

Hard Times¹
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Readings
The Guest House

Rumi²

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Compassion

Miller Williams³

Have compassion for everyone you meet
even if they don't want it. What seems conceit,
bad manners, or cynicism is always a sign
of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen.
You do not know what wars are going on
down there where the spirit meets the bone.

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2 From *The Essential Rumi*, versions by Coleman Barks

3 From *The Ways We Touch*

Sermon

Last Sunday, I was able to go outside and take a ten minute walk. It sounds so simple, but it was something I hadn't been able to do since September. Most of you know I was dealing with health issues during the fall—with a crash in my thyroid hormones that also triggered an outbreak of shingles. I was at least partially laid up for six weeks. But there was also this small thing—a bursitis in my knee. And once I began to feel well again, I found it was still a problem, and I couldn't go for a walk. Thankfully, a naturopathic doctor gave me a liniment that would enable me to heal by interrupting the cycle of pain. I could start walking again. I can't express to you what a wonderful thing it is to be able to take a walk down the road on a sunny day. The joy of the ordinary.

Who knows when our lives might be disrupted by trouble? Illness can come out of the blue, whether we live with healthy habits or not. A small injury can have huge effects. Accidents happen, even to careful drivers. Wonderful jobs can evaporate with budget cuts. Those we care about can move away. Those we love can stop loving us back. Hard times come into our lives.

I am not going to try to tackle, today, the larger context of hard times. I am not going to talk about how society shapes the way trouble affects us. It does, of course. Illness means a whole different thing depending on whether one has the resources for medical care. Poverty and wealth, job losses and gains, never happen in a vacuum. Next week I want to take a look at poverty and wealth in our society. But today I want to look at the personal side of hard times. I want to look at the mystery of suffering.

We might imagine ahead of time that we can bear whatever comes our way, but trouble takes us by surprise. What shook me the most during my illness was how it laid waste to my spiritual practice. My soul felt like it was walking through a dark valley. I could barely focus enough to meditate. I couldn't seem to find my joy, my inner light and wisdom, my sense of connection to the vast beauty of all existence.

I could tell myself intellectually that this was a side effect of low thyroid hormones. But it was frightening to realize how much I am formed from the chemicals in my body, and how much can be undone. What we think we can count on may fail us, right at the moment when we most need it.

And so I have been thinking a lot about the meaning of suffering. One of the books of the Hebrew Bible is devoted to this perennial mystery. The book of Job tells the story of a righteous man who has honored God and been blessed by God. But Satan, who is chatting with God up in heaven, says to God, "Well of course Job honors you—everything is going well for him. But I bet if he lost his good fortune he would change his tune and curse you." So, the story goes on to describe how Job loses everything—his crops, his wealth, his children, even his health.

His friends come around and challenge him—"What did you do wrong so that you are being punished now? You must repent of your sins!" And doesn't that happen too often in our day as well? Someone loses a job, and friends ask, what did you do wrong? Or someone gets cancer, and asks it of themselves, what did I do wrong? But Job protests his innocence. His wife says, "Curse God and die!" And we also like to find someone to blame for our troubles. But Job is unwilling to do that either. Instead, he appeals to God to understand why he is suffering.

And eventually, God speaks—not with an explanation or an answer, but with bigger questions:

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding...

On what were its bases sunk, or who laid the cornerstone

when the morning stars sang together

and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"⁴

Job is left with his questions—with the mystery of suffering and pleasure, with the mystery of his little life in the vast expanse of time and space. Yet he is compelled to praise the great mystery of life, to praise the creator whom he cannot understand.

I was reminded of the story of Job when I watched Terrence Malick's film, *The Tree of Life*. The film begins with those words of God in Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" The film explores the tragedy of a death of a child at 19. But we don't see the actual death, rather, we see a story of grief, of memory, of the mystery of life, of the days of childhood. We hear the voice of the mother praying to her God, "Where were you? Where were you?" We see the well-meaning neighbors offering words that fail to comfort.

