

More Than Silver Linings
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Readings

from the *Isha Upanishad*, as translated by Eknath Easwaran:

Those who see all creatures in themselves
And themselves in all creatures know no fear.
Those who see all creatures in themselves
And themselves in all creatures know no grief.
How can the multiplicity of life
Delude the one who sees its unity?

The Flower Communion prayer by the Unitarian minister Rev. Norbert Capek, who originated the Flower Communion in 1923 for the Unitarian congregation he founded in Prague, Czechoslovakia. This version has been adapted for inclusive language:

In the name of Providence, which implants in the seed the future of the tree and in all human hearts the longing for love; in the name of the highest, in whom we move and who makes all who they are; in the name of sages and great religious leaders, who sacrificed their lives to hasten the coming of peace and justice... let us renew our resolution sincerely to be real brothers and sisters, siblings, regardless of any kind of bar which estranges one from another. In this holy resolution may we be strengthened, knowing that we are one family, knowing that one spirit, the spirit of love, unites us.

Sermon

What, if anything, have we learned during these past fifteen months of pandemic and pandemic lockdowns and restrictions? What, if anything, will we carry forward into the next months and years? Is this time merely a blip in human history – or might it be a transformative moment?

With such questions in mind, and as this Zoom worship year *from* the Old Ship Meeting House winds down, and as we seem at least here in the United States to be emerging from the worst of the pandemic, I've been reading some of my journal entries from just over a year ago. And page after page reads as if I was writing not a year ago but from another century.

To begin with, there was so much I/we couldn't know then and that we know now, at least know better: how the pandemic would spread, how long it would last, how many lives it would take... not to mention how the rest of that election year would play out.

But here's a truth too easily ignored: We never know what an upcoming year or even a month or a week will bring. It's just that at the beginning of this pandemic time this "not knowing" was understandably much closer to the surface, magnified and colored not just by a usual curiosity about the future, but also about serious and persistent, even fearful, worry. Along all these lines, here's something I wrote in April of 2020:

As a world community, though scientists and infectious disease specialists know a lot, we are to a large extent charting our own path forward as we go – so much is still unknown about the virus, there is so much uncertainty. So, if nothing else, the pandemic has laid bare basic truths about life that we most often ignore or deny: life is uncertain and everything is impermanent. So, which sort of life do you want to live: a life of denial, a life in which we try to mask these truths and realities by accumulating things, seeking praise and worldly success... or a life awakened to how things are, a way of living that allows us to relax into each moment, to be fully present to each person, liberated from fear of what we cannot change.

Then a few days later I wrote:

It is all too easy to forget that greater suffering arises when we resist what *is*, when we wish for things to be different than they are but have no power to change them. So... easy to bemoan that this is what our lives are now... and when can we get back to how it was before?! Instead, how about this: So, this is life now, at least for some time, and this is what ministry is now. How interesting! And, after all, it *is* interesting... and anyway it does absolutely no good to wish things were otherwise when you have no power to change what is.

Well, little did any of us know in April of 2020 that we would still be Zoom worshipping in June of 2021, only beginning to emerge from pandemic restrictions, with plenty of hope, measures of joy, yet still with concerns and worries about what the next months might bring.

What a year, more than a year, it has been – "interesting" to say the least. For it has also been a year filled with so much suffering from Covid, and filled with much suffering still: the suffering of those who will long grieve their losses of dear ones from Covid, the suffering in many communities and nations still very much in the midst of the pandemic.

Now, as you've heard, this year I've often preached and written about the inequities and injustices that have been revealed by the pandemic and that have been further revealed by the rising for racial justice following the murder of George Floyd. And I've preached and written often about the ways in which the crisis of climate change and environmental degradation more generally has become ever more visible this year, visible in the heat waves, wildfires, and storms... and visible through the contrast with the clear skies over usually polluted cities during the early months of lockdowns when there was little driving and reduced industrial production and therefore pollution.

So of course we can only hope that these revelations of inequities, injustices, climate crisis, and so on remain at the forefront of our collective consciousness and conscience as we emerge from the pandemic and seek better ways to live together in our nation and on our small planet. For we can hope too that having glimpsed during the pandemic the possibility of other ways of living that are more congenial to the flourishing of human life and all life, that more and more of us will work to realize those ways of living – indeed to “be the change we wish to see.”

But as my journal entries suggest, these critically important matters of justice and ecological sanity need to be rooted in yet more profound learnings about the nature of our precious, impermanent life at *any* time or place.

Learnings which (have you noticed?) are not all that easy to absorb into our lives.

Here another entry in my journal from the spring of 2020. Early Sunday morning, April 26:

Almost time to go to the Parish House – for the Bodhisattva Study Group, and then the worship service and coffee hour. But aside from faces on the screen, I will only see one other person, Christopher. It is very different and strange when you think about it. Yet how quickly we humans adjust – “this is how things are now.” And anyway, are we so certain that everything about the old, usual ways was better? You can sleepwalk through almost anything. And the point is to wake up.

All that said, it wasn’t too long into our life of Zooming almost everything that many if not most of us came to a grudging appreciation for at least being able to connect on a screen – whether with a family member or an old friend, or at a committee meeting or class or worship service.

But whether in person or on a screen the point is, isn’t it, to wake up to how things are at any moment.

Also in April of 2020, I came across an essay (in *Parabola*) that included an anecdote about rock musician and composer Warren Zevon. Nearing the end of his life, after a journey with lung cancer, only in his fifties, in an interview with David Letterman, Letterman asked if he had any insight or advice about living. He answered: “Enjoy every sandwich.” Here’s what I wrote in my journal in response:

Well, not so different from “smell the roses” and other cliches or platitudes. But the ordinariness of a sandwich makes it stand out.... And this said, we should enjoy the “sandwich” even if it is only on the screen. *This* sandwich, however ordinary, however like the last one we had. The writer of that essay, which was titled “The Presence of Beauty,” makes that very point, writing about a lake near his home, a lake he’d been sort of dismissive of, as not as beautiful as other lakes in other places – until a friend, seeing it for the first time, commented on how beautiful it was. Comparisons are beside the point.

So in this time of coronavirus, social distancing, and so on, maybe part of the message is to appreciate what *is* rather than comparing it (whatever “it” is) to what was or what we hope will be.

Well, I could go on. There are pages and pages of journal entries I could share, indeed several volumes of pages. But for now I’ll just add these two sentences from Sunday, May 3, 2020:

In an odd way, we might be living through a sort of privileged time. This *could* be a major turning point in human history – if we allow it, if we are awake to the possibilities.

You see, it seems to me that being more awake to the nature of life as uncertain and impermanent is intimately linked to being more awake to the possibilities of creating a world of more kindness, more justice, more ecologically sane ways of living on the planet.

We *are* all one family under one sky, as the song puts it; and none of us live forever. And though we know that there is suffering that inevitably comes with simply being alive, we also know that there is too much suffering for no good reason, that doesn’t need to be: suffering because of the color of your skin or because of who and how you love, or because of where you happen to be born or happen to live... in other words suffering we can do something about. So why not do something about it?

Awake to the beauty and transience and preciousness of our thoroughly interdependent lives – maybe having awakened a bit more to all this during the pandemic – why not be a little kinder... or a lot kinder... why not, instead of going back to what we called “normal,” why not help create a better “normal” – a normal far more conducive to the flourishing of life?

That would indeed be more than a silver lining. That would be golden! That would be platinum!

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.