

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Recalculating

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**WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING

from *We Know How This Ends*, a memoir by Bruce Kramer

Bruce Kramer was a dean at St. Thomas University in the Twin Cities, and a blogger about life with ALS until his death in 2015.

[On the day of my diagnosis], we are in the car, my wife and I, with no pamphlet, no road map, not even a GPS to guide us. I try to project calm, to breathe deeply, but I begin to perceive a presence, overwhelming and towering over me, surrounding me, piercing me, stifling me...

Suddenly, my future falls open like some bizarre, fantastic flower, blooming and drooping its petals around me faster than I can collect them. Even more than in the doctor's office, we see clearly that there is no solution, no grand and final ending, no heroic rise or fall. Instead, we are required to make the best from the worst, working it until it can no longer be worked, accepting - with as much grace and dignity as possible - an ending, in the face of pure chaos raining down into the order that just yesterday was ours. In these few hours post-diagnosis, the life we thought was ours explodes, yet the epiphany of realization remains...

I have unknowingly prepared for this moment my entire life, and I am afraid.

I now know I must bring to bear everything I have learned upon this crisis, or we will be utterly destroyed. Somehow, someday, I must turn ALS on its ear and transform this moment from a death sentence to a life sentence instead. I cannot do this alone. I will need an inner circle, family and friends and professionals, to share ideas and grief and anger. I know what I must do, but I do not know yet how I will do it.

Above all, I know I cannot fix this. That would only be childish. All I can hope is to work it, and perhaps some way forward will emerge.

SECOND READING

This Error is the Sign of Love
Lewis Hyde

This error is the sign of love:

the crack in the ice where the otters breathe,
the tears that save a man from power,
the puff of smoke blown down the chimney one morning, and the widower sighs and gives up his loneliness,
the lines transposed in the will so the widow must scatter coins from the cliff instead of ashes
and she marries again, for love,
the speechlessness of lovers that forces them to leave it alone while it sends up its first pale shoot
like an onion sprouting in the pantry,

this error is the sign of love.

The leak in the nest,
 the hole in the coffin,
 the crack in the picture plate a young girl fills with her secret life to survive the grade school,
 the retarded twins who wander house to house, eating, 'til the neighbors have become neighbors.

The teacher's failings in which the students ripen,
 Luther's fit in the choir,
 Darwin's dyspepsia,
 boy children stuttering in the gunshop,

boredom,
 shyness,
 bodily discomforts like long rows of white stones at the edge of the highway,
 blown head gaskets,
 darkened choir lofts,
 stolen kisses,
 this error is the sign of love.

The nickel in the butter churn,
 the farthing in the cake,
 the first reggae rhythms like seasonal cracks in a government building,
 the rain-damaged instrument that taught us the melodies of black emotion and red and yellow
 emotion,
 the bubble of erotic energy escaped from a marriage and a week later the wife dreams of a tiger,
 the bee that flies into the guitar and hangs transfixed in the sound of sound 'til all the wetness
 leaves him and he rides that high wind to the Galapagos,
 this error is the sign of love.

The fault in the sea floor where the fish linger and mate,
 the birthmark that sets the girl apart and years later she alone of the sisters finds her calling,
 Walt Whitman's idiot brother whom he fed like the rest of us,
 the earth's wobbling axis uncoiling seasons,
 seeds that need six months of drought,
 flowers shaped for the tongues of moths,
 summertime, and death's polarized light caught beneath the surface of Florentine oil paintings,
 this error is the sign of love.

The beggar buried in the cathedral,
 the wisdom-hole in the façade of the library,
 the hail storm in a South Dakota town that started the Farmers' Cooperative in 1933,
 the Sargasso Sea that gives false hope to sailors and they sail on and find a new world,
 the picnic basket that slips overboard and leads to the invention of the lobster trap,
 the one slack line in a poem where the listener relaxes and suddenly the poem is in your heart
 like a fruit wasp in an apple, this error is the sign of love!

Recalculating

One Saturday night, years ago when my daughter was a little baby, I leaned over her crib to lift her out and I could not stand up; I had thrown out my lower back. This had never happened before. I placed her awkwardly down and moved kind of horizontally away, completely bent with blinding pain. I couldn't stand up or sit or lie down or do anything except whimper and gasp and beg for ibuprofen. I was a mess. Ross called someone at church to say I couldn't come in the morning, and I was relieved and mortified by that. Over the next few days I struggled not only with unaccustomed pain but with something else, a kind of crisis.

I felt embarrassed and ashamed that I couldn't go to work and keep commitments and do the job I loved; I was afraid about that.

I felt guilty and forlorn that I couldn't care for my own child; I was afraid about that.

