

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

A Time for Every Single Thing

*Reverend Victoria Safford*

Sunday 19 November 2017

---

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH  
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115  
651.426.2369 [vsafford@wbuuc.org](mailto:vsafford@wbuuc.org)

**FIRST READING**      *from Paul Tillich, 20th century Christian theologian*

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness.

It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life.

It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged.

It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us.

Grace strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying:

You are accepted.

You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you,  
and the name of which you do not know.

Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later.

Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much.

Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything.

Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.

If that happens to us, we experience grace.

After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe differently from before, but everything is transformed. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but acceptance.

**SECOND READING**     *from Rev. Kit Novotny, 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian theologian*

For everything there is a season,  
and a time for every single thing this side of heaven:

a time to be a baby, and a time for last breaths;

time to rage incoherently at the state of the world,  
and a time to tuck yourself into soft blankets and drink ginger tea;

a time to smash the imperialist white supremacist capitalist hetero-patriarchy,  
and a time to build up the egalitarian, multiracial, anti-racist, environmental,  
liberationist love movement;

a time to make wishes on dandelions, scattering seeds to the wind,  
and a time to pluck up new weeds, declare them flowers, and make new wishes;

a time to ugly cry and let the snot drip down,  
and a time to belly laugh till your sides ache;

a time to grieve dear ones gone to glory,  
and a time for dance parties even among graves;

a time to deep clean  
and throw away all the crap that doesn't spark joy,  
and a time to collect thrift shop treasures and impractical shoes;

a time to cuddle so close you get tangled up in embraces and can't tell whose arms are whose,  
and a time to give each other space to become your whole selves;

a time to be on the search for what's next, what's on its way,  
and a time to let go of what you always thought you'd have;

a time to recycle what's ready to go,  
and a time to upcycle what wants keeping;

a time to shred old files, and a time to stitch up fresh wounds;  
a time to get real still and quiet, and a time to yell true things out loud;

a time to love what needs loving,  
and a time to hate what needs hating;

a time for necessary conflict, holy resistance,

and a time for peace, which steadily persists, and passes all our understanding.

## A Time for Every Single Thing

*For everything there is a season ...* so say the old scriptures, so says the song, so writes a young minister in California in the United Church of Christ, in her gorgeous variation on an ancient theme. *For everything there is a season, and a time for every single thing this side of heaven... a time to be a baby and a time for last breaths; a time to recycle what's ready to go, and a time to upcycle what wants keeping; a time to be on the search for what's next, and a time to let go of what you always thought you'd have; a time to rage incoherently at the state of the world, and a time to tuck yourself into soft blankets and drink ginger tea...* There's a season and there's time, wrote a prophet in Jerusalem two thousand years ago in words that might still teach us, for every large gesture and every small responsibility; there's space in time to attend to every looming task, every mystical and haunting question and every sweet diversion. There is time and there is space - but it is so hard to believe this, so hard to trust, so hard to maintain equanimity and equilibrium when we're as busy as we are, as distracted as we are, as frantic, frazzled, fragile as we so often feel, with the weight of world, our desperate and endangered world, both beautiful and broken, closing in, pressing down, screaming for attention, flailing just like us and crying for our love.

The life of the spirit is all about balance, attending to this thing and then that thing, each one in its holy time, and *balance* is our theme this month, as if there really were such a thing in this physical and emotional universe. Nothing is ever really and permanently balanced. We know that from physics and we know it by experience. We're always walking the narrow beam, steadying ourselves and swaying, careening, between grief and hope, desire and contentment, resistance and resilience, breathing and pushing, working and resting, resting and praying, playing and crying, worrying and laughing, back and forth we go, through the days. We're clumsy often, graceful sometimes. The choir sings the words of Thich Nhat Hanh: "I have arrived. I am home. I am solid. I am free. In the ultimate I dwell." That's all about the spirit's graceful posture, and in rare moments of serenity, maybe we arrive there, but as soon as we do, we're glancing backward with regret and looking forward with anxiety; we forget we're there or why we've come, and so we're always trying to get home. Balance within, like physical balance, is not a steady state but a continuous dance, and sometimes it eludes us. Sometimes we fall down.

