

“Cabin Fever”

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“There’s no place like home.”

“There’s no place like home.”

So said Dorothy Gale, of course,
clicking the heels of her ruby red slippers three times,
while hoping for a quick trip back to Kansas.

And it worked, just as Glinda the Good Witch promised.

There in her own bed again,
after her wild adventure to Muchkinland and Oz,
Dorothy affirms that there is no place like home.

Following the adventure of these last ten weeks,
many of us have come to know, as well,
that there is no place like home.

And for many of us afforded the great privilege
of self-isolating in these times,
we may have reached the point of feeling
that there’s no place but home—

as much of our physical world
has been reduced to our own four walls,
with only the possibility of short escapes
for trips to the grocery store or exercise.

It’s easy to understand why our dogs
are now in the best shape of their lives.
Especially if they live in a home
with more than one human,
desperate to go for a walk.

These are strange days that we are in.

Days of wonder.
Days of difficulty.
And days of terrible tedium, too.

But hopefully with stand-out moments along the way
that have likely surprised us,
and taken us to places we never imagined going.

Exhibit A, from my own home:
[my husband] Bob and I have now
cut each other's hair three times,
which is something across our almost 22 years together
that I would have never predicted just a few months ago.

But, with the new expertise we've gained
by watching YouTube, we've managed.

I've taken to singing "Beauty School Drop-out"
whenever Bob takes up the scissors,
and he, when it's my turn, sings the opening lines
from Sweeney Todd, the "Demon Barber of Fleet Street".

While it's worked out well enough—
by which I mean we both still have both of our ears—
we're both quite clear that we will be very glad
to return to our own barbers, when this is all over.

That moment, for haircuts—and for so much else—
from hugs and time with loved ones
to kids being back with their friends,
and, frankly, all of us being back with our friends—
can't come a moment too soon.

At least for most of us.

It's been said that the public health decisions
to shut down so much of the way we live,
or, rather, the way we lived up until recently—
were actually far easier to make
than the ones we now face

in deciding how and when to open back up.

Part of this is, of course,
because we are still very much in the midst of a pandemic
and the return won't be, and can't be,
to what we previously knew as normal.

As provinces across the country begin to lift restrictions
and our cities slowly start to reopen,
we will each be asked to find our way in this strange new world,
negotiating the space between ourselves and others,
as we keep physical distance, and often wear facemasks.

However restless we may be to get out of the house,
it has to be said that much of this is negotiation
is awkward, and even surreal. And it raises anxiety for almost everyone.

Especially since "the rules" aren't always clear.
And because it may well seem to us
that everyone else is getting them wrong.

It's all sure to be enough, at times,
to make many of us click our heels
and remind ourselves that there's no place like home,
hoping to land safely back in bed,
with the covers pulled over our heads.

But we are not, of course, in Kansas anymore...

We've been swept up in a storm that is still raging,
and dropped into a strange new world.

For better and for worse,
this new world is not yet fully formed.
It is a work in progress.

And even amid the heartache, the fear, and uncertainty
that may seem to define it for now,
it is a place of possibility. A land of great opportunity.

The Indian writer, Arundhati Roy,

has described this threshold moment
we are in as being a portal.¹

“Historically,” she says, “pandemics have forced humans
to break with the past and imagine their world anew.
This one is no different.”

“It is a portal, a gateway
between one world and the next.
We can choose to walk through it,” she writes,
“dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred,
our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas,
our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us.
Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage,
ready to imagine another world.
And ready to fight for it.”

It is far too soon to tell which way it will go.

I tend to think it won't so much be
an either/or, but a matter of both/and.

Into this new world,
I expect we will carry with us
too much of what is already broken—
unable or unwilling to leave behind
what so clearly fails to serve life.

And I believe we will also bring with us
a deep memory of this time
that has asked us in such profound ways to shift gears,
to examine our lives,
and to remember that there is another way
for us to exist on this good green earth.

While this will play out, on a global level,
over the years and decades to come,
this will unfold for each of us,
in more immediate and intimate ways,

¹ Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic is a Portal,” *Financial Times*, 3 April 2020.

in the days and weeks ahead,
as we begin to slowly venture forth
and give shape to this world that is emerging.

Every one of us will be asked to consider
in countless ways—
some subtle and some not so subtle at all—
how we intend to live.

This pandemic is teaching us, yet again,
that we are but a tiny, though magnificent part,
of the great web of all existence.

That our lives are bound up with everyone,
and every living thing on this planet.

And that there is no separate place
somehow magically set apart from the web of life.

As the possibility of a better world opens itself to us,
we are being asked to grapple
with the how, the where, and the what
of our deepest commitments.

To ask ourselves if, going forward,
our values and principles
translate into meaningful action,
and are reflected in the ways we spend
our energy, our time, and our money.

The need to do this has always been important.

But this portal moment we are in
now makes it urgently so.

