

# **“Fine, Not Fine”**

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“Return again, to the home of your soul.”

For many people, the home of the soul can be found in nature...whether it's in our own backyard, or further afield.

This summer, many who have the opportunity may be spending time in rural areas or wilderness trails.

These outdoor experiences often provide a soulful sense of strengthening and spiritual renewal.

Except when they don't.

Recently an artist named Amber Share in the United States noticed that some people were visiting national parks and then giving them very negative “one-star” reviews on social media.

Amber turned those terrible reviews into travel posters, in the classic style of the “Golden Age of Travel” from the Thirties.

I'd love to show them to you, but I don't want to infringe on her copyright, so I'll describe them to you and tell you where you can find them.

My favourite is the one for Yosemite National Park in California.

Above a beautiful vista of mountains and pine trees shouts the headline:

“Trees Block View and There are Too Many Gray Rocks.”

Along with a gorgeous illustration of trees, for Sequoia National Park, we read:

“There are bugs, and they will bite you on your face.”

And the headline emblazoned across the stunning poster for Saguaro National Park in Arizona is:

“OK if you like cactus.”

Amber’s work can be found at her website:  
“subpar parks” dot com.

I hope that one day she’ll extend her valuable work into Canada.

Surely there is something bad to say about OUR national parks, such as Banff and Jasper...Georgian Bay and the Bruce Peninsula.

Without sub-par travel posters of our own, we’ll have to be content I suppose with the two great Canadian songs entitled “Rocks and Trees”...

One by the Arrogant Worms,  
and the other by Wendell Ferguson.

Wendell's song includes one of my favourite lyrics:

“By the time you hit Kenora  
You won't want to see no more-a  
Rocks and trees, trees and rocks.”<sup>1</sup>

That's his heartfelt tribute to Highway 17,  
which winds its way endlessly up through  
Northern Ontario.

## §

Now, on the surface, it may not seem as if satirical posters  
like these could be a source of deeper wisdom.

But I think that they are.

They call to our attention, with gentle humour,  
the paradox of life:

That beautiful and terrible things exist simultaneously...

And that we are called to be present to both of those...  
without running away or lashing out, as tempted as we may  
be to do both.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendell Ferguson, “Rocks and Trees”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKwFUSpQObc>

In the wise way of effective humour,  
the posters bring together things that don't seem to match:

The awe-inspiring grandeur of Nature,  
and the petty negativity of a Yelp review.

They co-exist.  
And from that co-existence, new insight can arise.

Such as the truth that we cannot take a vacation from  
suffering, no matter how far we go...or for that matter how  
long we stay at home!

## §

A few months ago, when the pandemic began,  
Rev. Shawn and I noticed that when people  
asked "How are you doing?" we'd say "Fine/Not Fine."

The usual automatic response of  
"fine, thank you" suddenly seemed inadequate.

These days, many of us are saying  
something along the lines of  
"Fine, under the circumstances".

And for good reason.

Gary Snyder's poem was written years ago,  
and yet it speaks to our situation.

“The rising hills,  
the slopes of statistics lie before us,  
the steep climb of everything going up, up,  
even as we go down...”

It's not possible now...if it ever was...  
to simply deny or overlook the challenges we face  
whether individually or as a species.

And yet, all things considered,  
perhaps we can be “fine” after all.

Perhaps we can hold both joy and sorrow together  
with some degree of equanimity.

Of course, this is a very familiar idea.  
It's hardly new or original.

It has run through religious teachings for thousands of years,  
in virtually all faith traditions and in music and art of all kinds.

Maybe it's repeated so often because it takes us  
so long to get the message!

Most recently I heard it from one of my favourite  
spiritual writers, Wayne Muller.

He wrote a book called “A life of having, being and doing  
enough” and he led an online course I recently attended.

He told us that for him, the definition of spirituality  
is “to become spacious enough to hold both the difficult

and the beautiful at the same time.”

Spacious enough to hold...

Humour and rage...

Peacefulness and anxiety...

Hope and despair.

You get the idea.

This is a spaciousness, it seems to me, that's bigger even than the Rocky Mountains...

And we may not be able to sustain it for long.

But those moments of spaciousness are important...  
however and wherever we find them.

They allow us to live in the Wholeness of life.

To live fully in the “As Is”.

## §

Laughter can often open up a space...which can allow us to respond more creatively to our situations.

As Gary Snyder wrote, “Go light.”

Even in the most difficult of times, a sense of lightness and even joy can be healing.

When we take a “panoramic view” of our lives today, most of us can’t help but notice things that are, well, less than “five-star”.

Perhaps we’re growing weary of the continuing restrictions on our lives...or noticing anxiety or irritation that is more persistent than usual.

We may see other people as obstacles to our happiness.

Perhaps we’re afraid of getting sick...fearful for the safety of people we love...or afraid we’ll do something wrong at this crucial time.

Perhaps we’re uncomfortably aware now of privilege, inequality, racism and injustice.