The other day I was driving in the rain and stopped at a red light. It was early evening, getting dark, absolute November. I turned on the radio and the President was on the news. I switched it off, because all of a sudden my throat had choked up and my eyes filled with tears (a visceral reaction), so much so that when the light changed I had to pull over. This never happens to me; it has never happened; it was very strange. I think part of it is simply the weight of this past year in our country, so many assaults on our spirit and our character and dignity, so many outrages and losses. All this time, like most of you, I've been holding it together in a responsible and upright fashion, channeling outrage into thoughtful resistance, shaping confusion into respectful, creative conversation, working to stay hopeful and helpful, fair-minded, even-tempered, working to stay awake and woke, instead of cynical or numb. The whole year has been a test of our mental, emotional, spiritual balance. But here I was this past week, on the side of the road, in the rain, just hearing that voice for moment and utterly undone. What brought it on, actually, was a small thing, relatively, in the grand scheme of apocalyptic crises roiling all around us now, and it's not

the thing the President happened to be speaking about when I heard him in the car. Someone had told me earlier, the day before, just in passing, about the Administration's revocation of the ban on importing elephant trophies and elephant ivory; now for some reason it's okay again to hunt endangered elephants and bring the trophies here. That's just one thing, and compared to health care, nuclear war, Russian spies, women's lives, Black lives, senators, drilling in the Arctic and all kinds of other huge things, it's a smaller thing, – but somehow, without warning on a rainy night this week, the African elephants discombobulated me. Somehow they nudged their way in, and they broke my heart, broke open my carefully guarded heart, these quiet, faraway companions, whom I've never seen but I've always known they're there, peaceful under the sky with their gentle, nurturing intelligence. Heavy and innocent, they're not like us, because they move with perfect poise upon the earth. They have no need for trophies. They caught me off guard and threw me off balance there on White Bear Avenue at rush hour, tossing me up in the air with their great trunks and tusks, and in that crazy disequilibrium there was a kind of grace. They really were "the elephants in the room," except they were in the car, and they are in me. I know the reversal of the ban may be itself reversed, but still... That anyone would even ponder this, even for minute, took my breath away, literally. For a few seconds I couldn't drive or think or breathe. It felt like I was knocked off my foundation, but now I think in that wild moment my balance was in fact restored.

How do we stay open, bravely, deliberately, vulnerably open, to the news of the day, the news of this sunrise this morning, all this beauty, all the pain? We guard our time, our attention, our compassion, our care, so scrupulously so we won't be thrown off course – but how can we stay open also, trusting that by grace and by our will we will not be overwhelmed?

*To everything there is a season, no matter how busy or distracted or resilient and normally sensible we are. There is time for every single thing this side of heaven, says Kit Novotny, Christian minister, echoing the Hebrew prophet. There's a time for holy resistance, a time to rage incoherently at the state of the world, a time to ugly cry and let the snot drip down, a time to yell true things out loud, and a time to get real still and quiet, a time to grieve, and a time to love with all your might what in this world needs loving. Sometimes balance needs to look like imbalance, at least for just a while.*

Danna Faulds, in her poem called "Allow," says it this way:

*There is no controlling life.  
Try corralling a lightning bolt,  
containing a tornado. Dam a  
stream and it will create a new  
channel. Resist, and the tide  
will sweep you off your feet.  
Allow, and grace will carry  
you to higher ground. The only  
safety lies in letting it all in —  
the wild and the weak; fear,  
fantasies, failures and success.  
When loss rips off the doors of*

*the heart, or sadness veils your  
vision with despair, practice  
becomes simply bearing the truth.  
In the choice to let go of your  
known way of being, the whole  
world is revealed to your new eyes.*

Sometimes balance looks like falling on the floor.

