

WHEN LESS IS MORE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
September 24, 2017

For the first time on record, three category 4 hurricanes have hit US soil in a single hurricane season. In parts of the Caribbean, paradise has turned into purgatory. Three major earthquakes have struck Mexico within two weeks. Late last month, the worst monsoon flooding in years left more than 1,200 people dead in South Asia, one million homeless, and a third of Bangladesh underwater. Wildfires continue to decimate the Pacific Northwest.

What's going on? Is God angry with us? Given the sorry state of much of the political world, I certainly hope so, though I'm equally certain that natural disasters aren't a sign of it.

Of what then are these natural disasters a sign? Earthquakes aside, climate change has been one widely discussed explanation for the uptick in extreme weather. While scientists cannot link individual disasters to climate change, they can demonstrate that global warming makes such events more likely to happen and more destructive when they do. Scientific American reports that the strongest tropical storms have been getting stronger. With each degree Celsius of global warming, wind speeds have increased by about 18 miles per hour. Stronger winds mean not only more wind damage, but bigger storm surges.

The forest fires in the Pacific Northwest reveal the effects of climate change in a different way. Jocelyn Bentley-Prestwich, manager of the Cathedral Ridge Winery in Hood River, Oregon, tells CNN, "When you have this much smoke in the air, you have complete climate change: It's cooler, the atmosphere is different." She adds, "If it's hazardous for us to breathe, you can only imagine what's happening when it falls on the leaves and the grapes."

If the war of words between President Trump and North Korean President Kim turns nuclear, the phenomenon Bentley-Prestwich describes will replicate itself around the globe. It will be hazardous for everyone to breathe, and the cooler atmosphere will stunt agricultural production — a nuclear winter. At 1:00 p.m. today in Reidy Friendship Hall, Alan Robock, a professor of climate sciences at Rutgers University, will discuss nuclear winter and the inevitable nuclear famine that would follow.

The effects of climate change are also becoming apparent elsewhere on the planet. About a week ago, Politico published an article by Helena Bottemiller Evich titled "The Great Nutrient Collapse." It's about a mathematician named Irakli Loladze and a discovery that was made 20 years ago about zooplankton, which are microscopic animals that float in the world's oceans and lakes. For food, zooplankton rely on algae,

which are essentially tiny plants. In the laboratory, scientists found they could make the algae grow faster by shining more light on them. More algae meant more food for the zooplankton, which should have enabled them to grow and reproduce faster.

But the opposite happened. According to the article, scientists eventually discovered that “the increased light was making the algae grow faster, but they ended up containing fewer of the nutrients the zooplankton needed to thrive. By speeding up their growth, the researchers had essentially turned the algae into junk food. The zooplankton had plenty to eat, but their food was less nutritious, and so they were starving.”

Irakli Loladze used these biological findings to develop a mathematical model of the relationship between a food source and animals that depends on it. Since plants rely on both light and carbon dioxide to grow, he began wondering whether increased carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere might have the same effect as increased light in the laboratory — perhaps increasing yields, but also decreasing nutrition. What would happen, he asked, if the plants grown for food around the globe became more abundant but less nutritious? Would the animals that humans grow for food, and eventually perhaps humans themselves, slowly starve as well?

Until quite recently, very little research has been done on this question, because mathematicians and biologists apparently don’t talk to each other very much. But preliminary evidence suggests that the junk-food effect Loladze described 20 years ago is indeed beginning to occur in fields and forests around the world. When it comes to the relationship between plant growth and nutrition, it turns out that more isn’t always more. Sometimes, more is less.

I must confess that I find this all quite depressing, especially when you realize that it took many hundreds of years and many billions of people to get us to this point in human history and climate history. The odds of any one of us, or even any few of us, making a large-scale difference in these matters during our few years on this planet seem woefully small. But resigning ourselves either to a fiery fate or to starving to death doesn’t seem sensible either.

Besides, each of us can do something — and most of us are already doing at least some of what we can. For the most part, the conundrum we face as individuals isn’t what to do in practical terms; it’s how to cope in spiritual terms. How do we remain optimistic in light of everything we know?

I have a thought about this, and it has to do with Loladze’s discovery. It occurs to me that the junk-food effect also applies to the spiritual relationship between each of us and the world around us. We take in vastly more information than humans ever have — more tweets, more posts, more blogs, more news flashes, more live-streamed events, more binge-watched shows. But we still end up feeling empty inside. We’re digitally overstuffed, but spiritually undernourished. When it comes to life in the digital world, more often doesn’t turn out to be more. Sometimes, more is less here too.

