

ALWAYS TOMORROW

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Over the past few years, my wife Holly and I have found ourselves in that stage of life when we must grapple with the loss of our parents. Holly's father died two years ago at the age of 95. Holly's mother, who turned 91 this past Thursday, is currently under hospice care and isn't expected to live more than another week or two. My parents, who are in their mid-80s, are gradually slowing down. Later this month, they will travel from their home near Seattle to visit Holly and me.

To anyone who observes this phase of life up close, it becomes painfully clear why the end of life is often referred to as a second childhood. It's not because frail older people revert to the innocence and naïveté of their younger years, but rather because they often are not fully able to care for themselves. They need help in order to accomplish the basic tasks of daily life.

Many people find the debilitations of age hard to accept. After all, at the height of our powers in the prime of our lives, we as human beings are remarkable creatures. We have evolved over the course of human history to embody amazing intelligence and often-astounding physical capabilities. On the strength of these proficiencies, we become accustomed to thinking of ourselves as independent and self-reliant. But then a day comes when a different truth emerges.

University of Chicago philosopher and legal scholar Martha Nussbaum once wrote an article in *The New York Review of Books* about what she calls extreme dependency: situations in which children or adults have mental, physical, or social disabilities that require extensive and even hourly care from others. She points out that elderly people are often more difficult to care for than disabled children and young adults, in part because they tend to be more angry, defensive, and embittered, and physically less pleasant to be with. But, she says, the way we think about the needs of children and adults with disabilities should not be treated as a special department of life, cordoned off from the needs of average people.

Quite the contrary: when life as a whole is taken into account, dependency looks more like the rule than the exception. Nussbaum says, "As the life span increases, the relative independence many of us enjoy looks more and more like a temporary condition, a phase of life that we move into gradually, and which we all too quickly begin to leave. Even in our prime, many of us encounter shorter or longer periods of extreme dependency on others — after surgery or a severe injury, or during a period of depression or acute mental stress."

In my experience as a minister, Nussbaum's observation rings true. The periods of relative independence many of us enjoy turn out to be a temporary condition, and

even those are more illusion than reality. Truth be told, none of us can go it alone at any time in life. Even at our most capable, we require the help of others. When trouble comes our way, the reality of our need for help sinks in. For many of us, that's why we come to a community of faith like All Souls — to find comfort in times of trouble, encouragement in times of fear, and support in times of weakness.

Over the past couple of weeks, a song by Bill Withers has continually echoed in my mind. Born amid the Jim Crow racism of Slab Fork, West Virginia in 1938, Withers also struggled with stuttering throughout his childhood. Oppressed because of his race and ostracized because of his speech impediment, Withers joined the Navy upon graduating from high school in order to escape. He ended up training as an aircraft mechanic in the Navy, but he also knew that he had to conquer his stuttering, which he mostly did. After leaving the Navy, Withers found work in an aircraft parts factory in California.

According to an article by Andy Greene in *Rolling Stone* magazine, one night after work Withers visited a club in Oakland where Lou Rawls was playing. Inspired by what he heard, Withers bought a cheap guitar and taught himself to play. Between shifts at the factory, he began writing songs. He also saved up money to produce a crude demo recording, which he shopped around to major labels, but none of them were interested.

Withers eventually sent his recording to Clarence Avant, a black music executive who had recently established an independent label. Avant recalls thinking that Withers' songs were unbelievable. Avant signed Withers to a contract and hired Booker T. Jones to produce the album and Graham Nash to help with the recording.

The cover photo of the album, which contains the song, *Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone*, was taken during Withers' lunch break at the factory. In the photo, he's holding his lunch pail. His co-workers thought the album was a joke — until a letter arrived from Johnny Carson inviting Withers to perform on the Tonight Show. The appearance propelled *Ain't No Sunshine* into the Top 10.

Withers used some of the money from his album sales to buy a piano, and he began playing around on it. He came up with a simple chord progression. He says, "I didn't change fingers. I just went one, two, three, four, up and down the piano. It was the first thing I learned to play. Even a tiny child can play that."

