

“Force Majeure”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Opening Words

We gather this day to celebrate life’s gifts of grace:

That we build on foundations we did not lay,
warm ourselves at fires we did not light.

That we sit in the shade of trees we did not plant,
and drink from wells we did not dig.¹

In this time we make sacred in our coming together,
let us give thanks for the ordinary miracles
that make our lives what they are.

Meditation

Paul Tillich, from his sermon “Shaking the Foundations”

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual... It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much.

¹ Freely adapted from Deuteronomy 6:10-12.

Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!"

Reading

words of Mark Morford

Stop thinking this is all there is.... Realize that for every ongoing war and religious outrage and environmental devastation and bogus attack plan, there are a thousand counter-balancing acts of staggering generosity and humanity and art and beauty happening all over the world, right now, on a breathtaking scale, from flower box to cathedral.... Resist the temptation to drown in fatalism, to shake your head and sigh and just throw in the karmic towel.... Realize that this is the perfect moment to change the energy of the world, to step right up and crank your personal volume; right when it all seems dark and bitter and offensive and acrimonious and conflicted and bilious . . . there's your opening. Remember magic. And, finally, believe you are part of a groundswell, a resistance, a seemingly small but actually very, very large impending karmic overhaul, a great shift, the beginning of something important and potent and unstoppable.

Sermon: "Force Majeure"

Well, it's been quite a year, hasn't it?

It's hard to believe it's been a year
since we started lifting up concern
in our communications and from the pulpit
about a worrying new virus that had recently emerged.

Sporadic outbreaks around the world
and eventually in Canada had started to grab our attention.

By mid-February last year,
the leadership of our congregation
began making contingency plans
for how we would operate if an outbreak in Toronto
prompted restrictions on large gatherings in our city.

We carefully put systems in place
with defined stages and thought-out thresholds

that, when met, would trigger certain action steps on our part.

The plan was meant to progress incrementally over time.

And, then, in a single afternoon,
literally on Friday the 13th,
our city started to lock down, just two days
after the World Health Organization had declared
that the world was in a pandemic.

For us and for so many, our plans were upended.

And, of course, our lives have not been the same since.

Over these past twelve months,
Dr. Tam and Dr. DeVilla have become household names.

Many of us have become armchair epidemiologists
in our own right.

And what we thought in March might be a sprint,
or at least the 400-metre dash,
has become more like a marathon—or a triathlon!—
a daily test of our endurance that is still very much underway,
though we are seemingly, hopefully,
with each day, catching glimpses of the finish line—
though it remains some distance away.

More than a hundred million people
the world over have been infected.

And some two-and-a-half million people have died.

The scale of loss and human suffering has been staggering.

And the very human global response to the crisis,
a mix of our very best and worst impulses.

What is now clear is that we are living through
a defining—or, rather, a redefining—chapter in our lives.

For the rest of our time on this earth,
this strange season we are in
will serve as a reference point.

We will speak of life before, during, and after,
knowing that the pandemic changed us
and so much of the world around us.

I'll confess that my eyes glaze over whenever I see a headline
pronouncing what the future is going to be like.

I've read enough of these articles to realize
that no one really has a clue how things will be different.

What they all agree upon, though,
is that we are living through a time of tremendous change
that we will spend the rest of our days sorting through.

Or maybe we won't.

Perhaps we will work incredibly hard
to return to what was,
to pick up where we left off,
to act—and maybe even believe—
that it was all a bad dream and that nothing has really changed.

Plenty of commentators have already predicted
that we'll pursue a path similar to the one taken by those
who lived through the Flu Pandemic of 1918—
the generation who moved on from the devastations
of World War I and the pandemic to embrace an era
of creative exuberance and excess
we now know as the Roaring 20's.

It is unfair to fault them, or ourselves,
for wanting to move on, and to never look back.

Early on in this pandemic, I learned that very little was written
about the 1918 pandemic once it was over.

It wasn't until the 1950's

that the first major book on the ordeal was published.