I was frustrated and impatient, so angry that my body had betrayed me. *After all I've done for you*, I said to my lumbar spine, *all this exercise all the time, all this healthy food, and you go and let me down.*

This was a crisis about identity, my sense of myself as a strong, young, capable agent, fully in command of my intentions, my time, my relationships, my dreams, my work. My back got better in a week or two, but the disruption to my core being was permanent, and this was good, ***this is good***: the aftershocks are still reverberating all these years later, still shaking up my understanding of what it means to be a person, a good person, good enough, and concepts like "capable," "strong," "able," "worthy," "healthy," "whole," "independent," "interdependent," "vulnerable," "human," "embodied," "enough," "mortal," "grateful," and "okay." As in, *most of the time, I am so grateful to be okay.*

That same winter, I was leading a class, a little study group, on prayer. The people shared stories and memories from childhood and written reflections about what prayer was for them, what it does and what it means, and to whom or what they prayed, if they prayed at all, and with what ancient words, sacred words, r made up words or silences. It was beautiful. In the last session we went round the circle and everyone read from their journals, shared some a prayer that sustained them, or something they'd written. One woman, the last to speak, was fairly new to the congregation. She said, "Well, I brought a prayer for our minister. I wrote a prayer for our pastor here, because I don't think she knows anything about this," and I was like, "Wait-what?" and she said to me, "Will you pray with us?" and handed me her paper, what she'd written – which I still have.

A Good UU Prayer for Victoria
by Jackie Meadows 1994

O Infinite Universe that Gives Me All
I say and do
Surround Me as I walk in Beauty

*Thank You Mother-Father-God
for the healing that takes place now*

*Hear me as I speak silently
Speak loud and clear to me as I listen*

*Thank you for the Love that you Allow
Unobstructed to flow through me*

*I trust that Life Supports Me
I rest well
with the knowledge of My work well done
I trust that love surrounds me
and that I Have all I need*

*I am Held
Nurtured
Loved*

*When I am tired
I sleep
When I ache
I am held
When I am cold
I am warmed*

*There is no doubt that Hope
can be lifted and held with Love*

[What she meant here was the great, wild, life-sustaining hope that she knew that I struggle to lift up, as if with a hydraulic crane, every week; the hope and love and faith that hold us in our orbit, anchor us to each other and to history and holiness; the hope and love and faith that bind us to our ancestors and to our descendants, and will not let us go, no matter what – she knew that it's a mighty work for me, to lift it up each week. And what she *also* meant was little baby Hope, who was maybe 3 months old, and whom I still could not carry at that point, because of my stupid back.]

*There is no doubt that Hope
can be lifted and held with Love
always safely within my arms*

*Thank you for this time
to know well my place*

I welcome your strength

I am honored to be chosen to serve

*O Infinite Universe that gives Me All
I Say, see and do*

Surround me As I Walk in beauty.

And once again, for the second time that same month, I was utterly disrupted. Everything I thought I knew, everything I thought I'd learned so well in divinity school, in my chaplaincy training, in college; everything I thought I knew about humility, courage, invincibility, was slapped down – lovingly – and reassembled by the people in that circle, hearing me speak those words. My understanding of my role as minister and the people's role as ministers, and who cares for whom, who teaches whom, who's blessing whom with sacred power, and who holds the center of our liberal faith and knows what's best and what restores the soul - my orientation to all of this was utterly and permanently disrupted, and this was good, and this is good, and I still pray that prayer out loud, all these years later, to remind me. The injury disrupted me, and then kindness disrupted me, and I have never been the same. And it's not as if the fix were permanent, as if I were cured and converted once and for all that year of all my hubris and tight-fisted individualism, that ridiculous boot-strap theology – but when I feel it start to calcify, like spiritual stiffness in the lumbar spine of the soul, I try to stay ever more open to cosmic surprises, good things, hard things, all these twists and turns that slap us down and wake us up, and rearrange every assumption.

