



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

“Kindness, Courage, Connection, & Creativity amidst Coronavirus”

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I. “Meditation” (Nichole Hodges-Abbasi, Director of Religious Education)

During this time of uncertainty, there are so many things we wish we knew. Scientists, public health officials, doctors, nurses and many political leaders are all trying their best to ensure that we as a country and a people are as safe and healthy as we can be. Yet, there are still so many unknowns about where this pandemic will take our country and world. Sometimes it’s scary, sometimes it’s overwhelming and sometimes we just don’t know what to think or feel.

Take comfort in these words by Thomas Merton: “You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.”

Take a moment and breathe in deeply. Let it out. Breathe in again. Let it out. As we move into our silent meditation, I welcome you to consider what possibility is offered by this present moment. Just think of one possibility, one potentially positive possibility.

While we aren’t able to embrace each other, we can certainly take a moment to fully embrace our thought and to give that thought the time, love and care that it needs to deeply seed any courage, faith or hope.

“You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going.”

Be gentle with yourselves dear ones. Embrace the nurturing presence you hold inside yourself.

Breathe.

II. "Feeling Fear" (Julia Jones, UU Seminarian)

Oh my friends.

It is good to be here, in this weird sacred digital space – with you in the way that we are learning to understand togetherness.

Last week I was seeing a lot of jokes on Facebook about how introverts have been preparing for social distancing their whole lives.

I represent that remark and yet, this is not really the introvert fantasy I had imagined – even if we don't take the virus into account.

My house is full.

My house is very full.

It is full of people – and have you seen my kids – they're nearly full-grown people.

It is full of dogs – my own fault to be sure and something that is often wonderful, AND...

It is full of a lot of other things too.

It is full of food – for the moment.

It is full of schoolwork for three of the four of us.

It is full of art projects and books and a great deal of learning how to do things differently.

It is also full of anxiety.

So many plans have changed.

So many habits need to be learned.

So much data that is so very scary.

So many questions that don't have answers.

So many people suffering.

And if you weren't feeling the weight of it this morning, I suspect you are now, and I'm sorry about that. That was not my intention.

My intention, however, is to give words to what is happening for so many of us. And I think that's important – giving it words, calling it what it is.

Last week, as we were driving here to stream the service, I guess I was quiet and Scot asked me what I was thinking about.

I answered that it was just one big, amorphous blob. It was just one big mass of “I don't like it.”

I then listed more specific things that I don't like about our current situation. Okay, I listed a lot of things that I don't like about our situation. I let go of anything that told me not to complain. I let go of anything that told me to suck it up. I let go of any judgment about what that annoyance, discomfort and every other feeling might say about ME, and I just gave words to the discontent.

It was such a relief. And I tell myself that my having created that space for judgment-free complaining, I made it possible for my wonderful spouse to give words to some of the things that he was struggling with as well. Contrary to some of the wisdom you'll find out there, giving air to our negative feelings that we had been holding inside didn't make us feel worse. It also didn't inspire the universe to create worse things for us. It just let us put words to things that feel hard, and that was good.

It has been my experience that everything hard I've ever felt or dealt with has been made worse by my unwillingness to just feel it, to acknowledge it, to accept it no matter what my culture tells me I should do.

I don't want you to be afraid. I don't want you to live afraid. I don't want all of our decisions at every level to be made out of fear.

What I believe is that if everyone made a little room for the fear that we do actually feel, we would feel a little better and it would be easier to think more clearly.

And this is not just my opinion, it is at the heart of every system of thought that encourages us to accept ourselves. It is what is potent about practices like observing ourselves and offering ourselves self-compassion. Experiencing your feelings cleanly is a fundamental expression of who you are, and I believe it is therefore sacred.

I don't want to feel afraid. It is yucky. It is also just a feeling and I can have hard feelings. I can do hard things.

When I feel that fear building and I can, instead of stuffing it down, simply allow myself the grace to sit with it, I feel more whole.

And my house can feel a little less full because I have done my part to clear it out a little.

