

The Only Way Through?
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

“A Blessing for One Who Is Exhausted” by John O’Donohue

When the rhythm of the heart becomes hectic,
Time takes on the strain until it breaks;
Then all the unattended stress falls in
On the mind like an endless, increasing weight,

The light in the mind becomes dim.
Things you could take in your stride before
Now become laboursome events of will.

Weariness invades your spirit.
Gravity begins falling inside you,
Dragging down every bone.

The tide you never valued has gone out.
And you are marooned on unsure ground.
Something within you has closed down;
And you cannot push yourself back to life.

You have been forced to enter empty time.
The desire that drove you has relinquished.
There is nothing else to do now but rest
And patiently learn to receive the self
You have forsaken for the race of days.

At first your thinking will darken
And sadness take over like listless weather.
The flow of unwept tears will frighten you.

You have travelled too fast over false ground;
Now your soul has come to take you back.

Take refuge in your senses, open up
To all the small miracles you rushed through.

Become inclined to watch the way of rain
When it falls slow and free.

Imitate the habit of twilight,
Taking time to open the well of color
That fostered the brightness of day.

Draw alongside the silence of stone
Until its calmness can claim you.
Be excessively gentle with yourself.

Stay clear of those vexed in spirit.
Learn to linger around someone of ease
Who feels they have all the time in the world.

Gradually, you will return to yourself,
Having learned a new respect for your heart
And the joy that dwells far within slow time.

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Sermon

Every now and then these days I catch myself realizing how strangely accustomed I've become to the way things are in these days of pandemic – the virtual gatherings, Zoom worship, masks, vaccine appointments at a football stadium or baseball park or a mall...

As the columnist and humorist Dave Barry often writes at the beginning of his columns about one or another outrageous actual happening in the real world (exploding pop-tarts anyone?): "You can't make this stuff up."

But here we are. In this strange world of Zoom and masks, different and sometimes inconvenient for just about all of us... yet needless to say, far, far worse for so many others.

Here we are. A year into all the Covid-19 restrictions and guidelines and still a fair way from so-called normal.

So it may well be that the language in the early sections of the John O'Donohue poem applies to the way some of you have been feeling, some of the time anyway: Time taking on a strain, light in your mind dim, weariness invading your spirit, tide gone out, marooned, "forced to enter empty time" – and so on. All utterly understandable feelings.

Yet... if you're listening to my voice right now, and/or seeing my image and the images of others on the screen... you *have* made it through the year – somehow. Whatever your living or work situation, whatever the state of your finances and health, here you are. Some of you have had Covid – mild or severe; some of you have lost a dear one to this terrible disease, and we extend our hearts to you in your grief.

So, yes, all this and much more that could be said about the year we've been living... *and* we are still here this morning. We've made it through thus far. How have we managed it?

There is an old saying: The only way through is through. Well... of course. True enough. But helpful? Could in fact be a little depressing, because actually... we'd much, much prefer a shortcut out rather than through – out of whatever might be distressing us... including, right now, the Covid-19 pandemic.

Dante would have preferred a shortcut too. “The Divine Comedy” opens with Dante in a proverbial dark wood. He sees light ahead at the top of a hill and wants to go right to it. But three beasts – a panther, lion, and wolf, block his path.

Then the poet Virgil comes along. He tells Dante that the only way to the light is to take a very... very... long journey first: through the Inferno, Purgatorio, and then finally to Paradiso... and then back to his earthly daylight life.

Dante's only way through was indeed through. Yes he, like us, would have really liked it to be otherwise. But for Dante, like us, it couldn't be otherwise.

So... this may not seem like a very heartening tale. But among the many layers of meaning in Dante's long poem, there are two simple things that speak to me anyway in today's context. Maybe to you too.

How did Dante get through? *Not* all on his own.

He had a guide all along the way: First, the poet Virgil in Inferno and Purgatorio. And second, he had the assistance of divine love, manifest in the character Beatrice, in Paradiso – who had also sent Virgil to begin with.

