

Turning Toward the Unknown

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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As humans, we have the ability to think about the future, and, we seem to have an innate desire to be in control. One way of being in control is to make plans for the future. The only problem with planning is that the future is uncertain. We tend to plan for the future based on the past. But if we look at the past honestly, and compare it to the present, we see how much has changed and how much of that change was beyond our control. Our forbearer, Ralph Waldo Emerson had some ideas. He wrote, "...man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future."

Emerson's assessment rings true. How many of us get stuck in the past...hashing over events long past...clinging to regrets or mourning an often idealized memory of what used to be while the chance to shape what is slips by? And what about the future? Who among us has not yielded an hour, day, week, month or even years to thoughts, often laced with fear and anxiety about an unknown or hoped for future while the present moment with all its potential and opportunity recedes into the past?

The remedy to this age old human habit, from ancient times to Emerson to our own day, is to live in the present, through the cultivation and practice of mindfulness. Something far easier said than done...or practiced as the case may be. What is required of us to turn toward the unknown? Is it bravery? Is it courage?

Aristotle observed that "we become brave by doing brave acts." Turning toward the unknown with courage shouldn't be confused with fearlessness. Being afraid when confronted with fearful things is an appropriate response. Herman Melville makes this point beautifully in a telling passage in *Moby Dick*. Where Starbuck, the chief mate, first addresses the crew. "I will have no man in my boat, said Starbuck, 'who is not afraid of a whale.'" The point Melville makes is the brave person is not one who is never afraid. That's rather the description of a reckless person, someone who may be more harm than help in an emergency. If Aristotle is right-and I think he is-then courage is a personality to feel appropriate degrees of fear and confidence in challenging situations.

While studying to write this message I recalled a children's poem I interpreted for a university children's literature course. I can't remember my pin numbers and passwords, yet I'm able to easily bring up this poem from decades ago. The poem is called *How the Little Kite Learned to Fly* by Katherine Pyle. This poem 'the brave little kite' is about courage. The poet describes how courage can help to overcome your fears. As the little kite was afraid of taking off, we are also afraid of challenges in our life. But the big kite encourages him to try. The big kite says to little kite that one can never learn who never Tried. Let me share it with you:

"I never can do it," the little kite said, As he looked at the others high over his head. "I know I should fall if I tried to fly." "Try," said the big kite, only try! Or I fear you never will learn at

all.” But the little kite said: “I’m afraid I’ll fall.” The big kite nodded: “Ah, well, good-bye; I am off.” And he rose toward the tranquil sky. Then the little kite’s paper stirred at the sight. And trembling he shook himself free for flight. First whirling and frightened, then braver grown, Up, up he rose through the air alone, Till the big kite looking down could see The little one rising steadily Then how the little kite thrilled with pride, As he sailed with the big kite side by side! While far below he could see the ground, And the boys like small spots moving round. They rested high in the quiet air, And only the birds and clouds were there. “Oh, how happy I am,” the little kite cried. “And all because I was brave and tried.”

The field of psychology has shown that people prefer certainty over uncertainty. We prefer our leaders to be decisive. We are constantly being told to take control of our lives. Studies have shown that when given a choice, people will choose the option of knowing they will receive an electrical shock over the option of maybe receiving an electrical shock or not. Let that sink in for a minute. People will choose certain pain over the possibility of no pain. We have a tendency to choose the known over the unknown, even when the known is unpleasant. These studies give some insight into why it is that people tend to stay in or go back to abusive relationships. They may even give insight into why we continue to find ourselves at war, even when we know the deadly consequences of war. Or pour into the streets during a deadly pandemic. We seem to have a built-in aversion to uncertainty and a built-in preference for that which we know.

You may have seen the cartoon that shows three booths at a fair. One booth offers past life regressions. Another offers instructions in meditation. The third offers fortune telling and a glimpse into the future. The lines at the first and third booths are long, while there is no one at the middle booth, except the tender of the booth, who is saying, “Can I interest you in the present moment?”

I recently had a conversation with my brother-in-law who came to Florida a couple of months ago. He has an autoimmune disease that has ravaged his mind and body for the past few years. He’s has amputations, is riddled with illnesses, and is entering a state of dementia. It’s been hard to watch. He told me that there were days when he was so low because he lost his abilities to function. Day by day he became more reliant on medications, medical equipment, and strangers coming into his home to care for him. I asked him how he pulls himself out of that dark place. He told me that a few years ago he decided to stop thinking about what he couldn’t do and what his future would be like and to simply get up and face each day one at a time. He said he realized that he was not in control of the unknown. Trying to control uncertainty created a debilitating anxiety. He freed himself of that.

Joanna Macy, Buddhist practitioner and environmental activist puts it this way:

“When you make peace with uncertainty you find a kind of liberation. You are freed from bracing yourself against every piece of bad news, and from constantly having to work up a sense of hopefulness in order to act –which can be exhausting. There’s a certain equanimity and moral economy that comes when you are not constantly computing your chance of success.”

We all have known times of uncertainty: waiting for test results from the doctor, waiting for approval of the bank loan, waiting to find out if we have been accepted to the school of our choice, waiting to find out if we got the job we applied for. Especially in these times when we are at the mercy of a pandemic, thus, the unknown. When I have been in these types of

situations, I find myself saying to my closest friends and loved ones, “The not knowing is the worst. Even if the news is bad, I know what to plan for.”

The truth is that we never know for sure what the future will be like, at least not with any degree of certainty. Religion has a role to play in dealing with uncertainty. What does our Unitarian Universalist faith have to offer in times such as these? We offer a wide path where people of diverse beliefs can walk together in search of truth. We offer a middle way between the past and the future, embracing the here and now as holy and sacred. We offer a community of companions to help us slay the anxiety dragons that live within uncertainty. We offer a religious perspective that is open to new insights and understandings, a religious perspective that sees doubts and questions as necessary attendants of faith. We offer a spiritual practice of humility, bowing before the great mysteries of life that are beyond our knowing. We offer shelter from the storm, a gathering place where we give to each other, where we provide for human needs as best we can.

We offer the freedom that comes in knowing that we are not in control of future outcomes, that we are part of something larger than ourselves and that we can only control our own actions, yet when we unite our efforts towards the common good, we have a greater impact. We offer forgiveness and freedom from judgment when life turns out differently than we had planned. We offer the wisdom of uncertainty and the grace that comes with knowing that reality is a lot like water that cannot be tied up in neat paper packages but has a flow of its own.

The poet Rilke says: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

Let us turn toward the unknown and release our fear of it. You are in today. The Florida sun is shining. There are likely birds singing in your neighborhood. Unwring your hands, let go and bask in the glory of today.

May it be so.