

WHAT COMES NEXT
Sermon by Audette Fulbright
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All Souls Church, New York City

This is the time of year when, if you ask any teacher, they will tell you how tired they are. With summer approaching, tests abounding, and kids distracted by sunny, warm days - then add things like prom or graduation, yearbook prep or any number of other end of year details - it's an exhausting slog 'til that last bell rings.

My experience and observation of the last year or more is that everyone - not just teachers - is overwhelmed and exhausted. People are anxious about what is happening in our country and around the world. News of six scandals a day is not uncommon; our institutions are under assault and it feels like there is just too much to care about, too many harms to worry about. This frequently leads to a combination of "compassion fatigue" and an apathy which is the space autocracy needs in order to bloom most fully. Knowing that constant stress is damaging to the body as corruption is to governance, how should we proceed? How do we handle all that confronts us? What comes next?

"Where there is no vision, the people perish." The book of Proverbs 29:18. One thing that we need in order not just to get by, but to flourish, is a vision of a better world. We need to really see, feel, and put our hands on the ideas and plans for something better than what we have right now. At the moment, the risk is that to survive, we are becoming numb to what is happening, we're normalizing corruption and an increasingly toxic culture. Information comes at us with that same old, "if it bleeds, it leads," and at the same time, the shortest way to express outrage or disapproval is to share a story of all that is wrong, demonize others as stupid or venal, and then call it done. Unfortunately, this doesn't change the world, and it only increases the divisions among us. As people who care enough about their spiritual lives and the possibility of Beloved Community to show up at church on Sunday mornings, we want to do better. We want to be better. We want something different. We need a vision to sustain us, and work that will heal us.

I believe we can conceive of it like this: we need work for our minds, and rest for our minds. We need work for our hands, and rest for our hands. And we need the work of the heart, and rest for our hearts. A vision to sustain us, and mind, hands, heart - at work and at rest.

When I think of a vision that sustains me, it always begins with a world where we have learned to live sustainably, yet with abundance. It might begin with something like "Biomimicry 3.8, a consortium of scientists and businesspeople dedicated to collecting research and training designers and engineers around the world as certified biomimicry specialists."¹ Janine Benyus and Michael Braungart, scientists and authors both, wonder:

What would nature do to design lasting and regenerative materials?" asks Benyus. "How does a river filter fresh water and a spider manufacture resilient fiber?"

¹ "From Soap to Cities, Designing From Nature Could Solve Our Biggest Challenges," by [Sven Eberlein](#). Yes! Magazine, Fall 2012

Braungart, picking up on the theme, wonders “Why aren’t we designing buildings like trees and cities like forests?” As Benyus and her long-time partner Dayna Baumeister began consulting with designers and engineers, they found that single organisms—as well as entire natural systems—could be an inspiration. For instance, while it’s possible to mimic an owl’s feather by creating a fabric that opens anywhere along its surface, Benyus and Baumeister realized it might be even better to emulate the process by which owl feathers self-assemble at body temperature without using toxins or high pressure. The implications for human use—in everything from textiles to quieter airplanes—were staggering. This went far beyond “reduce, reuse, recycle.” McDonough and Braungart wrote about the regenerative powers that exist in nature, positing that humans could have a restorative impact on the environment. Consider, for example, death. Since we emit carbon even when our lives are over, Braungart suggests we focus on making our ecological footprint beneficial, rather than merely trying to shrink it. At heart, this approach underscores the limits of standard environmental thinking aimed at making products “less bad.” Too reductive, says Braungart, who scoffs, “Think about falling in love efficiently.” Thanks to Benyus, Braungart, and McDonough, such ideas are no longer in the realm of science fiction. From oil-repellent coating inspired by water bugs, to using prairies as a model to grow food sustainably, to observing how chimps cope with illness, the possibilities of learning from our planet’s unexplored reservoirs of intelligence are vast.²

The thing is, there are not just visions of a sustainable, abundant, life-affirming world, but thousands of ways that vision is already becoming manifest. The trick, as it turns out, is seeking out and paying attention to the people and ideas that are building the world we dream about.

The same is true in our social/political worlds. Consider the work of Indivisible, which sprung up almost overnight in the wake of the 2016 election, and builds on the power of people coming together, or the work of adrienne maree brown, who envisions a world of “abundant justice, abundant attention, and abundant liberation.”³ In talking about her strategy, which brown calls “emergent strategy,” she gives a justice example:

The Movement for Black Lives. The simple interaction is Alicia Garza is so hurt by what’s happening with the Trayvon Martin case, she comes on[line] and she says, “Ya’ll, we have to do better than this, we can’t get used to this and just act like it’s nothing. Our lives matter. Black lives matter.” And a relationship formed around Patrisse [Cullors], and Opal [Tometti], and many others [who] came together and said there’s something here: “Black lives matter.” And that thing took on an organic life of its own and began growing, spreading, lots of people claiming it, and saying “Yes.”

