

“Mother Nature on the Run”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Earth Day Sunday

It was a sound quite unlike anything I had ever heard before.

It was my first semester of university,
and though I was studying music in a conservatory
and playing many of the greatest works in the orchestral repertoire,
it was the music I heard beyond the concert hall
that has had a certain staying power for me,
defining that particular time,
as music does for so many of us
when we look back to the earlier chapters
of the life that we've lived through.

My roommate and I that autumn in Ohio
could not have been more different, or more incompatible.

Come January, when a semi-private room became available,
I decided for many reasons that it was time to move.

As a poignant parting gift, though, my roommate gifted me
with a cassette tape of Neil Young's album *After the Goldrush*.

He had played the vinyl version incessantly,
and I had come to love it,
though it took me some time to warm up to Neil Young's voice.

It was the late 80's, and in a way I find hilarious today,
it felt that *After the Goldrush* was from antiquity,
an historic era passed long, long before my own.

I mean, after all, the album was released in 1970, the year I was born,
so it was pre-history to me, at least on a personal level.

Of course, with the wisdom of age,
I have come to know that eighteen years can fly by in an instant.

All these years later, if pressed to recite any lyric from that album,
it would be the snippet about “Mother Nature on the run in the 1970s,”

a line from the title track.

To this day, I don't really know what that song is about.

And apparently Neil Young doesn't either,
at least that's what he said in the early years after it was released.

When Emmylou Harris and Linda Ronstadt covered the song in 1974,
and asked Young what meaning it held, he said:
"I think it's about the Second Coming or the invasion of aliens, or both."

But a decade ago, he said, "it was an environmental song."

Now, that makes some sense, in retrospect,
given the dawning awareness at that time
of the trouble we might just be in
on this little planet of ours.

The very first Earth Day, as it turns out,
was held just a few months prior to the album's release.

That first celebration on April 22, 1970,
was something of a large-scale teach-in on environmental issues.

Whether he meant to or not, Young's words
offered up an image for the times:
of Mother Nature running for her life.

An image that speaks of a turning-point moment
that we were only starting to understand.

An image that has remained with me since 1989,
and that is more relevant now than ever.

* * *

Fast forward a few months later to the fall of 1989.
I was backpacking solo through Europe.

It was a heady time.

I was in Europe when the Berlin Wall started to come down,
and, like every backpacker on the continent, I headed for Germany,
using my student Eurail pass for everything it was worth.

The hostels in Berlin were full, and there was no place to stay,
so my visit was short, as I had to leave the city to sleep on the train.

The goal, though, was to glimpse a bit of history being made,
though I shudder in looking back to realize
how little I really understood of world affairs at the time.

What most sticks with me from that whole journey, though,
was a conversation I had with an elderly Swiss woman on a train in northern
Italy—a woman whose life had encompassed both World Wars.

She spoke with all of the authority of a first-hand witness,
as she said the events of those recent days would reorder the world.

I had never quite heard anyone speak like this.
She was literally narrating history, for my benefit.

Someone pulling away from the present moment
to speak powerfully of the seismic shifts underway,
something that was clearer with a bit of perspective.

* * *

Many previous generations have thought themselves to be
living at a critical juncture, at the hinge of history,
at a vital turning point in the story of the world.

There are many different ways to assess history, after the fact.

It's harder, of course, to judge the true weight of events in real time,
as those events are actually happening.

Certainly, some generations have had a pumped-up view of their era's true impact.
And we look back and judge them today for their misguided grandiosity.

But, with that risk now named,
I dare say that it seems more than fair to argue
that ours is such a defining age.

This present moment is surely a hinge of history.

For in a short span of years, we who are alive today,
by our everyday activities and our collective actions,

will significantly shape the future conditions for life on this planet, and perhaps the very future of life itself.

We are living through extraordinary times, when innovation has created a world of opportunity and material comforts widely unknown to previous generations.

And we are living in a bewildering world, where the future of life depends on whether we confront and contend with threats to human well-being—threats that thrive upon greed, distraction, and self-absorption.