It's been said that the people who lived through it
held a lot of ambivalence
about how the pandemic had played out,
including how they had responded,
both as individuals and as a society.

I don't know about you, but I've certainly felt
such ambivalence, such complications in myself over this past year.

I've wrestled with what it means to be a person of relative privilege
as it's become undeniably clear
that people with marginalized identities—
around the world and in our own city—
are bearing the brunt of this pandemic by almost every measure—
from the risk of contracting the virus and dying from the disease
to struggling to survive financially amid the economic upheaval
that has taken a disproportionate toll on those who earn lower wages.

And I've wrestled with what it means to live in a country,
where because of our nation's relative wealth,
we've been promised we'll all have vaccines in our arms by September,
even as people in more precarious circumstances
in poorer countries may wait years to get the vaccines.

The irony is that this particular inequity may endanger us all,
if the virus continues to mutate significantly in poorer countries.

While there has been some effort by wealthier countries
to fund vaccines for those who can't afford them,
I've been struck by how meager are the sums pledged
in comparison to the need.

This says to me that our leaders have failed to truly take in
the fundamental spiritual lesson of this experience:
that our lives are linked with all of life, at the very deepest level.

That as we say so often around here,
that what touches the life of one of us affects us all.

I read recently that all of the Covid-19 virus in the world—
every last bit of the actual genetic material
that is wreaking havoc on our planet—all of it
could comfortably fit in a large teacup.²

It's hard for me to conjure an image
that speaks more powerfully
to our shared destiny on this planet
than a mere teacup of virus
that has turned the world upside down.

In this single image our interdependence
is revealed in our shared vulnerability.

Which means that the health and well-being of people
in the favelas of Rio and the slums of Nairobi,
in the Indigenous reserves of the North,
in long-term care homes in the Kawarthas,
and in the massive warehouses of Brampton,
matter every bit as much as the health and well-being of the rest of us.

I suspect I'm not the only one among us
who has been wrestling with such uncomfortable thoughts.

Even for those with only time
for an occasional glance at the headlines,
I suspect there's been enough information there
to unleash the gnawing feeling that I'm talking about.

That something besides the virus is amiss.
That things are not quite right.

Which is to say that this is all enormously complicated.
And unsettling. And can be, at times, completely overwhelming.

Now, no one of us can hold it all, let alone fix everything.

² <https://theconversation.com/all-the-coronavirus-in-the-world-could-fit-inside-a-coke-can-with-plenty-of-room-to-spare-154226>

But we must resist the urge
to simplify what is extraordinarily complex.

And to the degree we can manage, sooner or later,
we must sit with the unsettling questions of justice and equity
that are so plainly and painfully weaved through
most every aspect of this pandemic.

Now, I say all of this knowing
that some of you are barely holding it together right now.

The demands of working remotely, or homeschooling,
or just trying to take in the magnitude of what we're living through
is already as much or more than you can handle.

My message to you this morning
is to simply hang on and be gentle with yourself.

Bless you for your resilience,
and all you've already endured.

Hope is on the horizon.
This will not last forever.

If you need support, please reach out to me,
to Rev. Lynn, to our Lay Pastors, or to our staff.
We can hold space to help carry you through this time.

And for those who are doing well enough,
all things considered, I encourage you
to pay deeper attention to what's truly weighing on your heart.

While protecting your own health and well-being
I invite you to really begin to grapple with the questions
this pandemic may be bringing up for you,
or, perhaps, the issues I've raised.

The truth is that we are all living through a traumatic experience right now,
even as it impacts and affects each of us differently.

The people who tend to struggle the most after enduring trauma are those who aren't able to process the experience.

It is that lack of processing that can cause lasting harm, and is sometimes worse than the original trauma itself.

For us to emerge as healthy and whole as possible on the other side of this pandemic means that those of us who can need to be doing what we can to make sense and to make meaning of this experience.

Because it will give shape to life on the other side.

A few months ago, in conversation with one of my dearest friends, he mentioned how much his professional life was being impacted by the legal concept of *force majeure*.