This month I've been reminded of a piece of truth that has rolled around to trip me up many times before. I've been reminded lately that life within community, beloved community, like a family or like a congregation, is a perilous life. It's easy to stay steady, easy to stay calm, cool and collected if you don't care too much about the people that you live with, or if you love them theoretically, which is a safe and sanitary kind of love. But if you love them truly, you're going to get in trouble, the kind of trouble that turns you upside down, leaves you wrung out like a dish cloth and ultimately saves your soul. This month I'm remembering again that I am never going to master what I was taught in seminary about professional demeanor, and the importance, the necessity, of maintaining a cool and stoic distance from sadness and from grief when somebody beloved dies or somebody is sorrowing. I learned about boundaries – yes, but distance, not at all. I was taught to stay upright at all costs, both by my upright and somewhat distant parents and by my seminary training, but I never learned that lesson fully, and I've gained no ground whatsoever, as I'm reminded every year, several times a year. Every time, I am unmoored and shaken, cursing God or the gods, or cancer or old age. It's a perilous and beautiful thing, to live in community as we do here, to live interconnected and interrelated on purpose, to travel round the sun together hand in hand. It is a beautiful, perilous arrangement. There are so many things to mess us up: the death of somebody beloved; or someone's new diagnosis or recurrence of an illness; the sad weariness of young adults or old adults whose parents are sick in body or spirit; the sharp grief of parents whose children are sick in body or spirit; the fragility of marriages and relationships where it's clear the center may not hold; someone's loneliness; the shadows of dementia lingering in someone's eyes; someone's trouble with money, or work, or shame, or addiction – there are so many things when you're bound, as we are, in community, that catch us off guard and send us reeling. Compassion sends us reeling. I feel sometimes as if life in church is like a game of Twister, that old party game where you spin the dial and get all tangled up with everybody, laughing, bolstering each other, until one person wobbles, they lose their balance; something happens to one person to knock them off their feet, and all the others, or many others, tumble to the floor. I never learned properly how to keep from falling, - and I don't ever want to learn. I have been, like so many of you, a deliberately incorrigible student.

Gregory Orr, a poet, says of life, this life, our little daily lives:

*Lots of sorrow and a little joy  
Lots of joy and only a bit  
Of sorrow.  
Who can know  
The formula beforehand?*

*We don't get to watch  
While it's mixed.  
No one tells us  
What's in [the cup].  
We lift it  
To our lips ...*

We're here to love this life and love each other not theoretically but recklessly, ever mindful of the cost of loss. Sometimes we like to think we are immune, or that with enough professional training or willpower or luck, we'll be somehow inoculated against dishevelment and grief – but who wants to live like that, or love like that, so meagerly? What else but outsize grief could hold an elephant? What else but outsize grief, wild grief, could rightly balance the infinite pleasure, necessary delight, the wild joy we find in one another's company? And so from time to time, our decorum is disrupted, our routines and normal gladness are upended, and there's a kind of grace in that, a kind of saving grace.

I remember a time many years ago when there was lots of anxiety in the congregation, not grief at that time, but uncertainty. I don't even remember if it was here or in the congregation that I served before, and I don't remember what the issues were (because they were not important). There was some low-level anxiety, and thus there were all these little outbreaks of animosity, or impatience, or garden-variety meanness. It was a hard moment, when people were not attacking each other exactly, but simply forgetting to hold each another with care, forgetting to presume that everyone, all of us, are shuffling along with the best of intentions, most of the time; forgetting to remember that we're all clumsy and forgetful, but most of us aren't evil. It was a snippy time – on a very small scale, it was kind of like what our whole country feels like now – and it was exhausting, demoralizing. One night I went home and said to Ross, "I've just got to grow a thicker skin or else I'm going to die here," and he said, "Well, you could do that. But the minute you do, you will be ineligible for your own job. You can grow a thick skin and put on all the armor you want, but then you'll be unfit for ministry. You need a permeable spirit." And that's true; to be a minister, *or to be a person*, you need a permeable spirit, a permanently breaking heart. We need to keep our pores open, eyes, ears, heart, mind all wide open, all the time, because once we're closed off, we're closed off. If you could keep a little distance, grow a little sheath of rawhide around the edges of your care, train your eyes to look away when someone else's eyes tear up, you could maybe be protected. And we'd be unfit for our profession, as brave and loving human beings.

