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Apocalypse? We've All Been There

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When I arrived in Chicago last August for my seminary's Ingathering, the official kick-off to the new academic year, I learned that the theme for this year would be: The Apocalypse.

Well, THAT seemed fairly blunt.

As we began the work of the school year, we learned more about what our faculty and staff had in mind when they set this work before us: Apocalypse means uncovering. It is Revelation. Its origin is from Greek *apokalyptein* "uncover, disclose, reveal." It may be useful to point out that this is quite distinct from "Armageddon," which means "cataclysmic final conflict," from Hebrew *Har Megiddon* "Mount of Megiddo," a city in central Palestine, given in the final book of the Christian scriptures, the Revelation of St. John, as the location of the final battle between the forces of good and evil.

Placing a bunch of etymology on top of it somewhat obstructs the view, however: What on earth does it mean to show up to an institute of learning, dedicated to the cultivation of religious leadership, to have our teachers and guides say "The Apocalypse is not a theory or a story, it is happening now."

This was not an invitation to pack up our bags and go home. This was, in fact, a calling forth to work that has become more vital than ever before.

Moving through the work with my fellow students, one refrain popped into my head over and over: “Apocalypse? We’ve all been there. The same old trips, why should we care?”

Does anyone recognize this lyric? [answers, if any] Right, so, that’s from the musical episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* called “Once More, With Feeling,” which originally aired on November 6, 2001. When I needed a title for this sermon, it occurred to me briefly to use “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine),” which was released as a single in November 1987. Perhaps the 19-year-old reference would feel more contemporary than the 33-year-old one? (Also, importantly, I would not exactly characterize the way I feel about the state of the world as “fine.”)

But this lyric didn’t occur to me only because it had the word “Apocalypse” in it. In the context of the show, this lyric is part of a rallying cry - what can’t we face if we’re together? What’s in this place that we can’t weather? Buffy and her friends can confidently agree they HAVE all faced apocalypse before, because over and over on the show, obstacles and threats were *uncovered*, revealed you might say, and then dispatched with.

THIS apocalypse, OUR apocalypse, is *also* not the first frightening, world-turning-upside-down grand reveal, great uncovering. It IS the most urgent one, because we are in it, now.

As a part of our Ingathering, the president of my school, Dr. Elias Ortega-Aponte, preached a sermon called “Ministry at the End of the World (or) What Future is This?” I would like to share a brief passage from it with you now:

“It is when faced with uncertainty that hope should prevail. Not a hope of false dreams, or easy comfort, not a hope that keeps us chained to passivity, but a hope that empowers our journey. Hope is what moves us to action even if we do not know what the outcome will be. We must act in the face of uncertainty because in doing so, we can help shape the outcome. Hope pushes us to look intently through the cracks in the world and see glimpses of a world that might be, even if there is no guarantee this world will ever be realized.”

There is a power in naming. When we look at all that is being uncovered in the world, all the truths that have been there all along that have become less easy to ignore...what name should we give it? What name should we give it when we begin to understand the devastating scope of climate change? What name should we give it when it feels as though our democracy is not just fraying at the seams but cracking through the center? What name should we give it when our society cannot agree that black lives matter? What name should we give it when wealth and power are held within increasingly fewer hands? What name should we give it when all our social indicators show that we are more isolated, more alone, more scared, feeling more despair than ever?

Let us take the freedom and power of calling it what it is. Apocalypse, an uncovering of that which has been hidden.

In fact, it is more than a naming - it is a *diagnosis*. When we are ill and don't know the reason, it is scary and unsettling. Our minds scramble to worse-case scenarios, especially if we Google our symptoms (public service note: PLEASE never do this). Our personal resources are already depleted by the illness; the fear compounds this feeling of depletion, of overwhelm. But if we have a diagnosis, if we can name the monster that stands before us - it is also true we now have been given the power to deal with that monster. Whether the power we are granted is aggressive treatment, a miracle cure, a slow therapeutic path to wellness, or even a compassionate choice about how

we will choose not to engage with the illness. It is by naming that we know. It is by knowing we can begin to understand.

