

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Order, Disorder, Reorder”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 4, 2018

Call to Celebration

My inspiration for today’s service is a Franciscan Priest, by the name of father Richard Rohr. I heard him interviewed by Krista Tippett on her show, On Being, and thought, “there is a sermon in that!”

Here are a few of Father Rohr’s words from the interview that will suggest where the title comes from and gives you a little taste of where I would like to go with you this morning:

... I’ve been telling the students at the school, “Picture three boxes: order, disorder, reorder.” And that if you read the great myths of the world and the great religions, that’s the normal path of transformation. Now what conservative people want to do is just keep rebuilding the first box, “order, order, order,” at all costs, even if it doesn’t fit the facts or fit reality. What’s difficult ... is so many people formed in the last 30 years were born into the second box of disorder ...

It’s much harder to grow up if you were formed after 1968. And yet, what I always tell the folks is there’s no nonstop flight from order to reorder. You’ve got to go through the disorder. Your “salvation project,” as Thomas Merton called it, it has to fall apart because it’s not really love of humanity or God or truth. It’s pretty much love of yourself. You don’t know that, and that’s not wrong. In fact, it’s quite appropriate. But what the great religions are talking about and I’m certainly talking about ... is this necessary confrontation with the tragic, the absurd, what St. Paul would call for Christians the “folly of the cross.” Yeah, that disorder is part of the deal.

So strap on your seat belts as we leave order behind and head for disorder with the hope that maybe we’ll see the outline of reorder starting to emerge as we join together in the celebration of life.

Spoken Meditation

In these troubled times,
There are many ways to become distracted
and follow the unwholesome ways of the world.

Discomfort with new ideas can morph
into fear and dread.

Intimations of suspicion can easily be spun
into stories of conspiracy.

The spectacle of the passing show leads away
from the assurance of core values and principles, and
undermines the confidence
of sacred traditions and wise teaching.

As we defend the bulwarks of our beliefs against all threats,
there may also be a time when we stumble.

That stumble will come as an unexpected surprise
but the consequences of stumbling
will interrupt a sense of assurance.

The confident defense against all threats
will meet one that gets through the lines and over the walls.

And confusion and helplessness will shadow the doors and windows.

In that disorientation,
where carefully crafted strategies now lead
toward ruin and destruction,

Emptiness and distress will loom over
the best laid plans of the past.

Even though clouds gather in front of the sun
and a chill wind begins to blow,
the light of hope has not gone out.
But now, the light can no longer be kindled in old lamps
depleted of fuel whose wicks are now too thin.

Let us pause now in the liminal space
between the certainty of youth, the crisis of middle age,
and the letting go of the aged;

And seek a sense of inner guidance
that can serve as our compass to show us the way
when no way seems possible.

Reading

from *Falling Upward* by Richard Rohr

No one would choose ... upheaval consciously; we must somehow “fall” into it. Those who are too carefully engineering their own superiority systems will usually not allow it at all. It is much more done to you than anything you do yourself, and sometimes nonreligious people are more open to this change in strategy than are religious folks who have their private salvation project all worked out...

Jesus and the Jewish prophets were fully at home with the tragic sense of life, and it made the shape and nature of reality very different for them ... life is characterized much more by exception and disorder than by total or perfect order. Life, as the biblical tradition makes clear, is both loss and renewal, death and resurrection, chaos and healing at the same time; life seems to be a collision of opposites. ...

Sooner or later, if you are on any classic “spiritual schedule,” some event, person, death, idea, or relationship will enter your life that you simply cannot deal with, using your present skill set, your acquired knowledge, or your strong willpower. Spiritually speaking, you will be, you *must* be, led to the edge of your own private resources. At that point you will stumble over a necessary stumbling stone, as Isaiah calls it; or to state it in our language here, you will and you must “lose” at something. This is the only way that Life-Fate-God-Grace-Mystery can get you to change, let go of your egocentric preoccupations, and go on the further and larger journey. I wish I could say this was not true, but it is darn near absolute in the spiritual literature of the world.

There is no practical or compelling reason to leave one's present comfort zone in life. Why should you or would you? Frankly, none of us do unless and until we have to. The invitation probably has to be unexpected and unsought. If we seek spiritual heroism ourselves, the old ego is just back in control under a new name. There would not really be any change at all, but only disguise. Just bogus “self-improvement” on our own terms.

