

How Are We Doing?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

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.

“The Peace of Wild Things” by Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Sermon

It has been quite an eighteen months, hasn't it?
So many lost to Covid. So many grieving those losses.
So much loneliness and isolation.
So much hardship: front line workers of all kinds from grocery clerks to bus
drivers; health care workers, from doctors to nurses, aides, housekeeping.
So many stretched to the limit and past the limit.

And even if we have been safe and well, and our dear ones safe and well, it has been – and continues to be – a time of unsettling uncertainty (yes the pandemic, but of course much else in the world these days too) often challenging our spiritual and sometimes our material resources.

How have we been doing? How have we coped?

As individuals, over these past months I've learned from many of you how you've been managing in the midst of isolation, remote this and that, losses, grief, worries:

You've been maintaining connections with family and friends – phone, FaceTime, Zoom, and blessedly now finally more often in person. I hope remembering that you don't always have to struggle through hard times alone, keeping up the smiley face when sometimes you are far from smiling inside.

I've heard how you are tending to yourselves, your spirits through some sort of self-care, spiritual care, however you name it: for some that means meditation or yoga, for others getting out for walks, in the woods, on the beach, or just in your neighborhood... and for many of us it can be as simple as turning off the news and allowing our mind/body/spirit to settle into the present moment (which sometimes might include something like a baseball game, trivial in some ways, but absorbing, pleasurable... a sort of blessed relief from whatever else). And some have mentioned a practice of gratitude as hugely helpful: As one of you put it to me, naming what you have rather than lamenting what you don't have.

But all this said, it seems to me that the first step for any of us during any tough time in our lives is maybe just this: Acknowledging how we are doing, naming for ourselves and maybe with a friend that things are hard if indeed they are hard. Too easy when asked how you're doing to say "I'm fine" when you may not be feeling at all fine. Not that we should dump on everyone... but you can name how things are for yourself or with a friend or dear one or therapist... or minister.

Then you might find that you can breathe a little easier and get on with it, whatever the "it" of a particular day might be.

Remember that wonderful book, "Tuesdays with Morrie"? Morrie was a professor who was living the final part of his life with ALS. One of his former students, Mitch Albom, visited each week. Morrie was generally remarkably upbeat and positive. Well, one Tuesday Mitch asked him if he ever complained, ever got down. Morrie replied of course – in fact he gave himself some time every morning to complain, even cry... and then he got on with his day, with living.

That bit of life wisdom has stayed with me.

Yes, for spiritual and mental, even physical, health, sometimes we just need to say to ourselves or to someone else how we are really doing – instead of wishing whatever problem or challenge or hardship didn't exist (an utterly human sort of wishing which actually doesn't help much). So instead, naming how things actually are, naming how we're feeling about how things are. Then moving on to figure out how to manage, how to cope, how to carry on.

I think much – maybe most – of what I’ve been saying applies to our life in community as well, community such as our Old Ship congregation.

Now, I believe we have managed pretty well this past eighteen months in the midst of the challenges posed by the pandemic to our community. We have stayed connected through individual phone calls and notes; stayed connected through Zoom meetings and classes, stayed connected through our on-line worship so we could all still feel part of our community. We’ve learned what we’ve needed to learn technologically to manage.

But it *has* been a long time and in fact it has sometimes been hard. Of course!

And we have challenges other than COVID too, as every church does. To begin with for us, the challenge of staff transitions: our wonderful new music director Christopher coming on board just a few months before the pandemic came along; Julianna Dunn moving on as administrator just as the pandemic had begun; Beverly Tricco resigning as Director of Religious Education; then our year with the good fortune of Chloe Briede filling in in the office as well as as interim RE director; now our good fortune (but yet another change) of Lisa Beck as our new administrator; as we continue our interim time in religious education with our new consultant, Deb Weiner.

Is your head spinning yet? Can you keep it all straight?

And now, in addition to all this, a new chapter of our Parish House challenge begins.

