

# "On Peace and Powerlessness"

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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“Let the stillness carry me...”

“Let the essence carry me...”

How often we have sung those words ...and how rarely  
have we needed to rely on them?

If we're very fortunate, the hymn “Find a Stillness”  
can provide a calming interlude in the midst of a busy life.

It's an invitation to let go, for a brief time.

But it may not be something we return to very often...  
not when life is going well and we feel in control  
and able to direct the course of our days.

We may enjoy and appreciate “Find a Stillness” and its  
message...

but we may not know we need it...  
except in a time of deep uncertainty, crisis and tragedy.

Like the time we're in right now.

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In the past several weeks, as I've been talking with many of you, the theme of powerlessness has come up again and again.

We are moving, together, though what Whitman called:

“An unknown region,  
Where neither ground is for the feet  
nor any path to follow.”

Sometimes the feelings of powerlessness have been spoken about directly:

“I don't know what to do with myself.”

“I'm so afraid of what might happen.”

“I wish I could do more to help.”

Other times it's come out in indirect ways...in irritation, frustration, or a heightened desire to control.

I should point out that I'm going through these things, as well.

One of the most interesting aspects of the pandemic

is that we're all going through it at the same time...  
while also bringing our own personal challenges  
and adding them to the whole picture.

The mosaic of faces on our Zoom screen  
shows us exactly that.

We're all going through this together.

Yet we're all going through it in our own "place."  
In our own way.

If we could all find a stillness though...  
a stillness that resides within each of us  
and holds all of us at the same time...

Imagine how our experience might be transformed.

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There's no question that this is a profoundly unsettling  
time...  
even for those among us who do enjoy time alone  
and who, so far, have maintained some sense  
of personal direction and choice in all of this.

Even if you still have a job, you may be expected to carry it  
out in a completely different way—with unfamiliar tools, in  
an unusual workspace, perhaps with children needing your  
attention at the same time.

If you're suddenly out of work,  
financial insecurity may be top-of-mind for you.

If you're retired, the activities that give your life structure and  
meaning may be suddenly absent.

If you are providing essential services, providing health care  
or food...you may be fearful for your own safety.

Or you may feel powerless over the health of loved ones who  
are themselves working on the front lines.

Meanwhile, no matter what our particular circumstance,  
we all share a sense of powerlessness over the virus itself  
and the tragedy unfolding all over the world.

Even if we're doing all the right things,  
when it comes to social distancing and self-isolation,  
we're likely to feel a sense of powerlessness today.

We need to find a way to carry on  
through this "inaccessible land."

And we may need to find a way to be carried.

## §

One of the most familiar passages in the Hebrew Bible is  
"Be still and know that I am God."

The original translation was probably more like  
"Be still and know that I am..." or simply "be still and know."

Language itself is always imperfect.

It's been said that it cannot help but divide and separate.

That's why all concepts and descriptions of any kind of  
“higher power” come up short...

And why words such as the Great Mystery or Being Itself can  
be helpful.

Even the words “stillness” and “essence” have a universal  
quality that points beyond language...toward something more  
embracing and deeply known by us all.

When we tap into the deep stillness  
both within and around us...

The essence of life...  
that connects us all in love...

We may find ourselves supported in a way that helps us carry  
on—  
in a way that can carry us through whatever may come.

Shawn told that lovely story last Sunday,  
about the young girl learning to float...  
and how we, too, can learn to be carried by the water of life.

I'm sure we've all heard this lesson before,  
expressed in modern stories and ancient ones.

I'm reminded of that familiar advice to be a "human being" rather than a "human doing."

Perhaps we're being asked to take it to another level of understanding now.

To learn to simply "be"—

When we can no longer do what we used to.

Even those of us who are actively engaged in new projects, assisting others through this crisis, or continuing to be busy in our work lives-- we too may feel more powerless than usual today.

Powerless over the behavior of others, whether they're public officials or people in our families.

Powerless over the virus itself and the extent of suffering it will cause.

We may feel stymied by technology, that can do so much for us but is never foolproof--and that falls short of physical human touch.

We may be unable to change difficult situations in our lives that were there before this crisis, and that continue today.

And finally, we may feel powerless at times over our own emotions—

Finding ourselves overcome by grief, fear, anger

or sadness at any time.

Acknowledging our powerlessness  
can be the first step toward making peace  
with what is an undeniably difficult situation.

It can allow us to be carried into the moment,  
and to find some equilibrium—  
which may be the most valuable asset  
any of us has to offer right now.

That small measure of peace of mind,  
even if it is momentary,  
can allow us to take action in the ways we can.

To make the unique contributions each of us can make,  
and to change our own situation in manageable ways.

The Serenity Prayer, written by theologian Reinhold  
Niebuhr in the late thirties can be helpful.

I recently learned that it was likely written as part of a  
sermon.

“God, grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change  
Courage to change the things I can  
and the wisdom to know the difference.”

(I daresay he knocked that sermon out of the park!)

All around the world, all at the same time,

millions and millions of people are being faced with  
so many things we cannot change.

Putting it another way,  
many of the things we could easily change a few weeks ago...  
we cannot change today.

That is a shock on a massive scale...  
A collective trauma as we have never known.

Yet if we come to know  
that the way to wisdom  
is not onward and upward...  
but rather, inward and downward...

Toward the Essence that is ever-present  
within us....

We have an remarkable opportunity right now:  
to learn to live differently.

To let go of what is truly non-essential.

To let our love be greater than our fear.

To find a Stillness and let it carry us...

Knowing that we are part of something  
so much larger than we can control...



And yet, that to be alive—  
to be even a small part of all that is unfolding,  
is a truly extraordinary gift.

As we listen to the melody  
of “Find a Stillness” again,  
let us pause to reflect on its message...

as we consider how we might  
find a stillness and  
seek the essence of life...

As we carry on,  
in our own way, today and in days to come.