Any attempt to engineer or plan your own enlightenment is doomed to failure because it will be ego driven. You will see only what you have already decided to look for, and you cannot see what you are not ready or told to look for. So failure and humiliation force you to look where you never would otherwise.

Sermon

Saul from Taurus' transformation into the apostle Paul illustrates Richard Rohr's proposal in his book *Falling Upward* of two different ways to live one's life. The transition between the two is what he calls the stumble, the stumble from order to disorder then to reorder.

Saul was a first century Jewish Roman citizen with a considerable degree of power. Well educated in Jerusalem, he was connected enough to be able to cast a vote to put the first recorded Christian martyr, Saint Stephen, to death. He was prominent enough to go to the chief priest to get a letter to go to Damascus to round up Christians and bring them back and to be put in prison.

On the way to Damascus seething with murderous threats, Acts Chapter 9 reports:

suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:3-9)

Paul stumbles, big time, remains blind and doesn't regain his sight until a disciple of Jesus comes to him, lays his hands on him, the scales fall from his eyes, he regains his sight and accepts baptism as a follower of Christ. He is a new man filled with the Holy Spirit and with a new life purpose. Instead of destroying this deviant Jewish sect, he has significant responsibility for its survival.

Paul's dramatic change of life direction illustrates a paradigm taught by Fr. Rohr. I was attracted to his analysis of human life having two phases. I present his ideas to you this morning, as an assessment tool for your own journey through life, especially if that journey has had a lot of stumbling as part of it. I find great comfort in the non-linear, even tragic view of life Rohr presents that makes meaning out of what we might otherwise want to discard, avoid or reject.

Rohr, in a general, developmental sense, sees the first half of life as one of constructing a self. In this phase we are developing skills, abilities and mastery over ourselves and our environment. We are gaining a sense of power and control, bringing an increasing level of order to our lives. We learn to move, communicate, and manipulate our environment to develop self-control and responsibility. To successfully complete this stage we'll necessarily develop a solid ego and a strong sense of self.

The stumble, the crisis he describes could be a single event or it could be a series of events that culminate in a moment of crisis that tips the balance. If we live long enough, Rohr proposes:

," some event, person, death, idea, or relationship will enter your life that you simply cannot deal with, using your present skill set, your acquired knowledge, or your strong willpower. Spiritually speaking, you will be, you must be, led to the edge of your own private resources.

This crisis initiates the disordered stage of life that leads beyond our private resources to cope. Things break down as we try in vain to organize and recover our old life using the old tools that are now no longer sufficient.

The breakthrough happens when we realize we have access to inner resources that are not under our control or power. In this second stage of life, Rohr proposes that we can find meaning in living from inner guidance rather than from external direction. The second phase of life is discovering a way to live by faith in that unseen and un-sensate inner source.

We see this illustrated in a magnified form in Paul's story. Paul knows exactly what he wants to do. He sees these followers of Jesus as a threat to Judaism and wants to eliminate them. Yet falling to

the ground and being blinded literally stops him in his tracks. I imagine those three days without food or water were an intense inner struggle. Paul had been master of his fate. Now he was completely vulnerable. He couldn't fix that blindness praying his familiar prayers or fasting. Only when one of Jesus' disciples touches and heals him do the scales fall from his eyes as he is filled with the Holy Spirit. He discovers there is another source for his religious life that comes from inside rather than from the outside as the Law of Moses does through the Torah. Thus Paul begins his second phase of a reordered life.

Most Unitarian Universalists take this story with a grain of salt or two. We don't know what actually happened in Saul's conversion to Christianity – or even if this story is factual or not. What we do know is this story does describe a not uncommon human experience metaphorically. Whether we encounter the stumble early or late in our lives, I think we can definitely accept the reality that life will present us with challenges we would rather avoid at all costs. We definitely would rather avoid flashes of light that knock us down and blind us.

Another sticking point I commonly encounter in UU circles is that term “Holy Spirit.” Is there something in us that we have access to, however you name it as spirit, love, or Spirit of Life, or the Holy, or Presence, or the collective unconscious, or something else, that is trustable, and reliable. Is it real or just a figment of our imaginations? If we suppose it exists, then is it something that is natural or supernatural?

The mistake is to try to answer these questions. Like many big religious questions, they are beyond the realm of human minds to resolve rigorously. It is impossible to prove or disprove the existence of God, the physical resurrection of Jesus, the reality of the Holy Spirit, and so much of Christian cosmology. Nor is it worth much of our life energy trying to do so.