The satirical posters speak to the privilege of travel... and the entitlement of those who expect ease and comfort in all situations.

They also comment on how the earth itself has been turned in some ways into a product to be bought, sold and reviewed...

And how the traditional lands of Indigenous peoples were not only colonized—but objectified—by white settlers.

In our own personal lives, pandemic or not, we may be aware of much that is “not fine.”

We may be experiencing physical or emotional pain.

We may be coping with disappointments, failures, various ways that life didn't turn out the way we hoped or planned.

We may be grieving, angry, or afraid.

If there could be satirical travel posters for life itself, the captions might read:

“Bad things happening here all the time.”

“Too many illnesses,” and

“I don't like the ending.”

Try as we might, and we constantly do, we'll always come up against the rocks and trees that block our view and make our journey difficult...

But, that also make life a spectacularly meaningful and precious gift.

## §

So, our task then, for our whole life, is to make space for the fine and the not-fine.

Not to require perfection and ease, but instead to learn to be “well” when things aren't going our way.



Indeed, we're called to get to know our most difficult feelings...

To explore them and travel them...

So that we may come to know ourselves and deepen in our ability to be present to others.

Fortunately, we're given many opportunities, over and over, to learn this lesson.

“OK if you like cactus.”

## §

When others ask how we are, we might still say “fine” at times.

It's not always helpful to list the many things going wrong, in response to this casual question.

But, there are times when being honest can be therapeutic.

It's okay to acknowledge that we're “not fine” right now, if we're not...that we're feeling shaken, disoriented, disappointed or weary...I could go on.

When we are on the listening end of the “not fine”, we're usually not called to fix the situation.

Instead our task is to simply be present to the suffering of our friend.

To show them, through our simple presence,  
that we are here...bearing witness to what they're going  
through.

That we are here, even if the view isn't what we'd like.

We can do this for ourselves, too.

Simply be present to our uncomfortable feelings...  
attending mindfully to ourselves...

Holding the “not fine” within something more.

Something like love, acceptance, God, or peace.

Of course, it's also **more than fine**  
to be genuinely happy and peaceful right now,  
even if others are not.

It is fine to be fine!

## §

Back in March, Shawn preached from a text written by the  
14<sup>th</sup> Century nun Julian of Norwich.

As he told us, her “Revelations of Divine Love” was written  
when she was so ill, she thought she was dying.

At that time she had a series of “showings” of truth, which  
she expressed according to her Christian context.

From the original writing that “the good Lord” can make all things well, her text has been simplified in modern times as:

“All will be well, and all will be well,  
and all manner of things shall be well.”

Recently I learned that that became part of a famous T.S. Eliot poem called “Little Gidding,” which was written in 1936.

Here are excerpts from that poem:

“We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.” [...]

“And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flames are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire

And the fire and the rose are one.”

## §

All will be well – when the fire and the rose are one.

When the terrible and the beautiful  
are understood together.

When we engage with that wholeness,

healing our tendency to judge and divide our experience...then all is well, all will be well...

And the All can become the well from which we draw.

That is, the wholeness itself becomes the well, that supports us in the work of love and justice.

Passages in both the Christian and Hebrew Bibles speak of the “well that never runs dry” and the “living water.”

When we consider that one name for God or Yahweh was simply the “I Am” or even the breath...we glimpse the idea of spaciousness and the limitless “well” of the All That Is.

From the Sufi tradition of Islam came Rumi’s famous lines: “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I’ll meet you there”—once again, the spaciousness to hold all of life experience.

And Buddhism gives us many ways to connect to this limitless spaciousness as well.

In her book “Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha,”

Tara Brach writes:

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“We all get caught up in wants and fears,  
we all act unconsciously,  
we all get diseased and deteriorate.

When we relax about imperfection,  
we no longer lose our life moments  
in the pursuit of [becoming] different  
and the fear of what is wrong. [...]

“We come alive as we rediscover the truth  
of our goodness and our natural connectedness  
to all of life.

Our ‘greater needs’ are met in  
relating lovingly with each other,  
relating with full presence to each moment,  
relating to the beauty and pain  
that is within and around us.”<sup>2</sup>

## §

Each of us is traveling our own path,  
even as we travel together.

And each of us will find the particular guideposts and maps  
that are most meaningful to us.

There are so many to choose from...but you only need a few  
good ones.

A question to leave you with today,  
perhaps to be discussed during Coffee Time is—

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<sup>2</sup> Tara Brach, *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life With the Heart of a Buddha* (Bantam: New York, 2003), 21.

what are the rocks and trees you're seeing today?

What's obscuring the view of the big picture for you...and how might a space be opened up, to relate to it differently?

Or even more simply, how do you sustain your wellness, even during challenging times?

These are questions I'm asking myself today.  
And I thank you all for being here with me.

I invite you now to listen or sing along with a hymn that keeps us in a traveling and exploring mood:

“Where My Free Spirit Onward Leads.”