

Test of Faith

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Normal day, let me be aware of the treasure you are. Let me learn from you, love you, savour you, bless you, before you depart. - Source Unknown

Meditation

Otherwise by Jane Kenyan

I got out of bed on two strong legs.

It might have been otherwise.

I ate cereal, sweet milk, ripe flawless peach.

It might have been otherwise.

I took the dog uphill to the birch wood.

All morning I did the work I love ...

But one day, I know,

It will be otherwise

Reading

All is Dukkha by Elizabeth Tarbox

The Buddhists say, "All is dukkha." It is hard to translate, they tell us. It means literally "suffering" but the feeling of dukkha is closer to impermanence. The fact of impermanence is central to the Buddhist path to nirvana, enlightenment.

Dukkha. All is impermanence. Nothing lasts. I thought of that yesterday, watching leaves come down in a shower, and the smell of the rotting ones going back into the earth. Leaf to humus and back to earth to nourish the roots of the mother tree. The crows crying as the leaves fall and their nests are exposed: dukkha . . . all is impermanence.

And life goes on, and people who were with us last year at this time have died, all souls pass on, all is dukkha, nothing lasts.

The path to enlightenment is understanding, accepting impermanence to the point where we no longer struggle against it. That is the way of the Buddha. But here in the West we search for that which is permanent, even as we live with the death of all things, all people. We search for a sure footing on the path strewn with fallen leaves; we notice the buds of next year's growth tight-curved and waiting; we hold on to the things we can count on -- our church, our community, our memories of those who died before us, our love and hope, and the search for certainty in a world that is dukkha.

Spirit of Creation, Goddess of today -- let us find each other in a changing world; let us experience love as something which exists, a possibility which is. Let us know that we are alive and being renewed miraculously each second; that the impermanence gives to life its freshness and surprise; that our memories of yesterday and our expectations of tomorrow make now a cherished, precious, eternal moment.

Hymn # 34 Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire

Sermon

Angela Klassen

Every day from 8:30 to 4:30 my neighbour Denise prepares for the worst on our behalf. As our municipality's Emergency Management Coordinator, her job is to plan a coordinated response to, and recovery from, a major disaster. Hundreds of thousands of us are counting on her planning, training and simulations to make sure we're prepared -- heaven forbid - if there were to be a natural, chemical, biological, nuclear or explosive disaster. She says it's a peculiar job in that she labours diligently every day knowing her work may be put to the ultimate test at any time; **but** she hopes that none of us will ever see the fruits of her labour as she prepares for a day she prays will never come.

A day when everything changes in an instant.

People living in Honolulu on the morning of December 7, 1941, begin their accounts of Pearl Harbour by saying what an ordinary Sunday morning it had been.

December 6, 1989 started out an ordinary day on the campus of Montreal's École Polytechnique. By evening it was the date of the worst single day massacre in Canadian history. Fourteen talented and promising women ... gone.

In the midst of life, we are in death, Anglicans say at the graveside.

"All is dukkha" say the Buddhists. Life changes in an ordinary instant.

Sometimes the change affects whole communities, nations, or the world. Other times the rug is pulled out from under just us.

Odds are that *you* have been sailing along, unsuspecting, when a personal disaster has struck. A difficult diagnosis, a wrenching separation or job-loss; a mishap, a miscarriage or death that came too early and which changed everything.

It happened to me on a Monday in February of this year.

Monday is my day off and it began as usual with housework and laundry. By mid day I noticed that the simplest tasks left me short of breath. I stopped folding laundry and sat down, hoping for either relief or insight.

I must admit that for a few moments, there was a struggle within myself. The shortness of breath was not abating and yet my goal-oriented self was reluctant to spend the rest of my day-off waiting in the emergency department unnecessarily. Thank goodness, the sane whisperings of my more aware self wouldn't allow me to ignore a deep sense of foreboding, which I later learned was a symptom of my illness.