May we all find space for grace for ourselves and all the ways we feel in this difficult time in our hearts and in our homes.

III. “The Gift of Change” (The Rev. Scot Hull)

This week, I read a Facebook post that said something like this: “I wasn’t really prepared to give up quite so much for Lent this year.”

And while I’m on board with social distancing, like many of you, I’ve been restless. On the mild end of things, my usual routines have been disrupted. On the not-so-mild end, my future livelihood is very much uncertain. Knowing that this is exactly what 99% of the planet is currently living with helps me. Kind of. But I am still anxious and more often, I am finding my thoughts far afield. My “Now what” thoughts give way to “What if” questions about the future, chased by “If only” thoughts about the past. Back and forth. Like a pendulum.

The media has been all too happy to feed my discomfort. A couple of days ago, I read a news article -- the point was that we should “stay calm and carry on”. Rather British. The article also made a reference to something that sounded vaguely Biblical. Being a theology nerd, I went and looked it up.

Turns out, it was not Biblical, but may well be rooted in stories from same era as the Old Testament authors. There are several versions of the story. One is Jewish, and it goes like this:

One day, King Solomon decided to humble one of his ministers. He gave him an impossible task: go find a magic ring. The minister, being bold but not wise, quickly agreed -- but asked how he would know it when he found it.

Solomon told him that it had special powers: "If a happy person looks at it, they become sad, and if a sad person looks at it, they become happy."

The minister searched the known world, and months later, returned to Solomon to present the magic ring. As soon as Solomon read the inscription, he knew his

minister had done the impossible. The inscription on the ring read: "This too shall pass."

"This too shall pass." Good times come and go. So do hard times. High valuations in the stock market come and go. And so will social distancing. It's a good lesson, and this "long view" perspective can keep us humble in our triumphs and grateful during our trials. I believe that this is what Solomon saw in his ring. We have given up a lot, and there are a lot of unknowns still ahead. Maybe, in this time of anxiety, knowing that it will pass brings some comfort.

If it's not a comfort, that's okay. There are a great many things we are being asked to surrender, and it feels like a lot is out of our hands. Yet, even with all the fear, uncertainty, and doubt. Even with the dismay, and the anger, and the guilt, what I want to remind you of, as we reflect on the story of Solomon's ring, is that while change is inevitable, change doesn't mean we're powerless.

In her book, *Parable of the Sower*, science fiction author Octavia Butler wrote: "Change is the one unavoidable, irresistible, ongoing reality of the universe. To us, that makes it the most powerful reality, and just another word for God." For Butler's hero, that meant that humanity had an obligation toward the inevitability of change. We should surrender when we must, but when we can, whenever we can, our job was to seize opportunity and do something with it. To shape it.

And that is my invitation, this morning. To see something else in the chaos, the fear, uncertainty, and doubt. To do something else.

But don't take it from me. Take these two great and wise masters to heart.

The first I want you hear is the Dalai Lama, who told us "There are only two days in the year that nothing can be done. One is called Yesterday and the other is called Tomorrow. Today is the right day to Love, Believe, Do and mostly Live."

The second is Master Oogway, of the 2008 movie *Kung Fu Panda*. Master Oogway tried to show us the way when he taught us all: "Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, and today is a gift -- that's why it is called the present."

The gift of today may not be quite the gift you were hoping for, but what if we see it as a gift nevertheless? What will we do with it?

Surrender what we must. Change what we can. Know that this uncertainty, this time of trial, this too shall pass. In the meantime, let us live, today, and celebrate the gift we have.

This weird and awesome day.

Amen.

IV. “Building the World A.D.” (Jen Raffensperger, Intern Minister)

The other night I turned on YouTube to keep me company. There was a livestream of a concert...there was another livestream of an artist painting and talking about their work...there was another livestream of someone reading a book out loud.

