

HABITS OF THE HEART
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Do you remember the comedian Stephen Wright? He had this deadpan, surreal sense of humor which he delivered in a series of one-liners. He was a keen observer that edged on the ridiculous. For instance, in his comedy routine he would ask the audience:

- How much deeper would the ocean be if sponges didn't live there?
- Do fish get cramps after eating?
- I used to work in a fire hydrant factory. You couldn't park anywhere near the place.

One of Wright's lines stands out in my head, especially these days. He said, "While I was gone from my apartment, somebody stole all my furniture and replaced it with exact duplicates." Funny, and a bit ridiculous sounding if you think about it, but that is kind of how I feel these days. I feel as if someone came in and took the country I know and replaced it with an exact replica. But something isn't quite right. It looks the same but everything is different. The ideas and values and freedoms and beliefs I thought this country stood for have been replaced by something else- something that at first glance looks the same but on closer inspection it is not.

Since the most recent presidential election, many of us are taking a long, hard look at our lives. These times have us looking at who we are as Americans. They have us considering how we live our lives, do our jobs, and entertain ourselves. They have us looking at our values and ideas, our relationships and communities. This looking in at ourselves, this evaluation of our lives, is part of living with incredible insecurity. And the incredible insecurity comes from feeling as if we walked out of the room and everything we knew and cared about was replaced with exact duplicates. It looks the same, but deep inside we know it is very, very different.

We live in uncertain times, although, in truth, each generation can acknowledge a level of uncertainty or crisis in their own lifetimes. Indeed, each decade in our American history has brought uncertainty in one way or another. And beyond this country times of crisis, ambiguity, and uncertainly reach back even further into history. The writer of Revelations in the Christian Bible, Rumi, and others, too, wrote of uncertain times or the end times or the dark night of the soul.

But, today seems different and that may be from a certain self-indulgent cynicism that permeates around us or it could be that the foundations of our democracy seem to be shifting, even diving off the proverbial cliff towards fascism. It definitely has something to do with the fact that today we are witness, like no other generation has been, to a global environmental crisis that is and will continue to devastate life on this planet. Whatever the reason, it indeed seems like the country, the world, we were sure of has been replaced with a replica that no longer is what we recognize.

In response to the tragic events of 9/11 almost 17 years ago, Professor Sharon Thornton of Andover Newton, suggested that we Americans found ourselves "separated from everything we have known and taken for granted." She called this separation a kind of

exile similar to that which the Hebrew people experienced after the destruction of the temple. In 587 BCE, the Babylonian king invaded the country, destroyed the temple and removed the Hebrew people from their homeland to Babylonia where they lived for generations. The Hebrew people had to learn a new way of life in the uncertainty of their exile. She suggested that the social dislocation that many of us felt after 9/11 was similar in depth, intensity, massiveness and urgency as that of the exiled Hebrew people.

Before continuing, let's just acknowledge that there are those in our country who have always felt exiled by this country because of the color of their skin or their immigration status. Or because their ancestors were from here and the land was torn away from them. Or by their poverty or their mental illness or disability. Or on and on. At the same time, we know that just as the events of 9/11 separated us from everything we have known and taken for granted and thus placed us in a certain kind of exile, the most recent presidential election has many of us exiled, uncertain, and anxious. The social dislocation many of us find ourselves in is indeed a profound exile that has our souls lamenting as if on the shores of Babylon.

If we are in a kind of exile, then we must dry our tears and begin the work of looking at the world in a new way. Our previous way of living and being no longer suffices. Exile invites us to examine new options, new ideas, new perspectives. It asks of us to develop new habits of the heart, a phrase coined by Alexis de Tocqueville. Like the Hebrew exiles, we must learn to develop an alternative community that at the same time draws us back to our deeply ingrained understanding of who we are in this world.

In any time of uncertainty or crisis, in times when we are stopped by the fork in the road, there are various and sundry responses and suggestions on how to survive, even thrive. For example., Parker Palmer, an educator, author and activist wrote about five habits of the heart in his article about what makes democracy possible today. In order to sustain democracy, he writes, we must develop an understanding that we are all in this together, an appreciation of the value of "otherness," an ability to hold tension in life-giving ways, a sense of personal voice and agency, and a capacity to create community.

In the book *Savage Grace: Living Resiliently in The Dark Night of The Globe* authors Andrew Harvey and Carolyn Baker write of reconnection, resistance, resilience, and regeneration as the four habits to cultivate in our hearts, minds and souls to carry us through this era. And Clifton Taulbert, in his book, wrote of eight habits of the heart that I believe point us, ultimately, to only one habit of the heart: community.

Robert Fulghum, the Unitarian Universalist minister and writer wrote that we come together as a community to "...associate with other people like us to affirm ourselves. We come for people reasons...Loneliness is one great burden of being a solitary human being. To spend time in the company of others who have our concerns, values, interests, or beliefs...is to get confirmation of who we are—to feel connected to a larger image of ourselves."

At its most basic, community is a geographical place where people gather. But on a deeper and quite bigger level, community is a feeling, a "touch" of others in our lives. Starhawk, the activist, author and pagan priestess, elaborates on this when she writes that community is the place where a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.

Community means strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.

Community does not simply happen. It takes an intentional desire to actually be a community. Not unlike a personal relationship, community requires attention, participation, flexibility and commitment. Community, like a personal relationship, takes a certain devotion to the creating of something bigger and better out of what at first might have been a thin connection, an attraction that simply seemed right.

Community must be expanded to embrace everyone. Not just those we are comfortable with, not just those who look, act, or think like us. When the Hindu sage Ramana Maharishi was asked "How are we to treat others?" he responded "there are no others." So, community helps us know and practice that all are welcome here.

Community also helps with give and take. It helps us hold the tension of different ideas and practices. It gives us space to work through these things and come out on the other side a bit stronger. Community develops dependability and responsibility. Friendship and fellowship. High expectations and courage. Forgiveness and resiliency. Bishop Tutu says, "There is no future without forgiveness." Without forgiveness our future is dominated by our past and a healthy, vital community cannot survive living in the past.

Finally, as exiles, we need to know deep in our souls that exile does not equal powerlessness. As a community we can engage the world and be a place where peace and justice meet. We can engage the world in a community of support and a community of hope. We can be the place where the broken can find healing and where all are empowered to do the healing.

We live in exile because we are "separated from everything we have once known and taken for granted." It is in community that we will be able to navigate through these uncertain times and perhaps even create something new. Transforming the world is a tall order but transformation can occur when we begin small. One person at a time. One heart at a time.

Amen and blessed be.