

“Parables of the Pandemic”

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As always, it is good to be together in worship.

These are the words I used to begin last Sunday’s reflection. And, again, they are true. It is good to be together!

Last Sunday – doesn’t that seem like weeks ago? So much has changed even since...Tuesday. We have gone from pretty much “business as usual” to everyday life screeching to a halt. And, for the first time in Winchester Unitarian Society history, we are worshipping together on-line. For the first time, I stand in the pulpit and look at the sanctuary and only see empty pews.

But, as always, when we are not together in person, I know you are part of this Beloved Community. As I continue my reflection, I will imagine you here in the Sanctuary with me. It is helpful that many of you sit in the same pew every week so I can easily conjure your image in my mind.

As you can imagine, I have been thinking about many things this week. Some memories that keep coming up for me are from my first year serving as minister here. That year was also the 150th anniversary of the congregation, a milestone that often brought me to the Society Archives.

If you haven’t been in the Archives, it is about the size of the bathroom off the Symmes Room – not very big. The good news is that the archival material is all organized by year, by ministry and by subject, such as “social justice” or “finance.” The bad news is that all three of these systems are in place simultaneously so looking for something in particular requires opening many boxes.

While there is some organizational work to do, the Archives is a wonderful, almost magical, place. What I love about this collection of photographs and newspaper clippings and paper newsletters is that it is like a time machine. Open a given file and the past, documented in minute detail, comes full into the present.

Take, for example, these minutes of a Social Outreach Committee meeting on February 16th, 1983 I once read: “The meeting convened in the Coonley’s comfortable living room, complete with friendly cat, at 8:15 pm.” The minutes were signed by someone named Stu Graham, “chairperson, secretary pro tem and lover of calico cats.”

Throughout that anniversary year, there was a persistent feeling of self-consciousness. For if I, in the present, was leafing through these records and memorabilia, discovering and bearing witness to congregational life from the past, then it is conceivable that the good people of the future could one day explore who we are now, how the world was changing in our time and how we responded to those changes.

It seems like this service should be captured in our archives, the first one broadcast on-line. But unless we save a digital file to a USB drive or print out this sermon, how might we preserve this moment? As the word “streaming” suggests, in this era of modern technology, this moment could easily slip through fingers thumbing through boxes.

However we record this time, to help orient our friends in the future and to recall how we got here: a recap. A new virus, called the Coronavirus or COVID-19, emerged in Wuhan, China. While it is relatively harmless for many, over time it became clear it poses significant risks to the elderly and immunocompromised. Complicating this situation, it is very contagious. Carriers may be asymptomatic for a number of days; they can easily pass the virus to others through simple activities of daily life.

Thus, in a short period of time, the virus traveled far from China. Places like Italy and Iran were slow to enact “social distancing” measures so rates of transmission were, to use one journalist’s word, “explosive.” Dramatic spikes in sickness overtaxed healthcare systems leading to limited equipment, insufficient hospital beds, a lack of virus test kits and deaths of sick patients. Where there are insufficient resources, someone in some system has to decide who gets a greater chance at living and who doesn’t

Coronavirus first appeared in the United States a few weeks ago on the west coast. This week the first two presumptive positive cases appeared in Winchester,

around the same time Arlington and Lexington announced the virus's arrival in their communities. Tuesday, Governor Charlie Baker declared a State of Emergency. This Friday, the Winchester school system, among others, closed for at least two weeks.

So, between last Sunday and now, we at the Winchester Unitarian Society went from scheduling our Saturday LexRAP fundraiser and Sunday Chili Cook Off as planned, with additional precautions, to on-line worship, a mostly empty building and cancelled programs. We have arrived in a place defined by the confusion of figuring out how to serve our mission of promoting spiritual growth, social transformation and environmental responsibility in a way that does not involve people gathering together. Or, sadly, sharing food. God, I love the Chili Cook Off. I invite your input, feedback and ideas as we navigate this new territory together. Like you, I cannot do this alone.

As I named – to use a phrase from our student minister, Marianne – the “pandemic-induced whiplash” has inspired a number of thoughts. Or at least a number of observations. It is a vocational hazard; some of my observations are theological. Stay with me.

My first awareness of “pandemic theology” is about interdependence. The Seventh Principle of Unitarian Universalism is “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” So often, in ways right and meaningful, this translates into reverence for the natural world and acts of stewardship; after all “environmental responsibility” is one third of our mission. Or, we speak of “interdependence” in a mystical sense, an understanding that all living things are bound together through the great energy of creation.

As we learned how the virus has traveled across the globe, we also learned how truly, how tangibly connected we are; human touch relaying from family visits in China to ski vacations in Italy to public bus routes in Seattle, radiating all the way to here, our home, and beyond. Prohibitions about touch have revealed how much people hug and kiss, how often we shake hands, how tactile it is to be human. And, as an aside, how often we touch our own faces without thinking about it.

The call for “social distancing” or “healthy spacing” reveals how, in ordinary time, how socially bonded we are. And the cavalcade of canceled events reveals how often we come together to enjoy beautiful music, to watch sporting events, to gather in rallies to support a politician or platform. And the canceled rites-of-passage - a college graduation, a family wedding in India, ordinations and installations – and the subsequent grief about these losses reveal how meaningful some gatherings can be. I never quite recognized the frenetic nature of human contact until it became necessary, for the good of the herd, to cease and desist.