Unless we have a reliable source of spiritual nutrition, we won’t be able to build up the strength we need to withstand the storms of life — whether natural, or medical,

or relational, or vocational. Perhaps what we need is not more of everything that ends up giving us less, but rather less of something that ends up giving us more.

If we look at the practice of spirituality over the course of human history, we see a clear pattern of winnowing down the wide-ranging knowledge about human life into a few essential insights that count as spiritual wisdom. The Great Vision of Black Elk, the Vedas and Upanishads of Hinduism, the Akaranga and Jain Sutras of Jainism, the Theravada and Mahayana Sutras of Buddhism, the Analects of Confucianism, the Tao-te Ching of Taoism, the Torah of Judaism, the New Testament of Christianity, the Quran of Islam, and so on. Over the centuries, the faithful in each of these traditions have learned where to look when tough times come. By narrowing their attention, by focusing on less, they find that they end up with more — more strength, more resilience, more patience, more purpose.

Given the challenges we face in our world today, I believe that each of us needs to find our own focused source of wisdom and strength — the less that gives us more. Whether written on a page, or painted on a canvas, or sounded by an instrument, or found in the beauty of the natural world, each of us needs a touchstone — a scripture, if you will — to anchor our struggle to realize our full potential as human beings in a brutal yet beautiful world.

Each of the legacy religious traditions of humanity has its own scripture, whether canonical or not. Likewise, one could say that the scripture of modern science is data — the touchstone of discovery and decision. In the same way, we need a touchstone we can hold fast to when the storms come.

For me, poetry is that touchstone. I view it as the scripture of contemporary spirituality, which is why it's an essential part of my own spiritual journey. The work of poetry is not to detail the facts of life in the world, whether tragic or sublime, but rather to distill its meaning. It's the less that can give us more.

To be sure, not all poetry is created equal, which is why you have to choose carefully those poets and poems that will stand up to repeated reading. One sturdy poem committed to memory is better than a thousand at home on the shelf.

One of my favorite lines of poetry to which I often return appears as the final line of a poem titled "Loss and Gain" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who writes, "The lowest ebb is the turn of the tide." Another is one of the two repeating lines in a villanelle by Theodore Roethke, who writes, "We learn by going where we have to go."

A final example comes from Emily Dickinson, who is perhaps my very favorite poet. The entire poem is made up of only 15 words set in three lines. She writes:

*In the name of the Bee –
And of the Butterfly –
And of the Breeze – Amen!*

I could talk at some length about this poem and why love it, but for now, I will make two brief points that are particularly relevant to my sermon this morning.

First, this poem is deeply subversive of traditional religion — even blasphemous. Some of you recognize the poem as following the Trinitarian formula used by Jesus in the Gospels when he baptized his disciples and sent them out into the world, saying, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.” Dickinson, with unbelievable courage for a woman in the mid-19th century, sets aside the Trinitarian God and puts the natural world in its place. Henceforth, she says, wisdom and even salvation will come not from God above you, but from the natural world around you. The gift of life comes to us not in the name of the Trinitarian God above, but in the name of the bee, and the butterfly, and the breeze, and the world we share with them. We are both in this world and of this world.

My second point takes Dickinson’s use of baptismal language one-step further. She chooses the bee, the butterfly, and the breeze because they parallel the divine roles contained in the Christian formula: the ruling father, the redeeming son, and the ever-present spirit. Dickinson baptizes her readers and sends us out into the world with a similar mandate, but from a different source. Like the bee, we are to convey the sting of nature’s authority. Like the butterfly, we are to convey nature’s capacity for transformation. Like the breeze, we are to convey nature’s restless presence.

My own view is that if everyone were baptized in the name of the bee, and of the butterfly, and of the breeze, the world would be a vastly different place. We’d have at least a fighting chance to head off the most destructive consequences of climate change. When I repeat these words to myself, which I often do, it’s a reminder of the work I have been called to do, no matter how daunting the circumstances. Speak with authority about what you know to be true. Enable transformation wherever you can. Be fully present always.

Each of us will choose our own words to fall back upon when times are tough, and we need to recalibrate our moral compass and renew our sense of purpose. We may also choose a painting, or song, or a story. But we need something that, for us at least, distills the essence of life’s purpose as we understand it. It needs to be memorable, and durable, and repeatable. It needs to be the less that gives us more.

In the name of the bee, and the butterfly, and the breeze — Amen!