A friend, Dr. Mike, was on duty in the emergency department. When a blood test to rule out a clot in the lungs came back indeterminate, the triage nurses reassuringly said that I looked too well on arrival for a diagnosis as serious as pulmonary embolism. It was a surprise when a CT scan not only confirmed the diagnosis but showed that I had several large clots in both lungs. Dr. Mike told me gravely, "It's really good you came in when you did. I called Shawn to say I wouldn't be in to work the next day before surrendering to IV tubes and a hospital confinement lasting six days before my body responded enough to the blood thinners for the danger of developing more clots to have passed.

All is dukkha. Life changes in the instant.

The Sufi poet Rumi says,

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,

Who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture,

Still, treat each guest honourably.

He may be clearing you out for some new delight.

I know that many in this room have encountered this crowd of sorrows and some have been left with long term loss, struggle and grief. I was lucky; very lucky, that the furniture in my metaphorical house was only modestly re-arranged. My illness, which medical staff believe was caused by prescription medication I had been taking, was serious, but recoverable.

For a period of about three weeks, although “I got out of bed on two strong legs”, I could not do the work I love. For another dozen weeks beyond that, my lung capacity would not allow me to “take the dog uphill to the birch wood”. Nor could I attend to duties beyond my paid work which my young-adult children are accustomed to my handling for our family. In fact, I became totally reliant on them for anything requiring physical energy – errand running, grocery shopping, vacuuming, lifting and carrying. To a healthy person, this might sound like a blessed vacation from the week’s least relished tasks. To an ill person though, an extended period of weakness, pain or immobility can begin to blot out the memory of, or hope for, improved health. The loss of normal routines, sense of autonomy and usefulness can be a recipe for personal crisis.

I felt blessed to be able to weather, with relative equanimity, the uncertainty of those days in hospital and weeks of wondering if or when my full strength might return.

The Reverend Scott Alexander says that “the test of a person’s faith is how well it serves them in times of trouble” and I credit Unitarian Universalism for seeing me through this health set-back. Without realizing it, my faith, like Denise’s community plan, had been the needed preparation and training for the day I hoped wouldn’t come.

I could not have imagined this faith serving me so powerfully when I first came to our congregations 20 years ago. Having arrived out of a religious tradition in which beliefs are handed down from above, it wasn’t immediately clear to me how to nurture a faith from within. Over time I learned from the words and living example of members of three congregations that to be UU is to spend a *lifetime* seeking reality and truth, striving to live in an ethical and principled way. During the many days my illness provided for reflection, I had an opportunity to appreciate the cumulative power of being involved and having gradually evolved my own working set of beliefs and practices. Three aspects of my faith were particularly helpful: belonging to a religious community, our religious heritage and daily spiritual practice.

Belonging to a practicing religious community

If research hadn’t shown that we may reap health benefits from regular attendance at servicesⁱ I would still know with every fibre of my being that we need to be here together.

we need each other, we need to see each other, we need to touch each other, we need to smell each other, we need to hug each other. We need each other. So we come to this place. We come to work, to talk, to sing, to laugh, to dance. We call this a religious community, not because this (place) is holy ground, but because what we do here, what we say here together, and what we are here, makes it a sacred gatheringⁱⁱ

In the most lonely and frightening moments of uncertainty in the hospital, the clear knowledge that my life is joined richly, deeply and lovingly with other lives was truly sustaining.

During my three week convalescence at home, friends from the Hamilton congregation went out of their way to nourish me with home cooking, long visits and philosophical talks.

Without the distractions of work, household chores and errands, I was confronted with the realization that I have some serious work to do on mastering self care. In a culture that rewards achievement and in which many women would rather die than be seen as self indulgent, I needed to finally get the lesson which Audre Lorde spoke of during her battle with cancer:

Overextending myself is not stretching myself. I had to accept how difficult it is to monitor the difference. Caring for myself is not self indulgence, it is self preservation and that is an act of political warfare.ⁱⁱⁱ

said Lorde.