And then getting to a point where other Black formations are growing and saying there’s something beyond just what Black Lives Matter can hold. That is, there is an organic set of relationships here we need to be in. So we have the

² *ibid.*

³ “**The World Is a Miraculous Mess, and It’s Going to Be All Right,**” by Zenobia Jeffries. *Yes!* Magazine, Spring 2018.

Movement for Black Lives, which is both organizations that existed before the Ferguson moment, and the organizations that came into existence after that which are saying, together we need to articulate a vision for Black lives, together we need to articulate a policy platform. Now the next stage is happening. They're moving projects. They have a 2021 strategy, and all this work is happening. And now we move to the next level, which is a multiracial, people of color alliance that is hosted by the Movement for Black Lives action table, but has immigrant justice folks, climate justice folks, Black feminists, education workers, folks who're doing anti-war/anti-militarism work, folks who are veterans. All these folks, now, coming to the table off of that articulation that Black lives matter and that we need to center an anti-Black analysis in our movement space.⁴

From human connection to vision to a capacity to respond - human nature, like all the rest of nature, thrives on connection, and it also needs its seasons: seasons of development and busyness, times of fruiting and flowering... but also fallow periods, times to rest in the darkness and restore energy, for future blooming.

In a time like this, our minds need a specific kind of work. It's far too easy now to separate ourselves more and more; to find ourselves exposed to only the political and social perspectives that cater to our well-developed prejudices. It's confirmation bias on steroids - aided and abetted by media platforms that filter expressly to heighten that bias. So now, more than ever, we need to approach those topics for which we hold the greatest concern, and slow down. We need a thoughtful process of checking our sources, and then, actively seeking different perspectives on it, and giving them serious consideration. We need to try to have curious conversations with people who think differently about those topics. I don't mean we give credence or even airtime to people espousing hate. I mean that we seek to understand the values and thought processes which give rise to those different perspectives. We need to consciously create space for holy curiosity. And - we need to rest our minds, as well. We need to take a break from news and media. We need to read novels, or poetry; we need to have conversations and to journal our deeper thoughts. We need to embrace rest for our minds as a necessary survival skill for a better world.

Our hands need work. Many of us gathered here earn our livings in ways that involve computers or conversations; only some of us labor with our hands more directly. But each of us needs a way to turn our hands to the work of love. That may be in crafting something beautiful, or caring for a child. It might be in helping someone who is aging or who needs help with daily tasks. It might be in digging in the dirt, knitting, or cooking from scratch. Our hands long for tasks that express love in some real way. And - like our minds - they also need rest. We need to learn to lean in to the care that others may take for us. One of the great graces of my life is when my husband turns his large, warm hands to soothing my neck with a massage, or kneading deeply my shoulders when I've been at the computer too long. Our hands need the work of love and rest, too.

A vision of a better world, work and rest for the mind, and the hands. We come at last to the work of the heart. In many ways, this is the hardest work of all. When we are tired and too busy, when we have neglected resting our minds and hands, and the world seems too broken to even begin to face, the work of the heart is hard to engage. It's hard to do its most essential work, which is to practice forgiveness. Forgiving those we love for harms great or small. Forgiving ourselves for everything we hold against ourselves, those long and brutal internal tally sheets

⁴ *ibid.*

that secretly declare our unworthiness. The heart needs space to do this most essential work, which then helps us create enough peace that we can begin to expand our definition of “family,” that we can then open up to the possibility of a truly Beloved Community that “says “us,” and each day means one person more.”

How do we get through days like these? We do it by taking our spiritual lives seriously. We do it by understanding the vision of the world that calls to us most deeply, and then by living into it through work and rest for our minds, and hands, and heart. Most of all, we need to remember how great our need is for one another. To that end, I want to close on this Mothering Sunday, a holiday begun as a call to pacifism and peace for every mother’s child, with this poem by Marge Piercy:

*Alone you can fight, you can refuse.
You can take whatever revenge you can
But they roll right over you.
But two people fighting back to back
can cut through a mob
a snake-dancing fire
can break a cordon,
termites can bring down a mansion
Two people can keep each other sane
can give support, conviction,
love, massage, hope, sex.
Three people are a delegation
a cell, a wedge.
With four you can play games
and start a collective.
With six you can rent a whole house
have pie for dinner with no seconds
and make your own music.
Thirteen makes a circle,
a hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity
and your own newsletter;
ten thousand community
and your own papers;
a hundred thousand,
a network of communities;
a million our own world.
It goes one at a time.
It starts when you care to act.
It starts when you do it again
after they say no.
It starts when you say we
and know who you mean;
and each day you mean
one more.*
- Marge Piercy

May we find a common vision, and both work and rest that sustains.

Amen, ashe, blessed be.