Which is to say that these are not merely technical problems to be solved, but are, in so many ways, spiritual challenges to be met.

The existential crises we now face involve questions that must be answered with moral courage.

Yet in a moment that cries out for moral clarity, humanity is, in so many dangerous ways, being swept up in swirling waves of chaos.

And this tumultuous time through which we are now living is, not surprisingly, challenging our ideas and our ideologies about how the world works—or is supposed to work.

If you're not actually feeling challenged in this way just yet, hold on; I suspect the day when you will be is not far off.

* * *

One of the enduring mantras about preaching is that the task of the preacher is to “comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.”

It's a struggle at the best of times to get this balance right, especially when the afflicted and the comfortable are sitting side by side in the same pew.

And, of course, affliction and comfort often live side by side within the same person. We humans are complex creatures, after all.

But I must confess to you that the forces presently at play in the world

must, I believe, be acknowledged, must be named—
though, I fear sometimes that doing so with the urgency required
may feel only like affliction,
when what I am striving for is to strike that delicate balance.

I know many of you—between the pandemic,
the war, the economy, climate change, and so much else—
are overwhelmed right now by the current state of the world.

I know that anxiety understandably grips you,
and that you can't take in much more.

I know because you've told me.

I truly appreciate and honour that,
and I only ask that you take in and take on
whatever you can handle.

Not everything in every sermon is meant for everyone.

At the same time, I increasingly feel
that I would be failing this congregation
and shrinking from this critical moment if I did not call us
to face and engage more deeply and more directly
with the realities we are facing.

I know this feels like a head-long journey into the pit of despair.

But, truth be told, even if we don't speak of these things,
even if and when we actively avoid them,
I suspect unsettling thoughts about these matters
are rarely far from our minds.

So I name them today, on this Earth Day Sunday—
and have been in various ways for years now—
in the conviction that we can and we must
find our way to the other side of despair.

Because our despair is only so helpful for so long.

* * *

I've been sitting recently with a particular book by Walter Brueggemann,
the esteemed scholar of the Jewish scriptures,

not least because I was taken with its title: *Reality, Grief, Hope*.

He offers this series of terms as a path for resistance in a time of crisis.

While he's speaking more in global terms,
this process works well on the personal level, too.

In his formula, there's the need to face the reality of the situation;
the need to grieve over the losses this reality brings;
and the need to be guided by one's highest hopes toward reaching a better day.

For myself, I've boiled this down to:
Get real. Let go. And embody hope.

Getting real means facing reality.
Pushing back on the ways we're often inclined
to deny the facts on the ground.

It's easy for our sense of reality to sometimes be clouded
by our privilege or misplaced sense of entitlement.

Facing reality, getting real, can involve overcoming denial
so that we might actually take in life's inconvenient truths.

When it comes to climate change, foremost among these,
is accepting the plain fact that the way most of us are living today
is simply not sustainable.

We know this, right?
We've known it for quite a while.

The timeline for the impact of climate change is and has been changing.
What just a few years ago felt generations or decades away
is, as we all know, already showing up in catastrophes around the globe.

I don't need to rehearse with you the details of all of this.

I imagine many of you have a stronger command of the particulars than I do.

Besides, how many more starving polar bears
and scorched forests do we need to see to be convinced?

Things are changing. We all know this.

But getting real means that we gain a deepening awareness that we are going to have to change, too— sooner than expected, more than we had hoped, and to a degree well beyond anything we may have already done— in order to sustain our lives and to sustain life itself.

And this is where grief comes in.
And the letting go.

It's been said that we humans don't so much resist change, as much as we resist loss.

Or as Chris Graham put it in his poignant memoir *As He Goes Deeply into ALS*:
“Dying isn't hard. What is hard is relinquishing.”

To grieve is to acknowledge the very real losses in our lives.

With climate change there are many, including having to adjust our understanding of how we thought our lives would play out, or losing our ability to take the natural world for granted, or, even, as many younger couples are finding, having the confidence to bring children into this world, for fear of what their futures may hold.

