

# “Bittersweet Blessings”

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## **Meditation Reading**

words of Kathleen McTigue:

Nothing about our lives is ordinary. Held up against the shadows of pathways not taken, countless catastrophes could have snuffed out the spark that led to this beating heart, these wondrous hands. Every life is gift and grace; fragile, astonishing and unrepeatable. We forget this easily, swept up in the pulse and busyness of our days. We hustle along with our private preoccupations, brows furrowed in concentration, hurrying lest we waste even a minute. But all of the important “doings” that fill our days pale against our singular “being”. If we could remember this once in a while – if we could stop and simply marvel at the stupendous luck that has allowed each of us to live – perhaps we would live more gently with one another, more kindly and compassionately, as one survivor to another.

## **Sermon: “Bittersweet Blessings”**

I mentioned in “First Light” this weekend that I was recently on Yonge Street, when I came across a dramatic and somewhat disturbing scene that has stayed with me.

Walking north, near College Street,  
I first noticed the overwhelming smell of garlic.

And then I spotted a jar of marinara sauce  
that had shattered rather spectacularly on the sidewalk.

It was immediately clear what had happened.

The plastic shopping bag that had once held the jar  
was ripped to shreds and there on the ground as well,  
splattered with sauce and shards of glass.

What really grabbed my attention, though,  
was what else was strewn about the scene:  
there on the ground was a box of dry pasta,  
a baguette of some sort in a paper bag,

and the ingredients for a fresh salad.

All of it abandoned on the spot,  
though everything but the sauce seemed to still be in good shape.

Clearly enough, someone's hopes of a lovely Italian dinner  
had not gone according to plan.

But what struck me was how those hopes  
had, seemingly, been so easily dashed.

In the days since, my heart has gone out to this hapless person  
who, by all evidence, just couldn't cope  
with literally picking up the pieces  
and making a meal with what was left.

As I've reflected back on it,  
I've realized the scene was a call to compassion.

After all, this far into the pandemic,  
and now with the unknowns around the new variant of concern,  
the truth is that few, if any, of us  
have as much capacity or resilience as we once did.

A dear member of the congregation wrote to me yesterday morning  
to say that reading my spaghetti sauce story helped her feel she's not alone  
in being constantly on the verge of tears over seemingly small things,  
and recognizing that her energy to cope is pretty well depleted these days.

Understandably so.

I'm tempted to ask for a show of hands of how many of you can relate.  
To ask if I can get a "Amen" to let her know  
she's not alone in noticing this internal struggle these days.

For many of us, this call to compassion  
needs to begin with our very selves.

Even with the relative privilege  
of living in a country with tremendous resources,  
where vaccines are plentiful and the health care system strong,  
where governments have thrown vital financial lifelines  
to so many to help them get through this,  
and where so many of us, because of the particulars of our lives,

have been able to ride out the pandemic with some degree of security, we must acknowledge that this has been and remains a very hard chapter in our lives.

It is blatantly obvious, but it needs to be named: we have never lived through something quite like this.

Arguably, there has not been in our lifetimes an event that has so gripped the entire world all at once.

An event now nearing the end of its second year, that has brought some degree of trauma to everyday life for most every person alive.

While we here have mostly been spared the levels of suffering and loss that have been so acutely felt in other places, we are still very much living through a time that is nowhere near being normal.

This already seems to be something that's easy for us to forget, even as we're dutifully putting on our masks and partaking of the many strange pandemic protocols that are quickly becoming second nature.

This is a truly extraordinary time— in the sense that there's little that's ordinary about it.

And it is a time for extraordinary compassion. A time to be gentle with ourselves and one another, as we seek to live into our new normal.

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A story, that happens to be true.

On June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1947, on a PanAm flight from Calcutta to New York, an engine stopped working, which caused another engine to overheat, which caused a fire, which caused a panic on board.<sup>1</sup>

While the pilot attempted to land the plane, the 25-year-old co-pilot unbuckled himself and went into the main cabin to help with the passengers.

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<sup>1</sup> True story, as related on [theoatmeal.com](http://theoatmeal.com).

He sat next to a young woman who was alone  
and told her it was going to be okay.

He told her this as he watched the engine continue to burn.  
He told her this as he watched the flaming engine fall from the wing.

He told her this as fuel lines became exposed,  
as fire overtook the aircraft, and the plane pitched downward.

He told her this knowing  
that every single person on that plane was likely about to die.

Shortly thereafter, the plane crashed into the Syrian desert.

Fourteen of the people on board did die instantly.  
Two crew members survived, including the co-pilot.

With a pair of broken ribs, he went back into the burning plane  
multiple times to pull survivors from the wreckage.

The last passenger he rescued,  
before the plane was completely engulfed in flames, died in his arms.

Eventually the wind turned, and fire overtook the aircraft.

As the fire burned out, the small band of survivors waited alone  
in the overwhelming darkness of the desert night.

Morning eventually arrived, but a rescue crew did not.

So, the co-pilot took charge and formed two search parties.

The first party went in one direction,  
the second party, along with the co-pilot,  
went in the other, wandering into the desert.

Eventually, this group found a village that had a radio.  
A call was made, and the twenty-two survivors were rescued.

As for the co-pilot, the crash changed him forever.

After that, he didn't want to be a pilot anymore;  
he wanted to do something different with his life.

This was, after all, the third plane crash he'd been in over a short span of years.

He probably thought why push his luck.  
I mean, how many plane crashes can one  
reasonably expect to walk away from?!