This happens to us all the time. We crave order and control and predictable patterns in this life. When we can't find them (because they mostly do not exist), we get anxious and we make them up, imposing our will or our opinion or our expectations of ourselves, of everybody else, all over the place, and when the universe rears up on its hind legs and says, "Well, actually no. You're not the boss of the world, and this is not how it's gonna go," we are mightily disrupted. It happens all the time: our bodies betray us (or rather, they betray our delusions of invincibility and eternal youth), the weather betrays us (or rather betrays our ridiculous self-centeredness within the natural world), hurricanes happen and floods and tornadoes; people betray us (or rather, they do what they must do): lovers leave and loved ones die; dreams are upended, expectations undone, outcomes which we thought were guaranteed (health, wealth, longevity, life, liberty and happiness) turn out to be nowhere written in the contract signed by the fates and sealed at our birth. Nothing's guaranteed. How we weather the disruptions; how we welcome them sometimes, or at least acknowledge them, honor them; how we grieve completely when loss or affliction assails us – how we grieve completely, and keep on moving forward anyway, however incompletely; how we let go of one idea, or one assumption, one dream, and re-orient our minds, our spirits, our plans around new revelations of reality – well, that is the religious life, that game, that challenge, that invitation, to constantly recalculate. Change, disruption, cosmic surprises that are wonderful and terrible – these are the base line, not the exception to the rule. Through all the windy turmoil, how can we stay fully present to ways of being (grateful, humble, curious, awake), ways of growing (wiser, deeper), ways of loving (more bravely, more freely, more honestly) as if there were nothing to lose?

We sing here all the time,

*What though the tempest loudly roar, I know the truth – it liveth.
 What though the darkness round me close – songs in the night it giveth.
 No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that rock I'm clinging;
 Since love is lord o'er hea'en and earth – how can I keep from singing?*

What songs in the night are you singing?

Some years ago, Siri joined our household- Siri, the smart sprite within the iPhone who guides us now so efficiently through internet searches and recipes and road construction and closed highways. Before Siri and before Google maps and a number of other applications, we had some other GPS device to give driving directions, and I swear every time we deviated from the route it wanted us to take, every time we made a wrong turn, the voice in that machine would give a little irritated sigh (almost imperceptible – in fact, I was the only one in our family who could hear it) or a little *tsk*, before it said, through clenched, passive aggressive teeth, “Recalculating,” and got us back on track. Siri is much more friendly, more professional and spiritually mature, as if she knows that few things in this life are predictable, controllable or permanent, and how we stay steady, how we stay true, to ourselves, to each other, to our deepest values, to gladness, to wonder and mystery, to God -- that is the true journey. It's all about recalculating, all the time.

I think of Bruce Kramer, a former Dean at the University of St. Thomas, who for five years wrote a devastatingly beautiful blog - a spiritual memoir, really- about living while dying, in his case from ALS. His book, based on those posts, is called *We Know How This Ends* (and in fact, that's about all we do know in this life), but the book is not depressing: it's poignant and funny and compassionate – a wise and not morose companion. He writes in the first pages unflinchingly, about devastation, about being healthy and young (in his fifties) on one day, and receiving a death sentence the next, but then he goes deeper, gets braver, still chronicling grief, rage, disappointment, terror, but never wandering into the shallows of “Why me?” which is not a good question and not a good theology. He writes about transforming what felt like a death sentence on that day into a life sentence, and beginning to name and to number and nurture all the things that make life *good life*, some of which were not only not diminished, but were somehow illuminated by his circumstance. He never speaks of silver linings, or making lemonade, but he does speak of gratitude and joy and love, and work well done and wisdom gained and friendship. Bruce Kramer writes,

Listen: a pronouncement like “you have ALS” or “you have a stage-four cancerous tumor,” or “you have Alzheimer’s” rings in your ears, obfuscating all sound. Yet, it also focuses you with the precision of a laser, forcing your attention like a slap in the face or a plunge into ice-cold water. There is incredible noise that goes with a terminal diagnosis, but there is also quiet clarity- clarity of thought, purpose and feeling.

I have likened ALS to death by a thousand paper cuts. I try not to dwell on this aspect, the progressive weakening of my body, but I know it is there. [But] honesty begets urgency. [I know now] it isn't enough to work. It isn't enough to love my family. It isn't enough to connect with friends. It needs to be done with passion, abandon, love and light. There is no time to hold grudges, be afraid, and not forgive. There is no time for games. There really are places to,

people to see, things to do, and time is wasting. There is a gift of joy and passion love with abandon, friends who aren't afraid [now] to say [to me], "I love you." I just don't have time for bullshit anymore. That is the gift of urgency,

and he's thankful for it, he says, and before having to **and choosing to** recalculate around the reality of ALS, he'd had no idea. Who of us does, really, have any idea, how urgent everything beautiful is?

Kramer draws a distinction between disease and dis-ease, being shaken from easy complacency, from self-centeredness, from isolation into full awareness of living and loving and dying. He writes, *Disease takes you to precipice of horror. Dis ease offers beautiful vistas of hurt and healing and hope.* As he shared his diagnosis, family and friends and colleagues shared their own stories more openly, of cancer, depression, loneliness, addiction. *I realized, he says, that their story lines were awakenings, profound connections in the moment of shared revelation that each of us carries uneasiness, often unacknowledged but always present, and each of us has to process [constantly] what this reality means. My diagnosis revealed the rocky shores beneath our lives. My physical condition will never be cured, but dis ease [non-complacency, disruption] allows me to be healed by love, to recognize that joy and sorrow are from the same source and that life I energy created from catastrophe and hope. The sources that give me the greatest joy can cut me to the quick while lifting me beyond any happiness I might have known.*

He never wrote of being glad to be sick, but he spoke with gratitude and wonder about this unbidden opportunity to recalculate what it means to be alive and human for this little while that any of us has.

