

Endings and Beginnings

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What a month this has been. This is not how we imagined our lives would be... worried about the health and safety of ourselves and each other. Too much physical isolation and not enough social connection. Way too much working from home on endless zoom calls, sometimes while caring for children and supporting their learning. Or, not enough working – from home or anywhere else. Our hearts heavy from hearing the stories and seeing the faces of those impacted by the coronavirus on endlessly streaming news sources.

This is not how we imagined our lives would be... And, this is not how I imagined my internship with you would end. I never dreamed I would be leading my final worship service from my living room instead of in the beautiful and sacred Sanctuary at Winchester Unitarian Society. Instead, I imagined my internship ending with hugs and well wishes and celebration... and cake! Alas, I have no cake in the house to celebrate with, and even if I did, it wouldn't be a celebration without you – the members and friends of this congregation who have become so dear to me over these past two years. It has been my honor and joy to be your intern minister. Each one of you has helped to shape my formation as a person and as a minister. As my internship with you ends and I move forward into ministry, wherever I go, you will go with me.

Given these unusual times, Heather has devised a plan for us to be together again! When this pandemic is over and we can once again be in the same room, Heather has proclaimed that there will be festivities – and cake! – to celebrate the many joys of being together. And, I will come back to say goodbye in person. I look forward to sharing that day with you. May it arrive soon.

Until then, we are here, in the midst of experiencing the impact of Coronavirus in our lives. In the swirling of change and uncertainty, I have had one of Mr. Rogers' songs going through my head:

I like to be told
If it's going to hurt,
If it's going to be hard,
If it's not going to hurt.
I like to be told.
I like to be told.
It helps me to get ready for all those things,
All those things that are new.

What is hard right now is the unknown of all this. Mr. Rogers was right. We would like to be told what is going to happen, and when it is all going to be over, and when there will be a vaccine, and when we can all return to our normal lives.

What we are learning is, it is going to take time—weeks, maybe months—for us to see this through. We are not going to figure it out all at once. And we need to learn to live with a level

of uncertainty that feels pretty uncomfortable. Like many of you, I can overwhelm myself by worrying about all the unknowns of what will happen next.

What I do know is, however you are getting yourself through another day of this unprecedented time, you are doing great! Whether you're overwhelmed, scared, bored, irritable, exhausted, can't sleep, having weird dreams, getting nothing done, getting everything done. Whether you are carving a path to the refrigerator or zoning out in front of the TV for hours – however you are getting through the day, you are doing great! Really.

It's hard being home with the same people – or alone – day after day. We each having coping strategies – some more beneficial than others, and some that conflict with the people we are living with. This isn't an easy time, so please take tender care of precious self. Be extra kind and gentle with yourselves and others.

During this time, I've experienced many of the challenging feelings and coping strategies I've just described. I also have some beneficial coping strategies:

I've been taking strolls on a section of the Tri-Community Greenway near my house. This is a new path for me. I stroll along slowly, paying attention to the leaf buds on the trees that are getting bigger each day; the grass that's getting greener; the daffodils that are starting to bloom; listening to the birds singing to each other; and the babbling of the Aberjona river. It's a wonderful respite to get out of my house and be in nature. And, I'm certainly not alone. Other than going to the grocery store, taking walks or riding a bike is about the only activity we can do right now.

When I'm too busy to take a stroll, I try to take at least a couple of mini breaks. My favorite is: going outside, turning my face toward the sun, spreading my arms wide and opening my heart chakra to receive the blessings of the sun – the ever-present sun that continues to rise, shine, and set – pandemic or no pandemic. The steady rhythm of the sun brings me comfort.

I have also been leaning more deeply into meditation. I've been an on again off again meditator for many years. But, this past December, I finally settled into a daily, well almost daily, practice. For the most part, I've experienced meditation as something calming. That is until the Coronavirus pandemic. Just as the world is experiencing external disruptions, I am experiencing internal disruptions.

In meditation, I am very aware that my nervous system feels jagged and frazzled. In spite of focusing on my breath, my mind chatters on in a panicky litany of fear, anxiety and grief. I make mental lists of all the urgent things I need to *do* as soon as the chime rings. I feel like there is so much more I should be doing. Everything seems so urgent and vitally important. At the same time, we can only *do* so much and I, for one, can exhaust myself in worry of all that I'm not doing. So, I decided to shift the question to... "How do I choose to *be* at this time?" I didn't try to force an immediate response, I decided to bring the question into my meditation practice as an inquiry of curiosity.

One recent morning, I felt compelled to watch the news first thing – before I meditated. Definitely not recommended by any meditation teacher, but that’s what I did. After the news, I tried to settle into a meditative state but faces and scary stories of the people I had just heard about kept racing through my mind.

