

# “The World’s Slowest Roller Coaster”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation.

*Have you ever intentionally allowed yourself to make mistakes?*

For those of you who are in Journey Groups, you may recognize that as Question #6 in this month’s *New Horizons* materials on the theme of Intention.

*Have you ever intentionally allowed yourself to make mistakes?*

On Wednesday night, I facilitated the Journey Group comprised of our Journey Group facilitators.

Our practice is to meet early in the month to go through the same materials the other Journey Groups in the congregation will use in the weeks to follow.

We spent a fair bit of our time together on Wednesday circling around this question.

*Have you ever intentionally allowed yourself to make mistakes?*

There are different ways to come at it.

Do you give yourself, in a general way, permission to make mistakes, at least from time to time?

Or have you—while fully aware you were making a mistake—allowed yourself to just keep at it—  
to just keep going, come what may?

How we answer this question speaks  
to our capacity to contend with change—  
at least the kind that is, to some degree, within our control.

It speaks to our willingness to take some risk.

To realize that you have to venture something  
you may very well lose.

To accept that life is shot through with uncertainty,  
and that grasping for reassurance or clinging to stability  
may put you in greater peril  
than simply going with the flow,  
and riding out the waves of chance and change.

Change, of course, can be the bringer of good things or bad—  
or a complicated mix of both,  
that can take a very long time to sort out.

So, with that as our reality, how, then, are we to live?

How are we supposed to know when to act—  
and when to hold back, take our time,  
and read our tea leaves, or our horoscope,  
or anything that might give us  
an ounce more confidence about what we're doing?

My late colleague Forrest Church said  
we should adopt the “60% Solution.”<sup>1</sup>

By this he meant when faced with a daunting decision,  
you take the leap, if your feelings of conviction reach 60%.

“Once you reckon,” he says,  
“that the odds for things turning out well  
outweigh the odds for their turning out badly,  
on a 60/40 decision you go for it,  
remaining mindful that you may be making a mistake.”

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<sup>1</sup> Forrest Church, “The Law of Unintended Consequences,” All Souls Unitarian Church, 9 February 2003.

That means that accounting  
for basic judgment and your share of luck,  
if you routinely act on 60% convictions,  
then 60% of your decisions will tend to turn out pretty well.

“As for the other 40%,” he says,  
“you can either write them off as a cost of doing business  
or—the spiritually finer approach—  
add them to your balance of humility.”

The danger in demanding a high threshold for certainty  
is that you may well miss out on opportunities that matter.

Life can become very small when we insist on certainty  
before we make a move,  
before we commit,  
before we get involved.

This came home to me last Monday,  
when I was trying to decide whether and how to respond  
to the stand-off between the RCMP  
and the Wet’suwet’en (Wet-SO-it-ten) First Nation,  
over whether the TransCanada pipeline  
will be allowed to cross over  
their traditional lands.

On Monday night, as Lynn and I  
were sorting through this issue,  
I knew I didn’t know nearly as much as I wanted to know.

I didn’t adequately understand the status of negotiations  
between TransCanada and the indigenous peoples  
who live along the intended path of the pipeline.

And I didn’t fully comprehend the power dynamics  
between the elected band council and the hereditary elders.

But while I’ve learned a lot this week since then,  
I showed up with Lynn and folks from our congregation  
at Nathan Phillips Square, because I wanted to show my solidarity.

I wanted to register my deep concern that the actions of the RCMP were at odds with the delicate work of reconciliation.

Reconciliation takes time, and it requires deep listening. And I wasn't convinced there had been enough of either.

I rarely believe the use of force to be helpful, but I believe this is especially true at this moment in our history.

Force is often a sign of weakness, an indication that the relationship is breaking down. And this week it has damaged our best efforts toward reconciliation between nations, and denied the best of who we aspire to be.

On Tuesday morning, though, when deciding what to do, I relied on the 60% Solution.

My anger over the use of force was easily enough to get me to 60%, even though there were uncomfortable gaps in my understanding.

*Have you ever intentionally allowed yourself to make mistakes?*

Yes, yes, I have. And I'm glad I did—and do. I actually find I'm getting better at it, with age!

For the record, I don't believe this was a mistake, but I realize it could have been.

I've thought about this, as we launch this series of services on Change, because I wonder often about our congregation's capacity for change.

I wonder how prepared we are to manage the stress of moving to a new home, to handle the disruption that comes with any move.

And I wonder about our appetite  
for taking risks and making mistakes.

In terms of our real estate efforts,  
I believe we have taken a tremendous amount of care  
to gather as much information as possible  
and to then make the wisest decisions we can,  
given the limits of what we can know.

I am deeply grateful for—and tremendously proud of—  
how you, as a congregation, have repeatedly demonstrated  
such resolve and ongoing dedication.

Few congregations would have had the courage to sell their home  
without knowing exactly where we're headed.

Few congregations would have managed  
the anxiety of this process with such grace and compassion.

That we've been able to do this  
is a testament to our refusing to be led by our fears.

Instead, we've gone for the bold embrace  
of a dawning future we trust is still unfolding.