Fortified by the ministrations of my UU friends and these words the cards which many of you sent to me at home provided the remedial education I needed to complete my learning. Lined up on my mantelpiece. they were a veritable reference library with explicit instructions like “stay in your pyjamas, plump the pillows, read a good book.....” and “come back soon, but not too soon.” Members of the congregation’s leadership team made taking this advice easier when they reminded me that this congregation has a sick leave provision for staff which allowed me to recover without worry.

In this, our “priesthood of all believers”, I received all the care and tending I could possibly have hoped for from my religious community. Our greatest resource truly is one another.

Our Religious Heritage

Our religious forebears were men and women who followed their own reasoned convictions in spite of what others might say. Hearing their stories repeated for two decades has helped me to have the courage of my own convictions and therefore, I think, fewer regrets.

Our theological inheritance means that no one in UU circles proposed that God had caused me to be ill as a punishment for my sins, nor that I had somehow attracted this illness to myself with incorrect thoughts. At this already vulnerable time, I was grateful for a theology which does not blame the patient.

Daily Spiritual Practices

Thanks in large part to the people I’ve met in our congregations, I’ve been encouraged and inspired to cultivate a variety of daily spiritual practices. An eclectic mix of meditation, ritual, devotional reading, and a form of journaling . It wasn’t until my secular life was set aside completely, that I realized how profoundly important it was that I had a rich inner spiritual life to turn to. As Reverend Christine Robinson says “While it is true that (spiritual) practices can be taken up whenever one needs them, it really is better to have some practices firmly established. Learning to meditate in the midst of a crisis can be compared to learning to relax in the midst of childbirth. It is possible to do – but it’s a lot of work and the results can be mixed.”

Each of us is charged, in our fourth principle, with undertaking “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”. This means that the faith you are nurturing may be quite different from mine. What is most important is that you *are* nurturing it.

There is a wonderful old story which illustrates this truth. A rabbi and one of his congregants, a soap manufacturer were out for a walk and the soap maker asked “What good is religion?” Look at all the

trouble and misery of the world! Still there, even after years – thousands of years – of teaching about goodness and truth and peace. Still there, after all the prayers and sermons and teachings. If religion is good and true, how can this be?

The rabbi said nothing as they walked along. They continued on until the rabbi noticed a child playing in the gutter by the side of the road.

“Look at that child,” said the rabbi. You say that soap makes people clean, but see the dirt on that youngster! Of what good is soap? With all the soap in the world, with all these years, the child is still filthy! I wonder how effective soap is, after all?”

“But rabbi” the soap maker protested. “Soap can’t do any good unless it’s used!”

“Exactly”, replied the rabbi, “exactly!”

As we go back out onto the “path(s) strewn with fallen leaves” and inhale the “smell of the rotting ones going back into the earth, leaf to humus and back to earth ...” may we be reminded that *now* is a precious, cherished time to live mindful Unitarian Universalist lives; knowing that we are richly and lovingly connected to this community of faith.

Because all is dukkha. Life changes in an instant and ...

One day, we know, it will be otherwise.

Amen.

ⁱ In a study comparing the associations between faith and health, a University of Pittsburgh Medical Center physician has shown the improvements in life expectancy of those who attend religious services on a weekly basis to be comparable to those who participate in regular physical exercise. The study was published in the March-April 2006 issue of the Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine. Dr. Daniel Hall compared the impact of regular exercise, statin therapy and religious attendance, and showed that each accounts for an additional two-to-five years of life. "This is not to say that religious attendance should replace primary prevention such as exercise, or a proven drug therapy, such as statin therapy, but it does suggest that regular religious attendance is associated with a substantially longer life expectancy, and this warrants further research," cautions Dr. Hall

ⁱⁱ Rev. Robert Fulghum in his address to General Assembly 2007

ⁱⁱⁱ Audre Lorde. "A Burst of Light"