And then suddenly the scene shifts, and we are led through a visual and musical exploration of the birth of the universe, of nebulae and stars, the formation of the sun and the earth, the rushing waters of the sea, the evolution of life. We take this journey all the way down through time to the birth of a child in 1950's Texas. To the intimate story of a family with three boys growing up in a small town. The suffering of one mother is set inside the entire unfolding of the universe. There is no answer, yet somehow, the mother finds a way to embrace her grief.

As a minister, I hear the stories of people's pain. Stories of horrible pain, and deep. I never look at a stranger any longer, without imagining that they too might carry a heavy burden. Why do we suffer? Why do we hurt the ones we love? Why do we struggle so much? These are questions that do not have resolution. Those who have tried to create answers have sometimes done horrible damage to the heart and soul. Like Job's friends, some people try to link good fortune with goodness, or suffering with sin. They might say we are to blame for what happens to us. But life itself is never so simplistic or cruel. It gives us suffering, but it does not blame us for our pain.

4 Job 38: 4, 6-7.

Once there was a young prince whose family sought to protect him from all suffering. And it worked for awhile. But one day, as a young man, he goes outside the castle walls, and sees poverty, sickness, and death. He abandons his life of luxury, and seeks to understand life. For a time, he follows the path of the ascetic monks, of fasting and deprivation, but it doesn't give him the answers he seeks. Finally, he sits beneath a tree, until he wakes up. He becomes the Buddha.

Pema Chodron says, "The first noble truth of the Buddha is that when we feel suffering, it doesn't mean that something is wrong... Suffering is part of life, and we don't have to feel it's happening because we personally made the wrong move."⁵ She goes on to say, however, that when we are suffering we usually do think that something is wrong. We think we need to fix something or change something.

When I first felt sick, I was obsessed with trying to find out what was wrong, and finding a way to fix it. Chodron is not saying it is wrong to address the pain or suffering that comes our way. Of course we should seek help, and get help. But not everything can be fixed or healed. We can become caught in a panic about trying to make things better. I kept going about my work and my daily schedule but I was frightened inside. It seemed that the only prayer I could hear in meditation was my body crying, help me, help me. I was able to find help but it took a long time.

We are tempted to run away from difficult feelings, and cling to pleasurable feelings. But if we can relax, if we can stay present to them, all of the feelings can be our teachers. The practice of meditation is meant to help us sit with whatever comes up in the present moment. Meditation is meant to help us to pay attention to how we respond to our feelings, and perhaps, to learn to embrace the very feelings we fear. Pema Chodron called it leaning into the feelings.

She tells the story of her teacher, Trungpa Rinpoche, who was walking with a group of his students into an unfamiliar monastery one day. They encountered a vicious dog that was barking wildly at the end of his chain. They walked around him, but then, suddenly, the chain came undone, and he lunged at them. The students froze, but Rinpoche ran at fast as he could, directly toward the dog. The dog was so surprised that he turned around and fled.⁶

In the same way, if we run toward the difficult feelings, if we embrace them, something unexpected happens. I am thinking about how our cats respond to strangers in our house. A friend of ours was visiting last weekend. One cat, Sassy, loves strangers. She runs right out and feels great pleasure with a new person. So there is nothing for her to learn about this. But Billie is afraid of strangers. She hides behind the bed, or peeks out from behind a curtain. On the third day of our friend's visit, while we were sitting on the couch watching a movie, Billie came out, and jumped up to the back of the couch; she walked behind our friend, and carefully sniffed her hair. Billie was leaning into her fear, sniffing out the stranger.

⁵ Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, p. 40.

⁶ Chodron, p. 14-15.

In the spirit of meditation, there is no label of right or wrong for our feelings. We notice when we feel pleasure, and when we feel pain. We notice our patterns. We take our time. We notice when we hide behind the curtain, and we notice when we are ready, with patience and courage to sniff out our fears. This pathway is very tender toward the self and others. We learn not to judge ourselves and others.

Pema Chodron says, "In practicing meditation, we're not trying to live up to some kind of ideal... We're just being with our experience whatever it is... If sometimes we can approach what scares us, and sometimes we absolutely can't, then that's our experience."⁷ I know that I am very used to making judgments about myself. I imagine that I should be hopeful, or peaceful, or happy, even if I am dealing with an illness. But suffering makes me humble, because I must acknowledge what I really am, right in this moment.