Our society, our world, our planet is in a state of apocalypse. The revelations pile up so fast they exhaust us, make us each feel we are carrying the whole of the weight on our shoulders, make us each feel too small and inadequate to the task ahead.

What wonderful news, then, that this is a task we must not do alone.

Now that we have a name, now that we know what we face, it becomes easier to address the fear. Fear grows deepest and most dense around what is unknown - what is hiding in the shadows may seem much more fearful than it is when we switch on the light.

In their book *Active Hope*, Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone describe a method to address these fears and despairs by strengthening our capacity to face crisis. They call it the “Work That Reconnects.”

There are four stages described in this work. They are:

1. Coming from Gratitude
2. Honoring Our Pain for the World
3. Seeing with New Eyes
4. Going Forth

Rather than giving a simple definition for each of these stages, I will share a brief reflection related to each one. I invite you to summon up such images, ideas, sounds, that arise when you reflect on moving through this work. This work is described by Macy and Johnstone as a spiral - not a direct route, not something to do once and never return to. This is ongoing work. This is an invitation to take a few moments to consider how vital our personal resilience is for each of us, to work together towards the world as it could be, without denying the world as it is.

One. Gratitude.

At Thanksgiving, it was my grandmother who said grace. This was my mother's mother, who was a Missouri Synod Lutheran, and even after my father was ordained a permanent deacon in the Catholic church, my grandmother was the one who said the blessing over the meal, every year until her last. And what a grace! No formula for Grandma. No "bless us O Lord etc. etc. amen please let's eat," no. Grandma went on and ON. It was not a prayer; it was a conversation. As she went along, it was as though she was reminded continually of new things to be thankful for, "Oh by the way, Lord, I have one more!" When I was very small, and very hungry, these graces were a LOT to sit through. And honestly when I was older they were still a lot to sit through, but I had learned some patience.

My grandmother lived a life full of gratitude. It was more than the words of grace she said, though I'm sure those helped. Gratitude is a muscle, the more we use it, the easier it becomes to use it. My grandmother's gratitude was strong!

In 1946, my grandmother gave birth to her second child, William - my uncle Bill. Bill was born with a severe developmental disability, and there were not many support services for these children or their parents at the time. The support system my grandmother had was her church and her family. When my uncle was old enough to start Sunday school, my grandmother brought him to the church. "I'm sorry," she was told, "but we can't allow your son in Sunday school classes." It would be a challenge. It would be a distraction.

My grandmother did not rage. She did not rail. It would have been reasonable for her to do either of those things, to mourn that the church she loved made no place for her son. But instead of doing either of those things, she looked to gratitude. She looked to grace. She asked, "Is my son not also a child of God?" And she founded the first Lutheran Sunday school for developmentally disabled children.

Gratitude grounded her. Gratitude gave her resilience. Gratitude helped her to create a better world.

Two. Pain.

Honestly, this entire sermon could be based on “Honoring Our Pain for the World,” the second step. How long should we linger here, when this is our constant state, feeling overwhelmed and angry, full of sorrow and despair?

I feel it all the time. I am sure many of you do as well. But the key word here is *honor*. To honor our pain is to name it, acknowledge it, and share it. To honor our pain is to acknowledge that it is right and good for us to mourn, and to grieve.

For those who are old enough to remember it, I would like to call to mind September **12**, 2001. There are more unforgettable, horrible images from September 11 of that year than any of us can count, and even those of us who were not alive then, or not old enough to remember, or who did not live in this country at the time could likely reconstruct how things went on that day. But on the next day, and the next?

I remember people being quieter. I remember people being more kind. I remember fewer horns honking, more doors being held, more people making eye contact. Maybe you have memories from those days. It's not that we were not feeling pain, quite the opposite - it's that we were feeling it together.

Honoring this shared experience also serves to remind us that not all who were here at that time felt the same sense of kinship. The pain in the world also spilled out into horrible hate crimes, against Muslims and people who “looked like” Muslims. But even in that rage-filled shameful time, there were people who saw the pain of the other, who made a “they” a part of “we.”