There are less drastic, less dramatic, opportunities all the time.

In the reading, Lewis Hyde, who is more of a philosopher than a poet, offers in a poem all these fantastic, real-life snapshots of accidents, upsets and cosmic surprises that somehow push the reset button on what seemed like fixed reality:

*This error is the sign of love:
 The crack in the ice where the otters can breathe
 The unexpected unaccustomed tears that save a man from power,
 The puff of smoke blown down the chimney one morning, and the widower signs and gives up his loneliness,
 The hungry children who wander house to house, eating, till the neighbors become neighbors,
 The teacher's failings in which the students ripen,
 Boy children stuttering in the gun shop,
 The hailstorm in a South Dakota town that started the Farmer's Cooperative in 1933,
 The Sargasso Sea that gives false hope to sailors and they sail on and find a new world,
 The picnic basket that slips overboard and leads to the invention of the lobster trap,
 This error is the sign of love!*

Sometimes things happen for no reason, no good reason, but meaning is made where there was no meaning; wisdom and insight and kindness find space where there seemed to be no space;

ships change direction, people change their minds; a work-around is found that opens up a whole new possibility... we do this all the time: recalculate, when chaos reigns. It's what this whole moment of resistance and resilience in our nation is about – recalculating what we thought we were, what we thought we were capable of, what we thought and now think matters most. Lewis Hyde calls it “the sign of love” when some accident or error message comes up on the screen - and I think that means our love of life, our love of this life on earth regardless of its disappointments, fully mindful of the sorrows and the certain risk of loss. Our love of life, our gratitude, our fortitude (some people call this faith), is larger than our devotion to our own small plans, opinions, ideations, expectations, self-descriptors. Our calling is to life and love, regardless.

Adrienne Marie Brown, a young philosopher and blogger, says

Adaptation is not the same as acceptance. Many of us respond to change with fear, or see it as a crisis. We spend precious time thinking about what has changed that we didn't choose or can't control, and/or thinking ahead to future stress. Often this is because we aren't clear about or committed to our dream destination. So instead of moving toward anything in particular, we are in nonstop reaction. I am wondering where I have agency, where I am moving and where I am being moved. I keep making decisions and declarations about my life, and then that larger force deftly, elegantly adjusts me on my path, and I adapt.

I am thinking of a video clip I saw this week; perhaps you saw it, too. In the school in Florida where Wednesday's shooting took place, students hid in a closet in the dark. One of them took out his phone and started recording, started to interview his classmates, right there, in the dark, in a whisper because, he said later, he realized that they had to leave a legacy. If they did not survive, they needed to tell the world what this is like, this crazy terror, for their whole, beautiful generation. One girl said, in a steady, quiet voice, *I've gone to gun rights rallies all my life. I've always loved guns. I've wanted to be a junior NRA member. For my 18th birthday this year, I've been planning to go to the gun range and learn to shoot. But this experience as so traumatizing to the point where now I can't even fathom the idea of having a gun in my house, having a gun on my body. I don't even want to be the person behind the gun, or behind a bullet. All my friends, my school, my teachers, my mentors... All that matters now is gun control, changing our laws about gun ownership. That is all that matters.*

I share this not to make an argument politically, but to say that things can shift and change in this life. We have no idea what will come, what will happen, how mightily for better, for worse, for sure, we will be disrupted. But things can change in an instant, and we can change. Everything is changing, and we are here to learn and love and grow.

Will you pray with me?

*O Infinite Universe that Gives us All
We say and do
Surround us as we go in Beauty*

*Thank You Child-and-Parent-God
for the healing that takes place now*

*Hear us as we speak silently
Speak loud and clear to us as we listen*

*Thank you for the Love that you Allow
Unobstructed to flow through us*

*We trust that Life Supports us
We rest well
with the knowledge of our work well done
we trust that love surrounds us
and that we Have all we need*

*we are Held
Nurtured
Loved*

*When we are tired
We sleep
When we ache
We are held
When we are cold
We are warmed*

*There is no doubt that Hope
can be lifted and held with Love
always safely within our arms*

*Thank you for this time
to know well our place*

*we welcome your strength
we are honored to be chosen to serve*

*O Infinite Universe that gives us All
We Say, see and do*

Surround us as we go in beauty.

Amen.