

What, After All, is Normal?
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Readings

from chapter 54 of the *Tao Te Ching*

What is firmly established cannot be uprooted.
What is firmly grasped cannot slip away.
It will be honored from generation to generation.

Cultivate Virtue in your self,
And Virtue will be real.
Cultivate it in the family,
And Virtue will abound.
Cultivate it in the village,
And Virtue will grow.
Cultivate it in the nation,
And Virtue will be abundant.
Cultivate it in the universe,
And Virtue will be everywhere.

“Let Them Not Say” from *Ledger*, by Jane Hirshfield

Let them not say: we did not see it.
We saw.

Let them not say: we did not hear it.
We heard.

Let them not say: they did not taste it.
We ate, we trembled.

Let them not say: it was not spoken, not written,
We spoke,
we witnessed with voices and hands.

Let them not say: they did nothing.
We did not-enough.

Let them say, as they must say something:

A kerosene beauty.
It burned.

Let them say we warmed ourselves by it,
read by its light, praised,
and it burned.

Sermon

To begin with this morning, here are some words I've patched together from my preaching during the first weeks of the pandemic lockdown in 2020 – which, I hardly need remind you, began two years ago this week:

Wendell Berry once wrote that “when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work, and when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey.”

What *is* our real journey now, in this trackless wilderness into which we've been thrust, our journey when the sidewalk ends? My hope: *Not* returning to our culture's striving for ever more consumption, ever more exotic experiences, always having to be the best... rather a journey towards more equality, more kindness, more love... toward really understanding that we're all in this together.

Further, many have noted that the lockdowns necessitated by coronavirus, for all the real hardship they have brought to millions... have at the same time been a healing time for the Earth – as energy use has declined, meaning that greenhouse gases and other forms of pollution have also declined.

We of course must bring back the livelihoods of the millions who are out of work around the planet. But the challenge is to do so in ways that don't just replicate the past “business as usual” – business as usual that has, as we know, been overheating the planet for decades at great peril to our human lives and to all life.

This means that the challenge will be to create a new, improved normal as coronavirus recedes: greening our way of life on our home planet, living more gently on the Earth, using less energy in all of our sometimes frenetic moving around... so, maybe moving around less (which we've discovered we can do...), all as we bring greenhouse emissions to net zero as quickly as we can... all as at the same time we reduce the social inequities that scar the lives of so many, inequities starkly laid bare during the pandemic.

All... as we rise to the task a German astronaut once named: “humankind's most urgent task, which is to cherish and preserve the earth for future generations.”

Does all this seem unlikely? Maybe. But who knows? Who really knows?

Back to Wendell Berry, who continued in that same passage:

“The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.”

Boy, how about that last line: “The impeded stream is the one that sings.”

Our stream of business as usual is certainly impeded now... on the whole planet. Yet there *is* singing, lots of actual singing as musicians share their healing creativity for the whole planet to hear and enjoy, to be inspired, lifted, healed.

And there is also the “singing” (*remember I preached this in the spring of 2020*) of innumerable numbers of people helping one another... including simply through the challenging act of staying home to slow the spread of the virus, to save lives.

Do we know where or how this journey will end? Where life is taking all of us?

Of course not. But the question we *can* answer is this: in what spirit will we live, these days and always? Millions upon millions of us are answering this question with kindness and love. Guideposts for this mysterious journey we have always been on.

Will life someday be just as it was before the pandemic?

Actually... I hope not. Rather can we be patient enough even as life resumes some vague semblance of “normal” activity to be part of helping to make a better, more equitable and just and greener world than the one we’ve left behind, that world of too much rushing and too little savoring, that world of too much division and hate, and not enough respect, understanding, and love.

Well – it may well and understandably seem that many if not most of the hopes I (and many others) held in our hearts two years ago have been dashed. It may well and understandably seem that the world as it is now is way too much as it was in the “before times” – and in some ways even worse, as the brutality and danger of Putin’s criminal war against Ukraine replaces with fear whatever hopes we still harbored for a better world post-pandemic.