The artist Lizzo has performed classical flute meditation pieces live on Instagram. The Indigo Girls live streamed a show to tens of thousands. American Celtic punk band the Dropkick Murphys did a live show from a Boston soundstage on St. Patrick’s Day, allowing their annual tradition to continue in a new fashion for over 320,000 audience members who watched and sang along. One fan emailed the band to say that they were in a wheelchair, and traveling was a challenge, and it was the first time they’d ever been able to get to one of the St. Patrick’s Day shows.

Perhaps you have seen the videos of folks singing to each other from their quarantine windows, or the folks who all work out together in the morning - separately - on the terraces outside their apartments. The students who synced up their singing from their separate devices at home once their choral competition was canceled due to the pandemic. Art hanging in windows. Art chalked on sidewalks. Across the world, people are picking up their guitars or their latch-hook projects, trying new recipes, thinking about school in a whole new way. The beautiful images of our own kids at play, at work, at joy, at art in our new world.

Make no mistake — as if any of us could — it is a new world. It feels hard and unsettling and scary to not know quite what this new world will be. As I looked for comfort, for solace, for inspiration during this first full week of physical distancing, once again I turned to poetry. What does 13th century Sufi mystic have to offer us in the face of the 21st century global pandemic? Quite a lot:

Keep walking, though there’s no place to get to.

Don't try to see through the distances.

That's not for human beings.

Move within, but don't move the way fear makes you move.

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty & frightened.

Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.

Take down a musical instrument.

Let the beauty we love be what we do.

There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

Don't move the way fear makes you move. We cannot see through these distances, my friends. In the face of the real despair — sickness, death, job loss, physical separation and its mental health tolls, fear and loneliness — in that face, what can be done? To keep ourselves well? To keep ourselves connected? To remind ourselves, again and again, that we are more than our jobs and more than our stuff, more than our fear and our frustration?

We may be separate, but we are still whole. Whole people presented with the unique opportunity to let the beauty we love be what we do. If justice is what love looks like in public, then art may be the best prism of public humanity. Whether we create it or enjoy it, we bring all of ourselves to art. Art brings us to tears of joy and sorrow. When we are physically separate from the best of being human, let us create — and enjoy — its public, loving face. Do music. Do art. Do kindness. Do human. Do love.

The world has a new “B.C.” “Before coronavirus.” “Before COVID-19.”

We begin, together, now, creating the art of the world that is to come. We light together the path towards our world's new A.D. After disease. After despair. After distancing. I look forward to meeting you there.

So may it be.

V. “Inclining toward Spaciousness” (The Rev. Dr. Carl Gregg, Minister)

There are a lot of scary headlines out there. And even though we can't control the state of the world, I would like to invite us to spend a little time reflecting on what we do have more influence over: how we respond to frightening news.

A simple framework that has stuck with me in recent years is from the psychologist [Rick Hanson](#). (Some of you may know his books, like [Buddha's Brain](#).) For now, imagine you are sitting in a car at a stop light: *green* means go and *red* means stop. Dr. Hanson has adapted that color coding for noticing what's happening with the state of our minds ([Hardwiring Happiness](#), 50).

When we feel safe, centered, and connected, it's easier to skillfully respond to any problem that arises. When we're relaxed and open, we are more able to be creative —and draw from our full set of inner resources, allowing the best versions of our self to emerge. That's what Dr. Hanson calls **“green” Responsive Mode**. In contrast, when we feel threatened, anxious, or discombobulated, it can be easy to downshift into **“red” Reactive Mode**, and lash out at anything that triggers us.

To get a little nerdy about it, when we're in “red” Reactive Mode, our *amygdala* (those two almond-shaped clusters of densely packed neurons in the temporal lobes of our brains) has taken over. The amygdala controls instinctual responses, and has been called the **“fight or flight” — the “have-sex-with-it-or-kill-it” — part of the brain** ([Evolving Dharma](#), 35-36). When we are deeply in “red” Reactive Mode, we're acting primarily on base animal instinct.