When I read Marg's words on Friday, in advance of the service, I found myself wondering just what that pristine water she described, the purest on the planet, from the nearby Town of Elmvale, actually tastes like.

Don't you want to know?
Will we ever know?

We, as a civilization, must begin to grieve what has been and is being lost.

As an essential step on our journey, I am strangely encouraged by grief.

Grief is a sign, I think, that we may be starting to get somewhere. To a place where we can recognize what is being or has been lost— and, as importantly, what is still at stake.

Now, it needs to be said that feeling sad, and depressed, and even full of despair is not an irrational way to respond to the hard truths of our times.

So, let yourself go there, if you need to, so that, in time, you can let go.

And so that, in time, you may also turn towards hope.

* * *

Joanna Macy, the Buddhist scholar and environmental activist, calls this deeply-needed change of our hearts and minds “The Great Turning.”

The Great Turning is the response to what she sees as the “Great Unraveling,” which is defined by what Buddhist social thinkers call the three poisons at the root of all human suffering: greed, aggression, and delusion.

Poisons that we happen to have more than plenty of in our world, at this particular moment in time.

To turn away from these poisons which undergird our present Industrial Growth Society to a more Life-Sustaining Society is, admittedly, an enormous endeavour.

It involves a radical shift in direction, and requires a revolution in human understanding.

Again, this is spiritual work.

What Macy puts forward as the process for this turning is aptly titled the “work that reconnects.”

And it is vital to finding hope.

The workshops she and her disciples hold around the world are meant to engage people in the hard work of reconnecting, of coming back to life.

I took part in one of her experiential workshops a few years ago. I found it powerful, challenging, and life-changing.

One of the things that has stayed with me from the workshop, was an exercise we did in pairs.

We took to the outdoors on a crisp, sunny day, just outside Ottawa.

One partner, with eyes closed,
was guided by the other on a nature walk.

For the first forty-five minutes, my friend Debra was my guide,
leading me through the world,
inviting me to see with my other senses
things I typically failed to notice with my eyes.

Without the benefit of sight,
I depended on her descriptions of things.

As she placed dandelions and pinecones in my palm,
I relied on her to tell me what each object was like.

Sometimes, through touch or smell,
I could conjure an image of what I was quite literally at hand.

At other times, I couldn't figure out exactly what I was holding.
My task was simply to experience it through my available senses.

Occasionally Debra would position me directly
in front of a pine bough or the trunk of a tree
and then invite me to open my eyes.

Slowly, as my eyes adjusted to the light,
I would come to see in amazing detail the kind of wonders
I too often race past without thinking,
without recognition,
and certainly without gratitude.

Eventually, it was time to switch roles,
and I found myself leading Debra through the same area,
all while needing to notice and narrate what was around us.

It is a simple exercise.
Two people could recreate this scene most anywhere.

And, yet, we don't.
Unless we slow down, and truly begin to see.

Until we realize that it's not so much Mother Nature on the run,
but we, who are running for our lives.

Like so many situations in life,
it is only by naming our pain and grief
that we can begin to do something about it.

And it is only by addressing our pain and grief
that we can make room for hope to enter in.

It is what opens us to possibility.

This is not the stuff of wishful thinking, though.

That task is, as Macy says, to embrace an “active hope”
that is grounded in love and gratitude,
for this world, and for all the life it holds.

Active hope isn’t something we have, but something we do:
by setting our hearts on what we deeply long to see in the world,
and then doing our part to help bring that vision into being.

Friends, may we become a people of active hope.

May we live out of an active hope by deepening our commitment
to tend the sacred bonds of life that bind us one to another.

May we live out active hope, being led not by our fears,
but by our love for the great gift of life itself.

Getting there means getting real and letting go of many things,
but it is the only path forward that gives us a chance
at ensuring human flourishing in our own time,
and for generations still to come.

May we live our lives to make it so.

Amen.