So – how do *we* get through – the pandemic, as well as lots of other things? Well, to get a little more contemporary than Dante, I chose our opening hymn: “Lean on Me” by Bill Withers:

Lean on me
When you're not strong
And I'll be your friend
I'll help you carry on...

So, to begin with we lean on each other, help each other, keep each other company, just as Virgil kept company with Dante, and guided him along the way. These days our companionship might often be on screens or on the phone or at a distance. But whatever mode, it is huge to know we have someone to call on – whether as in Bill Withers' “Lean on Me” or James Taylor's “You've Got a Friend”...

When you're down and troubled
And you need some love and care...

So... know that you can call on me, on anyone on our Pastoral Care Team – and, really, anyone you see on the screen in front of you this morning.

Then, our closing hymn will be “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.” It was composed by Thomas A. Dorsey in the midst of deep, deep grief after his wife had died in childbirth, along with their infant son. The words are poignant beyond words, particularly when you know his story. In any case, his calling on “precious Lord” (as Dante had the assistance of divine love) might or might not be our language, but if nothing else it comes from an awareness that we – like Dante – are held by, cared for, larger forces than our individual will – spirit of life, love:

I am tired, I'm weak, I am worn
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand, precious Lord.

So... how do we get through?

Yes, with the help of one another. And many also attest to the experience of more than a little help from inner/outer resources beyond naming. The twenty-third Psalm, which we heard earlier, is a poetic call to those resources beyond naming, something like Thomas Dorsey's. The Psalm's language is not my theological language, but even so, saying these ancient words brings me peace, helps me rest in the moment, return, in John O'Donohue's words, to a measure of calm, to slow time, opening to the small miracles I'd been rushing through.

And this leads to another perspective on how we get through – the importance of one day at a time, coupled with a wide or long view at the same time.

In a marathon, for example, the experience moves from a mile at a time to a block at a time to a few steps at a time as the finish line looms. Not a bad metaphor for the pandemic marathon. In this spirit, many of you have shared with me the small yet precious things to which you've been giving your attention these days to help you get through: reading, music, poetry, artwork, seed catalogues, a cup of tea, a walk. For those of you who have work, attention to each task, one thing at a time. And another day passes, then another week...

At the same time as we narrow our focus – one step or one day or one task at a time, it seems to me that widening our perspective also helps along the way of whatever marathon we're living through. When it comes to an actual marathon, it is all too easy to start paying attention only to the gathering pain. But when you remember to look around, to notice the sky and fields, to really see the faces of those cheering you on along the side of the road – all the small miracles you'd been missing –suddenly, as it seems, you've run another mile.

In the pandemic marathon I know that many if not most of you have made it from day to day, season to season by widening your perspective to caring for your family and friends; and many of you have further widened your perspective through activism: becoming part of the movement for racial justice, working on responding to climate

change, along with other forms of service to the greater good. And the days and the seasons pass.

Finally this morning, “gratitude” is a word and a quality that many of you have named in our conversations as helping you get through. Naming and letting ourselves experience gratitude for the blessings of our lives has remarkable healing power. As most of you know. I surely do.

Sometimes simply gratitude for the surprising gifts of the moment: glancing out the window as a hawk swoops by or a deer runs through the woods, or as the sky clears from the morning clouds, or surprised by the phone call from a friend you hadn’t talked with for months, or by the impulse to make that surprising call yourself.

Well, as I’ve said to you in one way or another for the past year, “take care of yourselves, take care of each other.” Know you are loved within this community, you’ve got friends here; and know you are held by the spirit of life and love by whatever name.

Yes... of course the only way through *is* through – but the spirit with which we live through and help one another through... well, that makes all the difference.

So it is. So may it always be. Blessed be.

Benediction

May we take each other’s hands
as we walk the journey of this time in our shared lives...
knowing that the hand we extend and the hand we touch
are the hands of life and love, God of many names.

Peace and blessings to all.

Amen. Blessed be. So may it be.