets in my opinion.

When you met, in jail, these *super violent offenders,* did fear keep you from seeing their softest part?

You have to have somebody with guns, there has to be someone to take care of that. Whether the police should be involved in half of the other fiddly stuff that they are is a different question, but for the serious stuff there has to be something, *something to stop a threat like that. But I certainly don't see how the prison system is at all helpful, really to anybody.*

It almost killed me.

Does a softest part, when it's hurting and no one helps it, stay soft?

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As I am sitting here in this cafe, editing your words and writing my own, I am eavesdropping on two UChicago law students at the table

next to mine. One is sipping cheap campus coffee and the other a homemade protein drink. They preach loudly to their choir of two about a prosecutor with “no ideology,” an attorney who apparently arraigns folks on aggressive marijuana charges while bragging about smoking weed herself: “She knows it gets you cred these days!” Laughter like a single-camera sitcom.

Most people that I’ve talked to, in jail or other places, had four, five, sometimes seven, dirty UA’s before they went to jail for the first time. I mean, they give ‘em chance after— Me, it was [snaps] *one time and boom, in jail. Combine that with the anger of feeling unjustly treated by this DA woman—that just fueled it even more, the resentment. It was a really toxic mix of emotion and perspective and all that anger.*

I stare at my screen as their voices soar above the din of the café, swelling with a righteous passion that feels… *impersonal,* somehow. Like they keep their softest parts at home. They joke, inexplicably, about how the attorney can’t sing: “She can’t carry a tune!” They don’t mention anything about the people the prosecutor has put behind bars. I wonder if they know I sit here, only feet away from them, mapping our lives, echoing your anger.

When they sentence you after a revocation, probation is not an option. But the DA wouldn’t tell us going into that hearing what she was gonna ask for. According to my attorney, her husband was gay. So she had a real vendetta against gay men. Whenever cases involving gay men came into the system, she took ‘em for herself. She was the one who determined who got what cases, and she always kept the gay men for herself and went hard after ‘em.

The law students bring up Marx. I wince—it’s too familiar. They use words like “paradoxically.”

They make me mad: Why are you, two white men, taking up space in stories that aren’t even yours?! With passion more intellectualized than personal?

And so she wouldn't even tell us—normally they tell you what they're gonna ask for. And so at the revocation hearing, when she asked for 5–7 years with 25 years of extended supervision, that's when your mom, who was present, just gasped *and started crying.*

Do they know what I'm writing right now? Do they know the ache of listening to your voice through my headphones as you tell me this story? How it makes my softest part burn, how it keeps making some unconscious part of me press pause, keeps tearing my eyes away from the screen? How witnessing our shared softness makes me want to run home, jump into my bed, and smother your words in my pillow, drowning your story in dreams?

Their laughter peals. I put my headphones back on. One of the law students has the same pair.

I could hear her crying behind me. And here I am: I'm shackled and just… horrible. Your mom— That was… scary. Awfully scary. I mean, just shackled. It was just so humiliating, the whole thing.

My anger at these men is shame, a sinking feeling that the way I have been wielding my hardest part has not been righteous, but self-righteous. Do I sound like them in class?

I know I do.

I don't think I would be here today if I had.

Had I gotten that sentence, I think ultimately I would have found a way to kill myself.

When I sat down at this café, I had planned to write an essay with a reference list several pages long, an essay that sang out its master's program-refined knowledge of every writer-thinker-activist it quoted. I had planned to critique your hesitation to burn down the system that hurt you, to use pretty words to make you think, make you feel exactly like me. But how can I, when you know the system so much more

intimately than I? When you lived within it? When it saw your softest part and almost snuffed it out?

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I continued using drugs on probation because I was trying to hang on to that very brief—we're talking, from the time I started using cocaine, less than a year—a very *brief period of finally feeling popular for the first time in my life and finally feeling like I fit in for the first time in my life. That was pretty powerful.*

We made a deal that if I went to treatment and completed it, then my probation wouldn't be revoked. So, I go to Hazelden Betty Ford, and then they put you on house arrest, which of course is isolating, lonely, boring.

