

**White Bear
Unitarian Universalist Church**

Coming and Going

Rev. Sara Goodman

Sunday, January 5, 2020

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

328 MAPLE STREET, MAHTOMEDI, MN 55115

WWW.WBUUC.ORG

READINGS

Touch by Trevor West Knapp (ADAPTED)

We speak of the pain of childbirth, referring, of course, to the mother, but what is pain to the mother, the one through whose body the course unwinds? She understands already what kind of world she must return to, how it daily hones its many edges against human skin, unlike the child whose untried limbs inch toward it, pressing now so firmly against her they feel for the first time the pinch of bone against bone and is seared by the friction. Aren't they the one on whom the real burden falls, the one to whom resilience means nothing yet? Their tender skin like a small measure of cloth unfolding before the blade under which they will, for a lifetime, bruise and heal: Crush of the long descent, grip of the steadying hands, brush of breath against cheek, even the constant barrage of the microscopic, the tiny plink-plink of the dust motes knocking against them before custom makes them numb to it. No wonder the startled mouth cries out, each pore suddenly hungry in the withering, nourishing light.

Elevators I by Donald Britton

An enormous list:
coming and goings, nights and mornings,
births and deaths
and rebirths and second deaths
and little lapses like grace notes
where sadness surges in:

sadness surges in,
a passing-windshield light-effect
on the ceiling.
Would you prefer it some other way?
I'm versatile.
I'm hungry.
I'm hot.
I'm not really sad either.
I'm happy, it's just that this happiness
isn't the happiness I expected or sought
and for a time I confused
this happiness with the sadness
I thought I was experiencing.
I feel a lot better now.

Oooh. That should give you
an indication of the improvement.
Oooh, there it goes again.
And again,
only I didn't say 'Oooh' this time.
I can't explain it,
but it feels terrific,
like a totally fulfilled infatuation
or a California Lifestyle apartment ad.

Coming and Going

I thought I knew how the path was going to unfold. I mean, I didn't really. But I had studied the map before leaving, and knew the basic route, how long it should take, I had even looked at the weather and put on my sunscreen.

It was a lovely spring day, as they all are in southern California. My family was going for a hike in a new place, a path we hadn't taken before, but landscape we were familiar with.

I've got my hat, my running shoes, my camera – I'm ready to go. As usual I am in the middle of the pack, watching the others go before me, following where they go sometimes or looking for the right footing for myself as needed. Leading those who come behind me, holding a branch back so it doesn't hit my follower in the face.

I know, more or less, where we're going and how to get there so I am not worried about getting lost. It is a bright sunny day today, so I am startled to find the path is muddy. I'm reminded that it rained yesterday, time to watch my footing a little more closely.

Sometimes on the path I have to stop to listen to the gentle breeze through the trees, a bird calling. Sometimes I wonder at the thousand different colors of green and brown that make up a forest, and how sunlight streaming through the leaves can paint such a bright halo on the undergrowth.

Oops. My foot slips a little in the mud and I look to my footing again. A warm hand reaches for me, and I laugh, "I've got this."

I hear the water before we see it. Gurgling, bubbling, the stream is bigger and a little faster than expected because of yesterday's rain. The stepping stones are underwater today. I watch some of the others go first, slippery slidy across, wet shoes seem to be inevitable.

I take my first steps with confidence. So often confidence and a quick step will get you where you need to go, won't it? That's what the others did after all. But me, two steps in? My foot goes off the rock, sliding across it, throwing me off balance. My arms fling out, but it's too late, I'm already falling.

Next thing I know, I'm sitting in the middle of a stream, soaked and startled, and just starting to feel the pain. OWIE. That hurt.

My family has different reactions – some laugh at my antics, some keep moving, those closest to me reach out to pull me up. Ask me where it hurts. Hold my hand as we cross together the rest of the way.

Once safely on the other side we take inventory: Am I hurt? Can I keep going? What do I need?

I have wet clothes, a sore butt, and a bruised ego. I curse a little, I cry a little, I laugh as much as I can and then slowly but surely I start down the path again. At this point, the only way through is forward. It's harder now and everything chafes, but I make it home. This is resilience.

Resilience, I have been taught my whole life, is an important tool for living a happy life. Resilient things don't break as easily when they're bent.

Resilient people can get back to "normal" faster when something bad happens in their lives. "Get up, dust yourself off and keep going."

Psychological researcher Martin Seligman believes that there's more to it than that. To him, the building blocks of resilience are 1. positive emotion, 2. engagement, 3. positive relationships, 4. meaning, and 5. accomplishment. In order to have resilience, we need to feel hopeful, feel engaged in our lives, have good relationships, and feel like what we do means something, that it makes a difference, and gives us a sense of accomplishment.

This is all well and good, if you are in a good place already. Obviously people with these things already in place are going to struggle less when bad things happen. But these building blocks seem like a lot to build in a life if someone is already struggling.

What is resilience if you aren't already pliant? Can we learn to bend a little at a time, like stretching a muscle? Can we do regular exercises to loosen our joints and find a way to bend in the wind like a cypress tree, like a palm tree?

How do you get to resilient from stuck and struggling?

If we could choose just one of Seligman's building blocks as the most important place to start, we should choose the third: Relationships. Relationships in community – healthy, empathetic, and supportive community – is the best way to build resilience in people.