By no means am I saying that we should get rid of our amygdala. This evolutionary inheritance can save our life in a high-threat situation. But it can also cause us to exist in a state of ratcheted-up anxiety all the time. When we are in “red” Reactive Mode, our “lizard brain” —our brain stem—takes over, and we don't have access to all those more evolved parts of ourselves that the prefrontal cortex makes possible: compassion, clarity, concentration, equanimity, and so much more.

So if you are finding yourself spending too much time in a ratcheted up “red” Reactive Mode, take a deep breath: *in...*and *out*. Take another one. Offer yourself some gentleness, kindness, and compassion. You've been going through a lot. We've been going through a lot. I invite you to notice in the coming days:

- What are the people, places, things, and activities that most regularly incline your heart and mind toward *“green” Responsive Mode*?
- And what are the people, places, things, and activities that most regularly incline your heart and mind toward *“red” Reactive Mode*?

You may not be able to eliminate all of those “red” stressors from your life, especially in such a time as this. But **can you be intentional about getting *more* of the “green” people, places, things, and activities in your life—so that when the “red” stressors do arise, you have a greater capacity to remain in *Responsive Mode*?**

Sometimes, as we did just a few moments ago, it can be as simple as taking a deep breath, and placing your hand on your heart and inclining yourself back toward heartfulness. Here’s a quote from the meditation teacher Jack Kornfield: “Tune in to your heart. That is where love, wisdom, grace, and compassion reside. With loving attention, feel into what matters most to you. **Yes, there are anxious thoughts, and there is grief and trauma, but don’t let your heart be colonized by fear**” (“[Freedom Amid Challenging Times](#)”).

I love that: “Don’t let your heart be colonized by fear.” Fear will arise, but practice *letting it go* before it sets up shop and moves in permanently.

Along those lines, I want to leave you with one final practice. It’s been on my mind since everyone’s been talking about *zoom* so much in regard to Zoom Video Conferences. And while the word *zoom* can mean to “move really quickly,” it can also mean to “move in and out on a camera from a long shot to a close-up or vice versa.” And it’s that latter sense of *zooming in and out* on a camera that can be of use when we feel contracted and locked in by fear or anxiety.

When we’re afraid, fear can feel like the only thing in the world. If that’s happening, a significant first step is *noticing* the fear. Simple mindfulness: noting, “There is fear.” **Noticing and naming can give us a little bit of space between being fully caught up and trapped in fear—and *witnessing* what is happening.**

From there, one practice that has been useful for me is inclining my heart and mind toward *spaciousness*: intentionally *zooming out* to put my fear in a larger context.

If you are open to it, I will show you what I mean with a short guided meditation adapted from one of my teachers, [Emily Horn](#). (Her full version is ten-minutes, and is [available online](#). The parts directly quoting Emily are in quotation marks below.)

If you feel comfortable, I invite you to settle in a little more right where you are. If it’s possible for you in this moment, I invite you to sit up a little straighter—so that you

are *relaxed, but alert*. Perhaps put your feet on the floor. Rest your hands in your lap. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so. Relax your shoulders. Take a deep breath in and out.

Begin by noticing the *spaciousness* of the room that you are in. You don't even have to open your eyes, just allow yourself to feel into the experience of sensing that the room that you are in, however large or small, is *bigger* than you. There is spaciousness.

"And now seeing if you can allow that sense of spaciousness to grow." Zooming out a little more. "Imagining the sky above you."

And now zooming out a little further still, "imagining the expanse of space extending beyond the sky."

"Whatever is arising in your field of awareness in this moment—body sensations, breathing, feelings, thoughts—allow it all to come and go, just like the clouds in the sky." As the saying goes, *you don't have to believe everything you think*. You don't have to hold on to everything you feel.

"Awareness holds it all. No need to do anything. Is there a sense that there's a need to do something? A desire to do something? That too can arise and pass. Within this vast spaciousness of awareness, surrendering in this moment just a little bit more to awareness."

As you are ready, I invite you to return your attention to the room that you are in—and know that this practice of *zooming out* and *inclining your mind and heart toward spaciousness* is always available to you.