I have a practice of writing in my journal every day, and often I write as a form of prayer. When I hear a message from my inner wisdom, I use a red pen to write it down, so I can find it again. During the autumn, my journal was full of pages and pages of black ink, with no red. It seemed that the voice of inner wisdom was silent.

Later, in this ongoing dark night of the soul, there were days when the only prayer I could pray was a kind of surrender. Surrender to the present moment of darkness. Surrender to the reality of being exactly where I was. In surrender, I found the only wisdom I could find. The day after I was diagnosed with shingles, I wrote, in red, "Even in illness I am still within the love of the Great Love. No matter what."⁸ That was when I had to stop everything and embrace this big disruption of my life. Isn't it interesting how we see certain parts of our lives as our lives, and other parts as disruptions?

A week later, there was another phrase in red: "Embrace this journey, your very own life, with its own gifts and challenges, open to the spirit from within *this* body." Four weeks after that, I wrote: "It isn't anything that you do. Surrender. As if this journey you have been on through darkness is the exact journey in which you are being led."⁹ Not an interruption, but the real journey of my life.

Somewhere in the middle, I had been reading a passage from Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*, reprinted in *The Sun*.¹⁰ In it, two old friends meet by the river. Siddhartha tells Govinda, "Listen well! The sinner that I am and you are is indeed a sinner, but in time... he will attain nirvana, be a buddha. But..., this 'in time' is an illusion, only a metaphor. The sinner is not on the path to buddhahood, ... even though our intellect knows no other way of representing things. No, the future buddha is present here and now within the sinner, his future is entirely there already..."

7 Chodron, p. 17.

8 Journal, November 12, 2011.

9 Nov 18 & Dec 16, 2011.

10 Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, excerpt reprinted in *The Sun*, December 2011, p. 12-13.

After reading this passage, a moment of deep insight in red: "We are loved, not because of being good; we are loved without regard for good or evil."¹¹ Can I believe that? Siddhartha would say we contain within ourselves all good and all evil and that is Life. He says, "The only thing of importance to me is being able to love the world, without looking down on it, without hating it and myself—being able to regard it and myself and all beings with love, admiration, and reverence."¹² Our Universalist ancestors said that all souls shall grow into harmony with the divine.

I return to these messages now, and think about them in relation to what Pema Chodron is teaching. About how there is no judgment. Trouble can teach us about where our value really resides—not in what we do and what we accomplish, but in our very being, in our being part of this mysterious journey of life.

Suffering is painful. But if we can let go of judging ourselves on top of the pain, perhaps there is a way to bear it. If we remember that life comes with joy and pain, not because of anything we do, but because of life itself. We must open to the mystery of Life, which is larger than pain.

There was once an aging Hindu master who grew tired of his apprentice complaining, and so, one morning, he sent him for some salt. When the apprentice returned, the master instructed the unhappy young man to put a handful of salt in a glass of water and then to drink it.

"How does it taste?" the master asked.

"Bitter," spit the apprentice.

The master chuckled and then asked the young man to take the same handful of salt and put it in the lake. The two walked in silence to the nearby lake, and once the apprentice swirled his handful of salt in the water, the old man said, "Now drink from the lake."

As the water dripped down the young man's chin, the master asked, "How does it taste?"

"Fresh," remarked the apprentice.

"Do you taste the salt?" asked the master.

"No," said the young man.

At this, the master sat beside this serious young man who so reminded him of himself and took his hands, saying, "The pain of life is pure salt; no more, no less. The amount of pain in life remains the same, exactly the same. But the amount of bitterness we taste depends on the container we put the pain in. So when you are in pain, the only thing you can do is to enlarge your sense of things. . . . Stop being a glass. Become a lake."¹³

In our time of suffering, may we find the way to do so.

11 Dec 4, 2011.

12 Hesse, in *The Sun*, p. 13.

13 Told by Mark Nepo in *The Book of Awakening*, found at the Spirituality and Practice website: spiritualityandpractice.com.