"As social neurologist John Cacioppo has argued loneliness is such a disabling condition that [...] the pursuit of relationships is a rock-bottom fundamental to human well-being." We are much more successful human beings when we are in relationship, when we are supported and challenged by communities.

We need to be loved, to be respected, and to be needed.

As I repeat again and again every time I preach, this is why we are here, to build, be a part of, and benefit from Beloved Community.

The times we are living in are VERY HARD, and we need each other. What seems like the entire continent of Australia is on fire, with huge numbers of wild animals dying. Anti-Semitism is making a very unwelcome resurgence in our country. Republicans are calling for a review and reversal of Roe vs. Wade. And our government seems to be trying to start a war with Iran.

Many of us are reeling from the news as the year is just beginning. And we are here. YOU are here.

On top of it, so many of us are dealing with our own personal struggles. Health concerns, family strife, loss of loved ones. Our culture is an isolating one, so we find ourselves without the social structures we

need to feel secure in this unstable world. There is so much to be afraid of, and so many things to live with these days. And we are here. You are here.

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on the ceiling.

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and for a time I confused this happiness with the sadness I thought I was experiencing.

I feel a lot better now.

Confusing happy and sad, figuring out what it means to be living in times that don't make sense... striving to go up after a down, but not knowing how or why.

How do we do resilience when we're struggling? Well, we don't do it alone.

And how do we survive the really hard things when they happen?

For me, it comes down to three things: Feel the feelings. Ask For help. Move Forward.

Deal with the feelings you are having around what's happening, don't ignore it, but don't wallow. Feel really terrible for a while, learn why you feel that way, and work to let it go.

And don't do this alone. You are not the only person in the world feeling what you are feeling, find someone or even better a community of people to support you, people who even if they don't exactly understand what you are going through want to be there for you. Who want to listen to you gripe and complain and weep and laugh at yourself. Find people who will come clean your house, who will make you food, who will tell you jokes and give you the space you need to do a little more than survive each day. Find folks who will remind you that you are alive and if not whole, at least you are holy in your brokenness. (REMINDER: You are HOLY in your Brokenness.)

And probably the hardest thing, especially for people who enjoy controlling their lives: Move forward even when the path isn't clear. We all want to know what's coming next. What if that path is blocked, or this road is closed, or there is a stream to ford, or a cliff in the way? We want to see and plan and make the best decisions possible. Of course we do.

And when we can't see a way forward, we still can move forward. Sometimes when there is fog on the road, we have to put on our fog lights and inch forward hoping for the best. The alternative is to never go anywhere.

And in the comings and goings, we cannot forget that as the new year has come, I will soon be going, giving birth to a daughter. Learning each other, bonding over boredom and breastmilk.

Poet and mother Trevor West Knapp speaks to childbirth and resilience in her poem Touch:

*We speak of the pain of childbirth, referring,
of course, to the mother, but what is pain
to the mother, the one through whose body
the course unwinds? She understands already
what kind of world she must return to,
how it daily hones its many edges
against human skin, unlike the child whose
untried limbs inch toward it, pressing now
so firmly against her they feel for the first time
the pinch of bone against bone and is seared
by the friction. Isn't the child the one
on whom the real burden falls, the one
to whom resilience means nothing yet?
Their tender skin like a small measure of cloth
unfolding before the blade under which
they will, for a lifetime, bruise
and heal: Crush of the long descent, grip
of the steadying hands, brush of breath
against cheek, even the constant barrage
of the microscopic, the tiny plink-plink
of the dust motes knocking against them
before custom makes them numb to it. No wonder
the startled mouth cries out,
each pore suddenly hungry
in the withering, nourishing light.*

What is the pain of childbirth to a mother, when the child is the one who has never known pain, who has never known suffering, who yet knows nothing of resilience? It's the child who is learning through the birthing what it means to be human.

Mothers, though, mothers like me especially, know what resilience means. We know pain, we know ache, we know loss. I know how to live through tragedy, from personal experience.

Because this daughter is my second daughter, this birth will be my third birth, and my son Jamie is my second child. Our first child, our daughter Caroline, was born via emergency c-section only three days

overdue. She was born and there were complications, and before we even started to understand what it meant to have a child in the NICU, she was gone.

I wondered then and there, how do we survive something that seems un-survivable? The answer unfolded over the next several days: You don't survive it alone.

Shawn and I, we survived because we had people around us to love us through the storm, to reach out and pick us up when we were ready to stand again, to hold our hand as we moved forward.

I thought I knew what path I was on, I thought I knew the steps I needed to take to get where I was going, an order to take them in, a plan to put it into action. And then things got all messed up, the order of things changed, the path forward was actually more winding and hillier than I anticipated, and I hadn't packed my hiking boots.

Finding a way forward took going slower than planned, being frustrated. It took asking for help and working together with others. It took looking at a map and finding a different way. It took boldly stepping forward into the muddy riverbed again, and hoping that my step would be sure, it took slipping and almost falling again, and getting back up again, dripping and sore.

What does it take to be resilient? It takes sitting in the stream for a while after a slip. We aren't bouncy balls or rubber bands, we don't snap back into shape after being stretched. It takes nursing the wounds, looking at it straight on if we can, not pretending we're not hurt. It takes the hands of others to hold us while we get up again, and balancing each other as we cross the rest of the way. It takes moving a little slower, but still moving forward.

How do we survive? My answer is, and will always be: Together.