My second awareness of “pandemic theology” is also about “the interdependent web.” Within any given Unitarian Universalist congregation, including this one, there is great diversity in theological belief. Yet reverence for nature is an almost-universal thread. Spending time outdoors often nourishes our souls. There is a spiritual connection to the earth that binds us with all of creation. You can include me among those who feel such a connection. In the immortal words of Wendell Berry, “When despair for the world grows in me...I come into the peace of wild things...For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

And, if we are to be honest with ourselves, what I am now calling “Coronapalooza” reveals the complexity of being part of the natural world. This is true for any backpacker who goes into the mountains to become “one with nature” and, as part of the hike, encounters a grizzly bear or rattlesnake that means business.

I learn this lesson every time I meet someone in cancer treatment. A cancer diagnosis no longer means certain death but cancer can be a terrible, relentless disease. And, yet, we need cell division in order to live. Cancer is simply a small deviation from the very delicate fine tuning of an on-going biological process.

In a similar way, the coronavirus is also part of the natural world. While not a living thing like bacteria, it clearly has a life of its own, a life that has turned our lives upside down.

Moments ago, we invoked “the spirit of life” through song. If we are honest, we recognize that this “spirit” is not always human-centered. That, as the Buddhists remind us, the “three marks of existence” are suffering, impersonality and impermanence . Life is often hard and eventually, for all of us, terminal. And while we invest much belief in the self, that belief is not shared by our ecosystem.

Perhaps the starkest thing I heard this week was the question whether this pandemic is a way the earth is seeking balance. Just as we delight in imagining COVID-19 perishing as we sanitize our hands, fewer humans is good for the earth. As we stop driving to work and flying to family reunions, our carbon footprint plummets. I do not delight in this idea but, with the understanding that life is not about us, everything is mortal and the natural world sometimes includes unhappy endings, it is an analysis that makes sense.

When I titled my reflection “Parables of the Pandemic,” I hoped to capture the lessons of this time. For a parable is a story that bears a lesson within. Right now we are writing this story. And this story is being written all around us.

This month, the theme is “wisdom.” I know when some unspeakable tragedy happens, the question arises: How do we explain this to the children? So often, we turn to the words of the eternal minister to us all, Mister Fred Rogers, who teaches us to “look for the helpers.” In this month of “wisdom,” in this time of pandemic, I have become inspired to “look for the wise ones.” I have become inspired because I knew I would be standing in this pulpit in this moment and, frankly, because I was looking for wisdom for myself.

I looked and I found wisdom in the words of Rebecca Solnit, from her book “A Paradise Built in Hell,” shared by my colleague and our Summer Minister Joanna Lubkin. Rebecca Solnit reminds us that “The word ‘emergency’ comes from ‘emerge,’ to rise out of, the opposite of merge, which comes from ‘mergere,’ to be within or under a liquid, immersed, submerged. An emergency is a separation from the familiar, a sudden emergence into a new atmosphere, one that often demands we ourselves rise to the occasion.” This etymology of “emergency” serves as a question, asking us how we will rise in this “new atmosphere.”

I found wisdom among members of our own community, who teach a similar lesson. They affirm that every new, unexpected situation can be a crisis but can also be an opportunity to learn, to try something new, to explore. You have heard me say it many times before: dog trainers remind us that curiosity is the opposite of fear. What does *curiosity* look like amid this pandemic?

I found wisdom from another colleague, Lynn Ungar, who wrote a brilliant poem, “Pandemic.” Since I read her words early this week I have been pleased to see

them – excuse the pun – “go viral” beyond my small Unitarian Universalist world. Her poem feels like a commandment, a commissioning, to render our response to the pandemic a spiritual practice. She writes:

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath— the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling. Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.
And when your body has become still, reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful. (You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another’s hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.
Promise this world your love--
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

The parables of this pandemic are still being written. In time, whatever unfolds for this community will be another record to be noted in the archives. The archives – the journal of a congregation founded amid the lingering trauma of the Civil War, a faith community whose first minister died of tuberculosis while in office, whose building burned down, whose minister joined the front lines of World War I. Our story will join the stories of generations whose worlds turned upside down for a time.

I would like to say that everything will be alright. But that would be irresponsible. I would like to say that everything will return to what we remember. But that might not be true. Perhaps you will decide you love on-line worship and this will become a new ministry. Perhaps fervent hand washing will become a widespread cultural custom and my little handmade soap business will ensure I have solid savings for retirement. Perhaps, in some ways – large and small, good and bad – everything will be different.

I don't know what comes next. But, in my search for the wise ones, I would like to say I will be like the people in Italy. Perhaps you have seen the video? A dark urban street is filled with song as people, sequestered in their houses, raise their voices so they can be heard, so others know they are not alone. Like this sanctuary, it is not safe for them to gather as a choir but together, behind their doors and windows, they create harmony. It is as if they are proclaiming "people around me are ill and dying. My government failed to prevent this. Yet, I – and we – in this moment are still alive. How can I keep from singing?"