And we've made real our belief that we,  
led by hope and by love,  
can help bring it into being.

By my calculation, I would say that we're operating  
with something higher than a 60% Solution,  
but this decision has still required of us a great leap of faith.

Several years ago now, I shared with you the image  
of "The Roller Coaster of Change."

I distributed copies that day in your Orders of Service.

I encouraged you to stick them on your refrigerator,  
or to tape them to your bathroom mirror.

For years now, there's been a copy downstairs on my office door.

The roller coaster goes up and down, like any other.

But it depicts the many complicated stages of change,  
with the range of emotions we go through  
as we move from shock and anger,  
through grief and acceptance,  
to hope and excitement.

On this, our slowest roller coaster in the world,  
many of us have been through all the cycles, over and over,  
as we've made one trip after another around the track.

My hope is that you're learning to love the ride,  
that you're coming to embrace the adventure,  
even though we don't know when and where  
this particular ride will come to an end.

To be sure, there's a big part of me  
that very much looks forward to the day  
when we are settled in our new building.

I can't wait to have a home for us  
that is fully accessible to everyone, and functioning  
in ways that best support the life of this active congregation.

I long for the day we put down deep roots  
and devote ourselves anew  
to the flourishing of this wonderful city.

But, if I'm completely honest,  
part of me will also miss the ride  
when we pull into the station and the safety bars spring up.

It's because I know that the journey is the destination.  
That the ride on life's roller coaster is what it's really all about.

But, the truth is, that life is all roller coasters—  
here, there, and everywhere.

And the choice, as always,  
is whether we have the will to ride.

In just over two years, we will move from this place.

To be perfectly frank, this is one of the most challenging things  
a congregation can live through.

I have absolute confidence, though,  
that we're going to do so with our usual grace and good humour.

And I say that because I've already seen  
how resilient this congregation can be.

There is, in all of this, though,  
the question of how we spend these next two years here.

Obviously, there's a ton of work to be done.

We need to find a new location.

Design a new building.

Plan the move and buy tons of boxes and packing tape.

The conventional wisdom says that with all of that going on,  
a congregation should do what it can  
to minimize any additional stress and strain.

But I tell you today  
that I think that is guidance we must resist.

There's just too much to be done,  
at this complicated moment in time,  
for us to rest on our laurels  
and wait to move into a brand new home.

Instead, I believe we also need  
to dedicate time and energy over the next two years  
becoming who we long to be when we move into that new home.

If our goal is to truly increase  
the sum total of love and justice in our world,  
this isn't work we can set aside for a more convenient time.

I hear the call for us to deepen our resolve.

I hear the call for us to stretch and grow.

I hear the call for us to take risks,  
and to make glorious mistakes.

For the work of reconciliation is on our doorstep.

The need for racial justice in our city is growing.

Transgender people live around and among us  
in fear for their very lives and well-being.

And climate change confronts us at every turn.

We live in complex and concerning times.

But we also live in an era of great promise—  
a moment out of the vastness of time,  
when we are called to harness the powers of the human heart  
and spend them in service  
to the flourishing of peace and justice on this planet.

We don't have to do all of it—and, of course, we can't.

Each of us can only do so much.

But we are called to play our part,  
no matter how small, to help heal our corner of the world—  
be that through bold, grand gestures,  
or in small and steady acts of love and kindness  
that touch and transform people's hearts.

Over the next two years,  
as we live in what might be called “the meantime”,



I long to see us  
helping to heal the world,  
starting where such work always, and truly, begins—  
with ourselves, and with our own hearts.

I'm going to ask us all to dig deeper.

To deepen the spiritual practices that sustain you.

To deepen your awareness of how identity and privilege  
can impede the cause of peace and justice.

To deepen your resolve to build up  
the Beloved Community, here and now, as a moral imperative.

And to take what you learn about yourself in this place,  
in this little loving laboratory of the human spirit,  
to help build a better world beyond our walls.

The DNA of this strange and beautiful faith of ours  
has the potential to speak in powerful ways  
to the times in which we live.

I will readily confess that your ministerial and staff team  
can only do so much. Our voices only carry so far.

But, this community—equipped and emboldened  
to live out its values in the world—  
well, that's a different and far more compelling story.

That is the story of a people  
who can make a genuine difference in the world.

As I said a moment ago,  
conventional wisdom says that,  
as a congregation in transition,  
this is the time to play it safe.

But I resist that with every fiber of my being,  
and I hope you will, too.

The writer Anne Lamott writes:

...I know the truth that I am not going to live forever,  
and this has set me free.

Eleven years ago, when my friend Pammy was dying  
at the age of 37, we went shopping....

She was in a wheelchair, with a wig and three weeks to live.

I tried on a short dress and came out to model it for [her].

I asked if she thought it made me look big in the thighs,  
and she said, so kindly,  
“Annie? You just don't have that kind of time.”

Lamott closes by saying, “I live by this story.”

And, so, my dearly beloveds, must we.

Change is upon us, as it always is.

So let us cherish the ride, for as long as it lasts.

Amen.