So, the young man resigned from PanAm  
to pursue a career in writing and then, ultimately, in television.

Those of you who are devoted fans of the original *Star Trek*  
may recognize this to be the true-life story Gene Roddenberry,  
the man who would go on to create the illustrious series.

Long before he had conjured up Spock and Captain Kirk, though,  
Roddenberry was a pilot, first in the army, and then for PanAm.

I share this story from his background because it illustrates, so well,  
a quote most often misattributed to Winston Churchill;  
that “if you find yourself in hell, keep going!”

Now, co-piloting a crashing plane has certainly got to rank up there  
as one of the Dante's nine circles of hell.

Not only are you fearing for your own life,  
you're aware you're about to be intimately involved  
with the potential deaths of everyone entrusted to your care and expertise.

And, yet, as with any given hell we might find ourselves in,  
the most pertinent question always centres  
on what we intend to do about it.

The true mark of resilience is seen in someone  
who doesn't accept the present hell as a future they intend to live into.

We see the signs of resilience in someone  
when they choose to pick up the pieces and to keep going.

To do so requires holding forth a vision, a determination,  
that they will get out alive.

That, of course, was what Roddenberry did on that plane.

On a very practical level, he moved from the cockpit

to what turned out to be a much safer seat on an ill-fated flight.

This gave him an obvious advantage,  
even if it wasn't the motivation behind his decision to move.

But, perhaps more important was his outward confidence  
that everything would be okay. That all would be well.

We can question whether it was morally acceptable for him  
to repeat such words of assurance to the woman on the plane.  
Arguably, it would have been more truthful to say, at the very least,  
"I don't know what's going to happen, but it isn't looking good."

I firmly believe people nearing the end of their lives  
have a right to know the reality of their situation,  
so they can make whatever decisions  
or take whatever final steps they need to.

But I've read that one of the most significant factors  
in whether a person survives a plane crash, or some other horrific situation,  
often boils down to a person's conviction  
that whatever challenging circumstances they are in  
won't be their ultimate demise.

They're determined that what they're facing  
isn't going to be the way their story ends.

Now, it has to be said that such determination isn't always enough.  
It certainly wasn't enough for the passengers who died.

Sometimes you need luck, or medicine, or some other sort of intervention  
to be able to pull through and make it out alive.

But the important point here  
is that our attitudes can make a vital difference  
whenever we're trying to work our way out of some proverbial hell.

And they can make the all-important difference in what's to come,  
once we've been to hell and back.

Resilience isn't just about surviving an ordeal.  
It's about bouncing back from it, on many levels.

This is where the well-worn wisdom that

“what doesn’t kill us makes us stronger” shows itself to actually be true.

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Recent studies have shown that we humans are more resilient than we tend to imagine or recognize.

While Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, has entered our lexicon in recent decades and is used frequently to describe the profound lingering effects from trauma, the encouraging news is that more than 75% of those who “experience a life-threatening or violent event emerge without a stress disorder.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, up to 70% of people who experience trauma, go on to see positive gains as a result—so much so that this is now referred to in the psychological community as “Post-Traumatic Growth.”<sup>3</sup>

Storytelling is essential to this type of growth.

How we make sense of our story—and how we tell that story—is critical to our capacity to recover from hardship and heartache.

It’s critical to our capacity for resilience.

As Richard Tedeschi, a major research professor in this field, puts it: “trauma is a shock that ruptures the central story that you thought was your life. The recurring patterns that make up life are disrupted. The sense of safety is lost. Having faced death, people in these circumstances are forced to confront the elemental questions of life. But some people are able to write a new story.”<sup>4</sup>

So it is that the “growth comes not from the event but from the struggle afterward to write a new story that imagines a life better than before.”

“Researchers have found that people who thrive after a shock

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<sup>2</sup> David Brooks, “Tales of the Super Survivors,” *The New York Times*, 24 November 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Barry Kaufman and Carolyn Gregoire, “The Surprising Benefit of Going Through Hard Times,” *Huffington Post*, 2 January 2016.

<sup>4</sup> David Brooks, “Tales of the Super Survivors,” *The New York Times*, 24 November 2015.

are able to tell clear, forward-looking stories about themselves,  
while those who don't thrive  
get stuck ruminating darkly about the past.”

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I've often said there are people in the world  
who are in desperate need of a “near-death experience.”

I'm joking when I say that, of course, but only to a degree.

There is something about being  
brought up to and even pushed beyond our breaking points—  
being confronted by life's hard and heart-breaking twists and turns—  
that helps us to more fully appreciate  
how very precious a gift it is to be alive.

For better and for worse,  
hardship shows us something of what we are made of.

That we are made of  
bones that can break.  
Minds that can scar.  
Flesh that can ache in agony.  
Hearts that can be torn asunder.

But also flesh and bones that can heal.  
Hearts and minds that can mend and grow and open  
to hold more than we ever thought possible.

In other words, we are born with capacity in our very being  
to hold the bittersweet blessings of this life—  
the strange silver linings that so often come even from life's hardest chapters.

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In this life, hell comes to each of us in time and turn, if to varying degrees.

When you find yourself there, be it a hell of your own making,  
or a hell completely beyond your control, do all you can to keep going.

Keep going to the future that is beyond the pain.

Keep going to write a better end to the story that is you.

Keep going, with each step,  
blessing and calling forth the gift of life within you.

With all the strength you can summon, keep going.