In the midst of this very stressful meditation, the words “Peace, my brother. Peace, my sister. Peace, my soul.” popped into awareness. With these words, I felt my body soften and relax – for a brief moment! Then, my mind began to chatter wildly again. It worked once, so I softly said out loud. “Peace, my brother. Peace, my sister. Peace, my soul.” Again, I softened and relaxed. I kept saying these words over and over until the chime rang.

Since that morning, I’ve continued using an adapted version of Maya Angelou’s beautiful words as a meditation mantra: Peace, my siblings. Peace, all beings. Peace, Mother Earth. Peace, my soul. Peace. Peace. Peace.”

I realized this Peace Mantra was a response my inquiry: “How do I choose to *be* at this time?” I can *be* peace. In this time of change and confusion and fear, I can create a relationship with peace and make spreading peace a focal point in my life. That’s a nice intention, but what does that look like in day to day life?

- When I hear the stories of people who are struggling because of the Coronavirus, or other life situation, I wish them peace.
- When I take strolls outside, I bless everything I see with a prayer for “Peace” – the people, trees, birds, dogs, flowers, and the earth holding us all.
- I’m making a conscious effort to not add more negative energy to the planet. If a conversation is divisive or judgmental, I am practicing saying, “I’m not comfortable with this, can we talk about something more enjoyable.”
- When I’m feeling stressed, I take a mini peace break and repeat the mantra: Peace, my siblings. Peace, all beings. Peace, Mother Earth. Peace, my soul.

But what is peace anyway? I find great wisdom in how spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle describes it. He starts with what peace is not. It’s not about enjoying what is happening. Let me repeat that, it’s not about enjoying what is happening. Peace is accepting the truth of what *is* -- then responding by doing what you have to do, for now – in this moment, in this situation. For example, no one would probably enjoy changing a flat tire at night, in the middle of nowhere, and in the pouring rain, but we can bring acceptance to it. Performing an action in the state of acceptance means you are at peace while you do it. On the surface, acceptance looks like a passive state, but in reality, it is an empowering way of responding to life – as it is – instead of how we wish it to be. ¹

I want to be clear though, embodying a peaceful way of being is not easy. Just like covenants, embodying a way of being is aspirational. I fall off the peace train many times every day. Sometimes, for the whole day. Instead of being peaceful, I’m grumpy, tired, and short-tempered. Peace flies out the window. Then, I remember and take a breath and bring myself

¹ Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose*, page 296.

back into alignment with: “How do I choose to *be* in this time?” This is not a quick fix, it’s a transitional process of becoming that happens slowly.

But we can start the process of who we want to become now. We can use the uncertainty and stress of this pandemic situation to develop a deeper relationship with how we choose to *be* at this time, how we choose to respond to this current situation. It’s possible that the stress and anxiety of the situation will interrupt old patterns and habits that no longer serve us and will be a catalyst to see the world and possibilities anew. I am reminded of words by environmental activist, Joanna Macy: *“If we were to be given a pill to be convinced, ‘Don’t worry. It’s going to be okay,’ would that elicit from us our greatest creativity and courage? No. It’s that knife edge of uncertainty where we come alive to our truest power.”*

I believe we are at a threshold between the world as we have known it ending; and birthing a new world. We are in a time of transition and re-birth, which is never easy; there is fear, tears, and pain in every birthing process. And yet, what is born may be greater compassion and peace for our siblings, for all living beings, for the earth, and for ourselves.

In this time of re-birthing our world, I believe it’s more important than ever that our actions be aligned with and rise out of life-affirming energy. Peace may not resonate with you. There are multitudes of other positive energies we can be spreading in the world. Choose whatever energy calms, soothes and uplifts your own sense of well-being. Because you, and the world, need more of whatever energy that is.

I invite you to consider: How do you choose to *be* at this time?” Then, see what happens as you begin to focus on allowing that energy to expand. What new insights emerge? What new actions are you inspired to take? What shifts do you notice in your relationships? In this time of greater stillness and reduced busyness, we have the opportunity to dream of a future our hearts know is possible. We have the power to bring something entirely new into the world. There’s nothing we can do to change the past, but the future is unwritten. What we do right now will help create that future.

We don’t know what this new world will look like because it hasn’t emerged yet. We are going to build it together. It will require all of us contributing our unique visions, passions, perspectives, and talents to co-create something greater than any one of us can create on our own.

One thing I know for sure about the members and friends and staff of this congregation is: whatever vision or goal you set out to focus your attention on, you do it with big hearts and willing hands. You do it with smiles, hugs, warmth, wisdom, trust, respect, laughter, generosity, and care.

May the world we create be an embodiment of all these qualities. I can’t wait to see what happens next!

May it be so. Amen.