But, truly, again, who knows? You may recall the Chinese story of the lost horse. Here is one version:

A man and his son lived on the northern frontier of China. One day for no reason their horse ran away to the nomads across the border. Everyone tried to console them. But the father said, “What makes you so sure this isn’t a blessing?” Some months later their horse returned, bringing a splendid nomad stallion along with it. Everyone congratulated them, but the father said, “What makes you so sure this isn’t a disaster? After all, their household was richer by a fine horse, which the son loved to ride. But one day he fell off the horse and broke his hip. Everyone tried to console him, but his father said, “What makes you so sure this isn’t a blessing?”

A year later the nomads came in force across the border, and every able-bodied man went into battle against them. The Chinese frontiersmen lost nine of every ten men. Only because the son had this broken hip and couldn’t fight did father and son survive to take care of each other.

Truly, blessing turns into disaster, and disaster turns to blessing: the changes have no end, nor can the mystery be fathomed.

(slightly adapted from *Favorite Folk Tales from Around the World*, ed. Jane Yolen)

Look, I know and you know that life is rarely as simple as this story. We surely never wish for or welcome a disaster thinking it might be a proverbial “blessing in disguise.” But this story was created to make a point about change, and our sometimes faulty human judgements as to what is blessing and what is disaster – and it seems to me it has a lesson for us today. A simple lesson, but I believe a critically important one:

Would we not do better to put aside such judgements and just do what we can in relation to whatever circumstance, do what we can today and tomorrow and the next day, do what we can with who we are, where we are, and with what skills and gifts are ours, however seemingly modest (for it does all add up... of course it does.)

As we heard in Jane Hirshfield’s poem “Let Them Not Say,” her gentle yet powerful call to action, we *do* after all know enough, we see enough, we hear enough, to do what we can – in

regard, for example, to saving democracy and the planet, in regard to contributing to relief work in Ukraine, and much else.

We do know enough even though it is possible that everything we do will be as the poet put it “not-enough.” But... again... who knows?

For everything we do might indeed be enough, particularly if we continue to “cultivate Virtue” in every circle of our lives as the *Tao Te Ching* enjoined us to do in the first reading ... remembering that the Chinese word, *te*, translated here as “Virtue,” also means “power” – power derived from alignment with *Tao*, with the Way (capital “W”), aligned with, as we could choose to put it, the arc of the moral universe.

In this, our own Unitarian Universalist “Principles and Purposes” are a pretty darn good guide to cultivating the power of virtue... as we seek the truth, mutually support our spiritual and ethical growth, and strive to be part of creating justice, peace, and world community in the midst of this interdependent web we call life.

Well, all this said, here’s one sure thing for us: There is no going back to some past imagined “normal.” A “normal” which after all was not, as I was preaching two years ago, an entirely satisfying state of affairs in all sorts of ways, to put it mildly.

And neither is there going forward to some new settled “now everything is okay” normal. After all, as traditions as diverse as ancient Greek philosophy and Buddhist teaching remind us, change is a constant, nothing is settled for long.

So, yes, many of us are indeed finding that we can return to some of our previous “normal” routines and activities. This is welcome and pleasant and more than okay.

But we’ve also learned new and different ways of living, for example connecting with one another electronically – a blessing in the midst of disaster, alleviating some of our need for carbon-footprint travel, and bridging distances to keep us closer to those we love here close to home and among those in Ukraine.

Further, perhaps collectively more of us are now more awake to the threats to our democracy, to the ongoing pandemic of social inequities, and to the imminent and present danger of the climate crisis. Wakefulness which is itself a blessing... or at least the beginning of blessing, of possibility...

Finally, might it be that even in regard to the tragic and heartbreaking brutality of Putin’s war against the people of Ukraine... which of course must never be called a “blessing in disguise”... yet might it be that the unity of most of the world’s nations and peoples in response to this war could translate into a new era of unity and resolve when it comes to much else, climate at the top of the list and the health of the world’s democracies, which means more justice and equality too, perhaps close behind?

May we, then, each of us and all of us together, be awake and alert to the possibilities of each moment, of each circumstance, never assuming we know how things are going to “turn out” for good or ill; rather, living today in ways that will make more likely the good of tomorrow, including the rebirth of democracy and freedom, the renewed flourishing of life on our dear Earth home. Beloved community for *all*.

So may it be. Amen. Blessed be.