

“Still Here ”

Rev. Lynn Harrison
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
Online Service via Zoom
6 December 2020

Reading:

“Random Interview” by Pat Lowther
- from *Time Capsule*. Polestar 1996, pp. 242.

1, the fear

the fear is of everything
staying the way it is
and only i changing

the fear is
of everything changing
and i staying the same

the world expanding
branch tunnel cell
more and more
precious and terrible

while i grow only more
fragile and confused

the fear is my own
hands beating
like moths

my eyelids stuttering
light breaking into
meaningless phrases

the fear is of you

patiently elsewhere growing
a blood shape
of all my wishes

2, i am tired

i am tired of pain
i am tired of my own pain
i am tired of
the pain of others

i am tired of lives
unwinding like a roll
of bloody bandage
i shall roll up
the sky, pinch the sun

i go out to the cliff pours
of stars, the tall
volumes of stars

i go down
to the grains of soil
to bacteria
to viruses
to the neat mechanics of molecules

to escape the pain
to escape the pain

3, what i want

what i want is to be blessed
what i want is a cloak of air

the light entering my lungs
my love entering my body
the blessing descending
like the sky
sliding down the spectrum

what i want is to be
aware of the spaces between stars, to breathe
continuously the sources of sky,
a veined sail moving,
my love never setting
foot to the dark
anvil of earth

Sermon: “Still Here”

Here we are again.

The beginning of December, as the shadows are lengthening toward Solstice, and as several important observances converge, reminding us of shadows that don't go away...even as we begin lighting candles in this season of light that is now upon us.

Monday, December 1st, was World Aids Day.

Today is December 6th, the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women.

And as Ted shared with us, Thursday December 10th is Human Rights Day, as each year Amnesty International holds its global Write for Rights campaign.

Meanwhile, we're still here in the midst of
a global pandemic,
still here online,
doing our best to care for our families and for one another
during this time of profound uncertainty...

While these immense social concerns are still with us.

We still observe them, as we do each year,
with the accompanying sadness that we still
do have to face them,
taking up, once again, our pens,
our voices and our actions,
to move this world patiently yet urgently
toward love and justice.

§

The poem that I read just now is a challenging one...
and all the more so when you learn that its author,
Pat Lowther,
was herself a victim of domestic violence in 1975.

She was reported missing after not showing up for a poetry reading in
Vancouver.

Her second husband was later convicted of her murder.
He died in prison in B.C. in 1985.

When I chose her poem “Random Interview” for this service,
I didn’t know anything about Pat Lowther.

I didn’t know what had happened to her.

But even without that knowledge,
I was deeply moved by her poem
that speaks so powerfully to the difficulty of living in this world, which brings
us face to face with violence, cruelty and injustice every single day...if our eyes
are open.

Her poem resonated with me, especially in the way it weaves
together the life experience of fear...of fatigue...
and finally, of the longing for blessing.

The longing for love and peace.

In that final stanza:

“What I want is to be
aware of the spaces between stars, to breathe
continuously the sources of sky,
a veined sail moving,
My love never setting foot
to the dark anvil of earth.”

She articulates the hope that someday
we may be free
of the evil and injustice
that weighs us down.

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Thirty-five years after Pat Lowther’s death and now more than thirty years after
14 women were killed at
Polytechnique Montreal because they were women,
gender-based violence is still very much with us.

In Canada and around the world, calls to assaulted women’s helplines has
increased during this time,

As families are facing intensified stress, financial concerns and more, and there
are suddenly no safe places to go.¹

People are trapped in their homes, unable to find safety.

The United Nations has created a powerful campaign to spread public
awareness about what it calls the Shadow Pandemic, encouraging all of us to
check in frequently with each other, to make sure we are safe and well.

It’s also essential, for all of us, of all genders,
to care for our mental health during this time of high anxiety
and to reach out to professional supports if we or others
are at risk.

¹ “Calls to Canadian domestic violence helplines jump during pandemic” Brenna Owen, CTV
News.<https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/calls-to-canadian-domestic-violence-helplines-jump-during-pandemic-1.5145983>

We try to say it frequently, but it's worth repeating, that the ministers and pastoral care team at First Unitarian are here to provide support when needed.

The focus on human rights in today's service may feel challenging right now.

Violence against women and girls is a painful subject...

And the stories of human rights abuses brought to light by Amnesty International are difficult to think about.

Remembering, too, that this past Tuesday was World Aids Day, which also marked the beginning of Aboriginal AIDS Awareness Week in Canada,²...

We note that the coronavirus pandemic can threaten access to health care, including HIV treatment for people around the world...

And that global health concerns and justice issues are deeply and continually intertwined...

Making them all the more challenging and urgent to address.

It can seem, at times, that these challenges are just too much to take in...

And yet, we also know that the small actions within our scope can make a very important difference.

Educating ourselves, for one.

Connecting with organizations on the front lines of human rights and public health such as Amnesty International.