I listen to you and I think of my teenage student, his black ankle monitor peeking out from below the sweatpants he'll be wearing to high school gym class after our tutoring session. He stretches back in the broken chair, arms reaching long above his head, and tells me how school gets out early on Fridays. He tells me how, in those freed up hours, he is allowed to briefly visit his baby daughter before returning home to his house arrest and his video games. He's not allowed to visit his other child, just a little older than the first, because she lives just across the Bay and "they don't let me go that far."

And so, guess what I did? Started using again! Not a huge surprise there. And then got in trouble again. I did two separate 90-day-plus stints on house arrest. 'Cause they just kind of lose track of the time sometimes. Like,"Oh! Oh, has it been 96 days? Oh shoot, sorry."

I think of my stepbrother, 22 years old and on probation for drunk driving, crossing the width of Michigan to report for his meeting with his probation officer. He adopted a puppy on his last trip, bringing her home to his one-bedroom cabin, adrift in the middle of some woods somewhere. He told me, "I was in Kalamazoo, and I looked around,

and there was no one I knew there anymore. I couldn't go back without her." He named her Luna.

The house arrest times were—it wasn't the worst, it was certainly better than jail, but it was not helpful. The boredom and loneliness really got to me.

I wonder if these boys feel the same loneliness you felt. I wonder if it gets to their softest parts, too. Uncle Ben, what would happen if you asked them?

I wonder if their much darker skin will keep them trapped under the watchful eye of the law for longer than yours did you.

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The judge kind of thought it over for a minute, and he said, "Well, I'm gonna sentence you with credit for time served."

He said, "I don't think prison is the answer for you."

I didn't even fully understand at the time what had even happened. I was like, "I think that went really well," and then I get back to my cell and like 40 minutes later they call my name and wshhht! *I was out within an hour after the hearing, into the warm embrace of my mom and Anne and Nick and everybody. It was quite a jubilant day.*

I went back to Minnesota and kind of resumed my life.

It was really a miracle, that sentencing day.

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Our timelines reconnect in a Zoom room on another COVID Thanksgiving. I try not to cough as you speak another life back into existence, filling out my dimming childhood memories with color and context, adult feeling.

My twin sister and I, three years old, crawling around in the back of your police car.

You, newly clean, stir-frying corn and zucchini on an outdoor open flame. The whole family gobbling it up; you out there again the next night, sand blowing into your wok.

Watching my mom type a Microsoft Word letter to the judge, attesting to your character. Maybe she also wrote about hide-and-seek.

The Fortune Fish and Gourmet trucks that often drive through Hyde Park, making me imagine you at your desk at their headquarters, sending the emails that send the trucks here.

I have to rush off of our Zoom, and we feel unfinished. We make a plan to talk more at Christmas. Maybe, when we meet, I will read you this letter. I'll see you then.

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People are like, "Don't you try to hide your felony from people?" The way I look at it, it's all a matter of public record anyway. I don't lead with it if I can avoid it, but there's not any point in pretending it didn't happen, because it did.

I want a world where we know lived experience strengthens us. I want a world where we, from within our different lives, hold our softest parts side by side and notice they are the same, or once were, or could be. I want a world where sharing our softness makes fighting for each other—the hard part—irresistible.

I want it because of you.

Love,

Hannah

Hannah Clague (she/her) is a second-year Master of Arts in Social Work student at the UChicago Crown Family School of Social Work,

Policy, and Practice. She received a Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance and a Minor in Writing from the University of Michigan School of Music, Theater, and Dance. At UChicago, Hannah is a member of the Contextual Behavior Practices Program of Study and Rockefeller Chapel Choir. She is passionate about theater for social change, public education, youth homelessness, and the queer community.