On the other hand, exploring the boundaries of consciousness can be done experientially independent of what one believes or doesn't believe. To my mind this is exceedingly important as it helps us understand how our minds work and what is possible for us to know directly through personal experience. This is one of the reasons I so love mindfulness meditation. Every moment of mindfulness is an opportunity to witness the nature of mind directly and find out the nature of consciousness happening inside this head (pointing at my head) right here.

Brain imaging technology is beginning to allow us to look inside our minds and to notice patterns in how they work. Scientists are beginning to locate areas active, for example, in intuitive problem solving. I was just reading a fascinating article on this in Scientific American studying intuition while playing the Japanese chess like game shogi. Researchers are getting a picture of the integrative nature of different centers of the brain that connect different regions. It is in those vast networks of interconnection that emerge what we experience as sudden and unexpected insights.

Those of us of a certain age know about background, subliminal mental processing that happens when we reach for someone's name and it isn't there. I know I know that person as well as the back of my hand and yet that name is just not there. The harder I search, the more frustrated I get and the name seems to recede into the name swamp.

If you're like me, you've had the experience of just letting go of the attempt and after a few minutes the name just spontaneously pops into my head. That background name search kept going long after my mental foreground moved on. Creative problem solving often happens like this as a "eureka" moment. Maybe what we call intuition is an integrative process constantly going on searching for patterns and meaning in the deep background of our minds that every once in a while hits spiritual pay dirt.

I wonder if something like this was happening for Saul. The scripture suggests he held a lot of anger and hatred toward those Jesus followers. Yet he was also in close proximity to them so he heard their testimonials and beliefs being expressed. I imagine an intense battle going on in his mind between the words of Jesus' followers and his Judaism. That intense struggle may have been operating at a deep unconscious level until it suddenly erupted in a spiritual crisis on the road to Damascus. He might have experienced a kind of hysterical blindness (that is actually in the DSM-5 called conversion disorder). Perhaps the disciple's comforting touch broke that inner struggle releasing a rush of relief and a conversion to a new way of life and belief.

Whatever the source of our intuitive capability might be, whether a natural brain process or a supernatural meddling with our neurons, I need to add a note of caution. Some of the most religiously intoxicated people who live in this spiritual realm occupy psychiatric wards. The line between inner guidance and inner delusion can be thin indeed. We have to be very careful with what shows up in us spontaneously. An educated, reasonable central cortex can be a check against insanity. So can wise teachers and others around us, especially those who are different from us, less likely to be seduced by group think.

Nevertheless, I submit having access to this inner guidance is of great importance to enjoy the fruits of the second half of life. This is the time of life when things begin to break down and fall apart. This is the time of life that the people we love begin to get sick and one by one begin to die. Our mental capacities and energy level diminish and are not what they once were. It is a time of increasing vulnerability and dependency.

From the point of view of the first half of life, this is the failure of the self-building process. There is nothing to enjoy or savor as the faculties slip and fall.

But from the inner view of the second half of life, there is the discovery of a sense of being that transcends the self and is independent of the self. This is an experience of being itself of which our individual bodies are just a tiny part. In this embodied experience of being part of the oneness of being, there is great peace and relief. Yes, the self continues to fight against each loss, but there is developing at the same time an inner sense of ultimate security. And in this process, the disorder of each loss gets resolved in the reordering of our being toward a greater sense of what it's all about.

My message this morning is a message of hope. The hope is not born out of some great resolution to the crises that trouble us individually or collectively. Paradoxically, we must continue to struggle with them on a daily basis. But there is more and the access to that more is found inwardly.

Metaphorically, it is the integrative path of the heart not the analytical path of the head. While both are important for a good life, if you want to find inner peace, seek the path of the heart.

Benediction

I close with a few more inspirational words by Fr. Rohr:

The tragic sense of life is ironically not tragic at all, at least in the Big Picture. Living in such deep time, connected to past and future, prepares us for necessary suffering, keeps us from despair about our own failure and loss, and ironically offers us a way through it all. We are merely joining the great parade of humanity that has walked ahead of us and will follow after us. The tragic sense of life is not unbelief, pessimism, fatalism, or cynicism. It is just ultimate and humiliating realism, which for some reason demands a lot of forgiveness of almost everything. Faith is simply to trust the real, and to trust that God is found within it—even before we change it. This is perhaps our major stumbling stone, the price we must pay to keep the human heart from closing down and to keep the soul open for something more.