Writing a simple letter along with thousands of other people worldwide in support of someone wrongfully imprisoned...

Or making a financial donation to a helpline or a shelter today.

² <https://www.catie.ca/en/world-aids-day>

Phoning a friend...offering a listening ear...or providing a bridge to professional supports...

These very simple things,
that each of us can do,
are deeply important during this crucial time.

They serve to counter the “dark anvil” of forces that weigh upon us...and they remind us of our capacity to contribute in positive ways to the world...even if we ourselves are feeling tired, stressed or weighed down right now.

§

It is tiring, to be still here, in the midst of what’s been called “the full catastrophe”³.

A world shadowed by fear, inequality, aggression and violence.

We grapple with the fact that it is so hard to find peace in such a world, despite our sincere efforts in social justice and spiritual growth...

Despite our good intentions in building relationships and extending love and care to others.

As the poet and teacher Mark Nepo writes, “Most of us are educated to think that if we work hard enough, are good enough, and disciplined enough, we’ll crack the secret of life and live at the end of all trouble.

While those traits are helpful tools,” he says, “being human doesn’t work that way.”⁴

One of the greatest challenges of personal growth is to come to terms with this very difficult reality.

No matter how kind we hope and try to be, how ethical,

³ See, among others, Jon Kabat-Zinn’s *Full Catastrophe Living*

⁴ Mark Nepo, *The Endless Practice: Becoming Who You Were Born to Be* (New York: Atria, 2014), 67.

how awakened or conscious we hope to become—we will continue to encounter what is painful, unfair and unjust.

Inevitably, too, we will cause pain to others...
and that is also difficult to bear.

Sometimes, in our striving to become better people,
and stronger communities, we may imagine that our sincere efforts will lead
naturally to a more loving
and just experience of life.

We Unitarian Universalists may be especially prone to this notion, as we have
so carefully formulated a set of principles designed to create kind and inclusive
communities...

And as we draw on such a wide range of wisdom sources
that guide us toward love.

Probably each of us here has hoped or believed at times
that by learning enough or by growing enough, reflecting enough, being
vulnerable enough or caring enough...

That we might somehow find freedom from the most painful experiences of
life.

In discovering that is not possible,
perhaps through a very painful loss or rejection,
failure, trauma or tragedy,
or simply by witnessing the trauma of the world,
we risk becoming cynical or disillusioned.

Probably many of us here have experienced that, too.

But I believe that the deeper promise of life,
that runs like an underground river beneath all our experience, is that life learns
from the bending and the breaking.

That life seeks to heal, repair and renew.

That in the dark of winter there is a deep peace
that holds and heals.

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Every once in awhile I come across a piece of writing that expresses what I'd
like to say to you more clearly than I ever could...

So I'd like to share with you this longer excerpt,
from the book I quoted earlier:

Mark Nepo's "The Endless Practice."

I was already working on this service, with its title
"Still Here," when I stumbled on this passage.

"Each of us must make our peace
with suffering and especially unnecessary suffering,
which doesn't mean our resignation to a violent world.

For the fully engaged heart
is the antibody for the infection of violence.

As our heart breaks with compassion,
it strengthens itself and all of humanity.

Can I prove this? No. Am I certain of it? Yes.

We are still here.

Immediately, someone says, "Barely."

But we are still here, more alive than dead,
more vulnerable than callous, more kind than cruel—though we each carry the
lot of it."

He goes on:

"That we go numb along the way is to be expected.

Even the bravest among us, who give their lives to care for others, go numb with fatigue when the heart can take in no more, when we need time to digest all we meet.

Overloaded and overwhelmed, we start to pull back from the world, so we can internalize what the world keeps giving us.

Perhaps the noblest private act is the unheralded effort to return:

To open our hearts once they've closed,
to open our souls once they've shied away,
to soften our minds once they've been hardened
by the storms of the day.

Always, on the inside of our hardness and shyness and numbness is the face of compassion through which we can reclaim our humanity.”⁵

- Mark Nepo.

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“Perhaps the noblest private act
is the unheralded effort to return.”

How many times have each of us found some way to return:

To take a breath,
to return to the table.

To extend a small kindness,
to meditate or to pray.

To phone a friend,
to sing a song,

To sit with a painful truth,
or to say a quiet “thank you”
for the simple fact

⁵ Mark Nepo, *The Endless Practice: Becoming Who You Were Born to Be* (New York: Atria, 2014), 84-85.

of being still here.

In the moment-by-moment choice
to do what we can
with the one life that we have...

We are full participants in the ongoing
creative process of life...

Which does not deny,
and cannot never eliminate suffering...

but that upholds love and healing
and continually reaches for it
especially at the darkest of times.

As we are still here,
sharing this life of complicated
and continuing concern...

May we open ourselves to the peace
that is offered to us in the heart
of every moment...
That we may be the instruments of
love and justice
that this world needs...

As it always has,
and as it always will.

Amen.