All at the same time that we have begun a new chapter with how we gather... learning how to gather in hybrid or multi-platform fashion. We have indeed re-gathered in person for worship, but with masks and no congregational singing – so though it’s good to be in the same room together, it may not feel entirely satisfying, may feel awkward at times (does for me). And at the same time some are worshipping remotely, on Zoom. And this leads me to wonder: do we feel as connected with everyone as we did when we were *all* having to be on Zoom? Or are we now feeling as if we are a community divided? Or maybe just learning yet another way to truly be gathered as one, even when physically apart?

I don’t have clear answers.

But I do know the overarching question: How *are* we feeling and how are we doing as a congregation?

Well, I’ve named some of the challenges, named some of what’s going on for us in our community. And I’m guessing that many of us may be feeling a little unmoored or unsettled in this time of continuing uncertainty when it comes to COVID, unsettled perhaps in our personal lives, unsettled when it comes to where we’re at and how we’re doing as a congregation.

But here’s the thing: We’re still here at First Parish in Hingham... after almost 400 years after all. And we have really fine leadership on our Board, and various committees. And we know how to listen to each other and take care of each other.

We’ll be okay.

And as the story for all ages (“What Do You Do With a Problem?” by Kobi Yamada) pointed out, we might do well to keep in mind that problems, even big ones, often come with “an opportunity for something good.”

Reminds me of the story of the boy who woke up on Christmas morning only to find that his stocking was filled with... horse manure.

He said, “Oh boy, that means there must be a pony somewhere!”

In other words, we might do well to be looking for the ponies...

I want to shift gears for the remainder of my musings this morning – not unrelated to all I’ve been saying:

One of my favorite psalms is Psalm 121. The opening words are printed at the top of your order of worship today:

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help?

My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.

I invite you to read that first sentence, as many translators do, with a question mark at the end: “From whence cometh my help?” It is a plea for help! (The Psalms are in fact filled with pleas for help, using the religious language of their time.) A plea for help: Where will my help come from, who will help me.

The next line and indeed the rest of the Psalm is an affirmation that help is ready at hand: “My help comes from the Lord.”

But what if our faith is shaken and challenged? Or what if that religious language has little meaning for us?

Well, one of my favorite old jokes is about a fellow standing on his roof during a flood. He is praying for help: “Oh Lord, save me... oh Lord, save me!”

A rowboat comes by and the guy in the rowboat beckons the fellow in – but he declines, saying “The Lord will save me.”

Then a helicopter lowers a ladder. Again he declines the help saying “The Lord will save me.”

Well, he is swept away by the flood and finds himself at St. Peter’s gate. He is perplexed, since he had prayed to the Lord for help!

St. Peter says, “Well, we sent you a rowboat... then we sent you a helipcoper...”

In short: To use traditional religious language, we are God’s hands and heart. A helping hand – your hand, my hand, your neighbor’s hand – is God’s hand in human flesh. A blessing.

And if you prefer, you don’t need the “God language.” We are the hands and heart of the interdependent web, of the family of life, the human family, reaching out to one another.

Then there’s the 23rd Psalm, which we heard earlier. The opening of this Psalm suggests the ways that we can know and feel comforted by God in nature:

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...

So... the beauty of a sunrise or sunset? The beauty of the changing leaves? The beauty of God in the colors of nature. A blessing.

Similarly: The beauty of a song or symphony? God's melodies. More blessings – with or without the “God language.” Beauties and melodies of the cosmos – healing beauty through human creativity. Blessings.

So when we're having a hard time – as many of us have had at one time or another during the pandemic (maybe right now for some of you), not to mention during the rest of our lives... it's okay, indeed important, to allow ourselves to feel how we are feeling, to name it.

Then we can reach out if we feel we need to reach out – finding God or simply re-discovering we are not alone – in and through the hands and hearts of our dear ones, our friends, our neighbors.

And we can seek the solace of nature's beauty or the beauty of music to soothe our soul... finding God or simple solace in the colors and embrace of nature and the melodies of human creativity.

As the quite wonderful poem of Wendell Berry concludes, for a time resting in the grace of the world.

So may it be.

Benediction

May we go forth with gratitude in our hearts...

Grateful for blessings, then turning to make of our lives a blessing to others, a blessing to all life.

So may it be.