Bill is the manager for several of the world's great opera singers, many of whom were suddenly out of work when the pandemic began.

Scrambling to deal with closed concert halls and plummeting revenues, orchestras and opera companies around the world broke their contracts with singers who had been booked to perform.

They understandably cited a clause found in many such contracts that allowed them to escape liability from breaking their agreement because of a natural catastrophe—or, in other words, a *force majeure*, a greater force.

This long-standing concept that originates in French law allows a party to be released from a contract if there is some serious disruption that is unforeseeable, and unavoidable, and not the fault of one of the parties involved.

The concept relates in some ways to the notion of an “Act of God.” But it also can include human actions, such as war.

What's interesting is that the three-part legal test—

that something be unforeseeable and unavoidable
and not the fault of one of the parties—
is becoming harder to prove in a time
when the intensity of cataclysmic storms, for example,
can be traced to the impacts of human-made climate change.

Or when damaging seismic activity
can be traced to commercial drilling.

Or when the severity of pandemics can be traced
to human behaviour, to the way we live on this planet.

While a teacup of the coronavirus
is what started this global health crisis,
systems of injustice and inequality have made it
so much worse than it ever had to be—
especially at a time in human history
when we have the knowledge and capacity,
though not, tragically it would seem,
the will for it to be otherwise.

Pandemics have long been a part of the human experience.

And they have most often found their strength
by exploiting the weaknesses of the social fabric,
the social sins, if you will, of a given population.

The crushing effects of poverty often create
the perfect conditions for a pandemic to take hold.

Inequality is a vector for viral outbreaks.

Which means that this is something we, as a society,
have the power to change.

By working for justice and equity,
by upholding the dignity and worth of every person,
we can create a world that is not only fairer, but safer, for all.

Obviously enough, I speak of a world still waiting to be born.

“The more beautiful world,”
the philosopher Charles Eisenstein would say,
“our hearts know is possible.”

That is not necessarily to say a world where there is no disease,
but a world in which viruses fail to find an easy foothold
in enduring systems of injustice and inequality.

I know that this sermon has been heavy.
And I know it is a lot to hold.

I only ask you to hold what you can manage,
if and when you can manage it.

For those who can,
and I believe that includes many of us,
there is work to be done.

Much of it is the work that has always been there.
Work many of us have been at for years:
to bring more love and justice into this world.

I realize this may seem too lofty a goal or overly simplistic.

But we now know—
this far into the pandemic we must now surely know—
that love and justice are matters of life and death.

Ours is a covenant tradition.
As Unitarians, we do not necessarily share
the same or similar beliefs.

But what we hold is a covenant with one another and with all—
a promise to serve life, come what may.

Covenants, in contrast to contracts,
have no *force majeure* clause.

There is no escape from the responsibilities
we have toward one another.

When catastrophe strikes or hardship comes,
we must hold together for the well-being of one and all.

To some degree our governments have helped us
to do this over the past year.

But it is not enough.

The underlying social ills that have disproportionately affected
and taken the lives of vulnerable elders,
people of colour, and those who are poor must be addressed.

If we get through this pandemic
and then simply seek to return to life as we knew it,
we, as a society, will be saying that the unfair burden
on marginalized and vulnerable people is okay.

It is not.

So, as we dream of brighter days beyond the pandemic,
may we hold fast to everything we know
of love and justice.

May we take up this work in whatever way we can.

For that, dearly beloved, will truly a *force majeure*—a greater force.

A force that can change us and our world, for good.

Blessed Be.

Closing Words

This week, while reading an article
about the hope some have
that humans will eventually settle on the planet Mars,
I came across this quote from Carl Sagan:

“Our planet is a lonely speck

in the great enveloping cosmic dark.

In our obscurity, in all this vastness,
there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere
to save us from ourselves.

The Earth is the only world known so far to harbour life.

There is nowhere else, at least in the near future,
to which our species could migrate.”

He is right.

So let us renew our commitment to this one earth,
and all the life it sustains.

May love truly be our home. Amen.