If this is to be a moment of true transformation,
it will only come about
through the revolutionary love
that calls us to move through this life
with unprecedented kindness and compassion,
and invites us to spend ourselves

in the service of justice and peace.

I don't know about you, but this is a call
I know in my bones I cannot take up on my own.
And I wouldn't want to, anyway.

I can only take up this great work
with others committed to this cause,
with others who hold before me
the best of our shared humanity,
with others who will journey with me,
helping me when I falter or fail or forget,
and then be there to remind me
that my mistakes along the way
are not the whole of who I am.

In other words, I need a congregation.
And I imagine you might, too.

Maya Angelou makes the point so powerfully
in her poem, "Alone", of our need
for companions on the journey.

Lying, thinking
Last night
How to find my soul a home
Where water is not thirsty
And bread loaf is not stone
I came up with one thing
And I don't believe I'm wrong
That nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone....

There are some millionaires
With money they can't use
Their wives run round like banshees
Their children sing the blues
They've got expensive doctors
To cure their hearts of stone.

But nobody
No, nobody
Can make it out here alone....

Now if you listen closely
I'll tell you what I know
Storm clouds are gathering
The wind is gonna blow
The [human] race... is suffering
And I can hear the moan,
'Cause nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone....

Friends, we need one another,
now more than ever.

Like so many of you,
I lament the fact that we cannot gather in person
for now, and for what may still be some time to come,
given that it's become clear that religious communities
can, unfortunately, be highly effective
when it comes to spreading the coronavirus.

Along with so many of you,
I miss seeing one another, face to face.

I miss lighting our beautiful chalice.
Hearing the choir.
Watching the kids take in the story
and later having a gaggle of ten-year-olds
bustle past me down the hall on a mission
I can't begin to comprehend.

I miss singing hymns.
I miss preaching from a real pulpit.
I miss the smell of beeswax candles
and beholding the beauty of people lighting them,
to honour the joys and sorrows of this life.

More than anything, I miss the handshakes and the hugs,

and the countless ways we renew the sacred ties
that sustain us a congregation, week after week.

And, yet, here we are again today,
meeting in this imperfect format,
in our little boxes,
with our sometimes unstable internet connections.

But, as frustrating as it can be, at times,
I am so grateful that through the wonders of technology,
we are still able to gather.

(I can't begin to imagine what it was like to live
through past pandemics without Zoom!)

And, on the deepest level, I am grateful
we are able to gather in a way
that keeps every single person in our congregation safe.

Until there is a vaccine or effective treatments in place,
we will need to follow public health guidance.

But, even this, raises so many questions:

Can we meet in small groups?
Or hold worship in a park?
Do we have enough sinks for hand-washing?
And what will our insurer allow?

I've heard several of these questions floated,
and I've asked some of them myself.

I've also caught myself, at times,
realizing that there is at play a certain amount of bargaining—
that well-known stage of the grief process—
when we are desperate for a solution
that will spare us from heartbreak.

What all of these questions ultimately boil down to
is a desire to hold us together as a congregation
while keeping us—every single one of us—safe.

As we grapple with what that asks of us,
I believe this is a time to return to our principles for guidance.

To ask ourselves what it truly means to uphold
the worth and dignity of every person,
to ensure justice, equity, and compassion in human relations,
to accept one another and encourage spiritual growth,
and to respect the interdependent web of life,
of which we are a part.

At this moment, to uphold our principles
means being together, but apart,
given that so many within our congregation
fall within the categories of people considered vulnerable.

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As Unitarians, we have a long tradition of being held together
not by the shared beliefs of a single creed,
but in covenants that name how we intend to be
in relationship, with one another and the world.

As a congregation, we have many covenants,
including, of course, the one we recite
each Sunday, promising to “serve life.”

While that covenant still serves us well,
I find myself wondering about the covenant
that is required of us in these Covid Times.

In the Congregational Conversation
that will follow today’s service,
you’ll have a chance, in breakout groups,
to consider what values
we need to lean on to guide us through this time.

This is the hard work of the heart
involved in crafting a covenant.
Of putting our values into practice.
Of making promises to one another.

In recent weeks, beyond working hard
to bring the congregation together,
and reach out to as many people in our community as possible,
our staff and leadership have been shifting
from our initial response to the crisis
to a sustainable plan for the longer-term.

The staff is creating new online programs and worship services,
as well as different landing places
beyond Sunday mornings
to help hold us all together.

This is a time for creativity and innovation.
It is a time for opportunity.
It is a time filled with challenges.

But, most of all, it is an invitation:
to make real the values we profess,
in the service of love and justice,
even in these extraordinary times,
and especially in these extraordinary times.

In the chant we often sing, “Return Again,”
the lyrics call us to return
to who we are, to what we are, to where we are—
to return again and again,
to the home of our soul.

In these trying times,
there is no place like home.

And there is no place
like the home of our souls.

As we enter this new world,
may we help to build that home for one another,
as we travel together in hope
toward a brighter day.

May it be so.