When we honor the pain of the world, we let it teach us how connected we are. In our Unitarian Universalist values, honoring our pain for the world means taking the time to feel every pull and tear on the interdependent web of which we are all a part. We share the blessing and hope of this pain every week here: the hope that a sorrow shared is a sorrow diminished.

Three. Seeing with new eyes.

A part of perceiving the world in a new way means changing the idea of the self.

Having a healthy self-interest is, after all, healthy - especially if we expand the concept of "self." If someone asks you the question, "who are you?" how many ways could you answer?

I will share with you now a passage from the 1991 film *The Fisher King*.

"It begins with the king as a boy, having to spend the night alone in the forest to prove his courage so he can become king. Now while he is spending the night alone he's visited by a sacred vision. Out of the fire appears the holy grail, symbol of God's divine grace. And a voice said to the boy, 'You shall be keeper of the grail so that it may heal the hearts of men.' But the boy was blinded by greater visions of a life filled with power and glory and beauty. And in this state of radical amazement he felt for a brief moment not like a boy, but invincible, like God, so he reached into the fire to take the grail, and the grail vanished, leaving him with his hand in the fire to be terribly wounded. Now as this boy grew older, his wound grew deeper. Until one day, life for him lost its reason. He had no faith in any man, not even himself. He couldn't love or feel loved. He was sick with experience. He began to die. One day a fool wandered into the castle and found the king alone. And being a fool, he was simple minded, he didn't see a king. He only saw a man alone and in pain. And he asked the king, 'What ails you friend?' The king replied, 'I'm thirsty. I need some water to cool my throat'. So the fool took a cup from beside his bed, filled it with water and handed it to the king. As the king began to drink, he realized his wound was healed. He looked in his hands and there was the holy

grail, that which he sought all of his life. And he turned to the fool and said with amazement, 'How can you find that which my brightest and bravest could not?' And the fool replied, 'I don't know. I only knew that you were thirsty.'"

Four. Going forth.

Active hope is *active*. We have talked about naming. We have talked about knowing. This fourth stage of the Work that Reconnects also asks that we engage our imagination. What is that world we glimpse through the cracks? What can we imagine better, take steps to set in motion, within ourselves and our larger sense of self, our communities and companions and connections?

At last, we return to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the Apocalypse. For those of you who might not be fans - or who might not have the slightest idea what I'm talking about - the premise of the television show is fairly simple. In a world where supernatural creatures such as vampires, werewolves, and demons exist, there is also a person called the Slayer. In the show's mythos, the Slayer is a young woman, who is granted special powers to overcome those other threatening supernatural creatures. She is a defender and a champion. During the course of the show, we learn that a new Slayer is "activated" each time another Slayer loses her life. There is only one at a time, because that's how it has always been. In the show's finale - and I apologize, this is a spoiler alert, even though the finale aired almost 17 years ago - Buffy's friend and powerful witch Willow casts a spell which unlocks the Slayer potential in every being, of every gender, who might have been "next." The final battle - the Armageddon, if you will - is also an apocalypse. The truth of the power of the slayer has been revealed, re-imagined, and re-written. No longer must the stress of "saving the world" rest on the shoulders of one young woman. Now it truly is the work of us all.

Now truly, this is the work of us all. This is not the first apocalypse. Civilizations have turned, dashed, triumphed, fallen before us. But this is OUR apocalypse. Will you join with me? Will you cultivate gratitude, so that you may recognize it even in the shadows

and name it? Will you honor the pain you carry, that we all carry, holding in your heart the untold and unknown battles that each of us are fighting? Will you allow yourself and open yourself to perceive the world in a new way? Will you go forth, taking your pain AND your energy AND your fear AND your loving connections, will you go forth with me freeing ourselves from the idea of doing things the way they have always been done? Will you let yourself dream with me a world where the new CAN be beautiful, no matter how many messages we receive otherwise?

Will you join me in seeking a new revelation, a new voice, a new path? At the other end is a new world...and the end of the old one. Along the way is more turning, more churning, and much more to be revealed. Come now. Come now and allow your hope to empower the journey. Come now and allow your love for this life to be greater even than your fear.