To all things there's a season. I don't drive in tears all the time, just when it's the right and fitting thing to do. We're not always overcome with sadness, or overwhelmed by joy – but we keep open to the possibility, willing to have the steady state of apathy disrupted, or the stasis of fear, or control, or respectability. For everything there is a season, and time enough to give our full and generous attention to what calls us out of ourselves and back into ourselves, into right relation with each other and with God.

We like to think we keep our balance on our own, but that's impossible. All kinds of forces work to keep us steady. Gravity is one, and community another, the outstretched arms of other people, whether reaching out for help or reaching out to hold us when we're the ones in trouble.

We're held in place and grounded by forces larger than ourselves. Paul Tillich, theologian, spoke of grace not as our own practiced poise, not anything we have to work at, but a sense of quiet assurance that no matter what, we are accepted and sufficient, even with a thousand demands upon us, even when the world is splitting at the seams, even when we're wracked with sorrow, wracked with guilt, wracked with worry, wracked with fear, fractured by anxiety, flattened by depression, shattered by shame. Grace, says Tillich, is not a discipline you master, but an openness to trust.

*It strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness.*

*It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life.*

*It strikes us when we feel that our separation from others is deeper than usual.*

*It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us.*

*Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks in, and it is as though a voice were saying: You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know.*

*And nothing is demanded in return.*

We hold our balance in this life, physical, emotional, spiritual balance, by grace, by love and by our willingness to stay wide open to the wild winds and gentle breezes that sometimes knock us down. By grace and by our will, we are steadied and readied for our work, which is the work of love.

From Reverend Kim Novotny:

*There is time for every single thing this side of heaven:*

*a time to be a baby, and a time for last breaths;*

*a time to smash the imperialist white supremacist capitalist hetero-patriarchy, and a time to build up the egalitarian, multiracial, anti-racist, environmental, liberationist love movement;*

*a time to make wishes on dandelions, scattering seeds to the wind, and a time to pluck up new weeds, declare them flowers, and make new wishes;*

*a time to ugly cry and a time to belly laugh till your sides ache;*

*a time to grieve dear ones gone to glory, and a time for dance parties even among graves;*

*a time to deep clean and throw away all the crap that doesn't spark joy, and a time to collect thrift shop treasures and impractical shoes;*

*a time to cuddle so close you get tangled up in embraces and can't tell whose arms are whose, and a time to give each other space to become your whole selves;*

*a time to be on the search for what's next, what's on its way, and a time to let go of what you always thought you'd have;*

*a time to get real still and quiet, and a time to yell true things out loud;*

*a time to love what needs loving, and a time to hate what needs hating;*

*a time for necessary conflict,*

*and a time for peace, which steadily persists, and passes all our understanding.*

*-silence-*

These words in closing come from Jeanne Lohmann, asking a question that could be a table blessing for Thanksgiving,

*Praise what comes*

*surprising as unplanned kisses, all you haven't deserved  
of days and solitude, your body's immoderate good health  
that lets you work in many kinds of weather. Praise*

*talk with just about anyone. And quiet intervals, books  
that are your food and your hunger; nightfall and walks  
before sleep. Praising these for practice, perhaps*

*you will come at last to praise grief and the wrongs  
you never intended. At the end there may be no answers  
and only a few very simple questions: did I love,*

*finish my task in the world? Learn at least one  
of the many names of God? At the intersections,  
the boundaries where one life began and another*

*ended, the jumping-off places between fear and  
possibility, at the ragged edges of pain,  
did I catch the smallest glimpse of the holy?*

In this short life, these crazy, busy days, these holy, spacious days that we are given, there is time enough and more, for everything.