This simple tune, titled, *Lean on Me*, became the centerpiece of Withers' second album, *Still Bill*, which was released in 1972. Its lyrics read, in part:

Sometimes in our lives we all have pain
We all have sorrow
But if we are wise
We know that there's always tomorrow

Lean on me, when you're not strong
And I'll be your friend

I'll help you carry on
For it won't be long
'Til I'm gonna need
Somebody to lean on

Once released, the song shot to Number One and was virtually inescapable for more than a year. Withers' popularity as a songwriter and performer ebbed and flowed until 1985, when he retired from the music business. He was inducted into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in 2015.

Especially in his song, *Lean On Me*, Withers captures the fundamental reciprocity that characterizes all of human life. We all have pain and sorrow from time to time, but we know that as long as life continues, pain and sorrow will not have the final word. There's always tomorrow — another day, a new chance, an unexplored opportunity, an unrealized possibility. If we help others in their hour of need, then we will have friends who can help us when we need somebody to lean on.

This interplay of strength and vulnerability, of resilience and reliance, lies at the heart of our self-understanding as a spiritual community. Collectively, we commit ourselves to availing ourselves of each other's strengths and shoring up each other's weaknesses. Together, we are able to endure hardships that would weigh us down individually and achieve goals that would be impossible for us to reach on our own.

I'm reminded of a scene from the 2010 version of the movie *True Grit*. The original version of the movie starred John Wayne, who won an Oscar in 1970 for his portrayal of bounty hunter Rooster Cogburn. In the remake, which was written and directed by Ethan and Joel Coen, Jeff Bridges plays the role of Rooster.

The moral center of the movie, however, isn't Rooster, but a young girl named Mattie Ross, played in the original by Kim Darby and in the remake by Hailee Steinfeld. Mattie's pigtails belie a brassy disposition and a mean streak. Mattie says, "I was just fourteen years of age when a coward by the name of Tom Chaney shot my father down in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and robbed him of his life and horse and two California gold pieces that he carried in his trouser band."

The movie tells the compelling story of how Mattie eventually avenges her father's death. In so doing, however, she endures a series of unfortunate events that results in her being bitten by a rattlesnake. Rooster Cogburn, the mean and pitiless bounty hunter whom Mattie employed to help find her father's killer and whose loyalty to Mattie and her cause has ebbed and flowed throughout the film, scoops her up, heaves her onto the back of a horse, and then swings up behind her. "I must get you to a doctor, sis, or you are not going to make it."

Rooster rides like the wind throughout the day and into the bitterly cold night. As snow begins to fall on the wind-whipped landscape, their horse founders. Rooster pulls Mattie clear as the horse sinks to the ground, and then he reaches down to pick her up.

“Put your arms around my neck,” he says. “I will carry you.” And he does, mile after tortuous mile.

As the credits begin to roll at the end of the Coen brothers’ version of the movie, we hear an old hymn being sung. The tune has provided a musical through-line since the opening scene. The hymn is titled, *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*. I know it well: we sang it often in church and at family gatherings when I was growing up as a Mennonite in Delaware. The words of the hymn proclaim:

Oh, how sweet to walk in this pilgrim way,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.
Oh, how bright the path goes from day to day,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.
What have I to dread, what have I to fear,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

What are the everlasting arms? In the version I used to sing, a descant was added to the original words: leaning on Jesus, leaning on Jesus, leaning on the everlasting arms. On these terms, we have no reason to fear the bitterness of life, or the darkness of life, or the dreadful and fearful experiences of life. God will support us, take care of us, and exact vengeance on those who oppose us.

The original version of the movie didn’t refer to this hymn, but it did use Christian language and symbolism to invoke an underlying belief in a supernatural God. In John Wayne’s world, people serve either as agents or as pawns of a just and vengeful God. The relationships that matter are vertical, not horizontal.

The Coen brothers’ version of the movie, on the other hand, strips away most of the Christian language and symbolism, but invokes the hymn to make a different point, which in my view is far more religiously profound. Mattie’s moral purpose gives Rooster a chance to redeem himself, and his response in her hour of greatest need saves her life. Together, they illustrate the enduring need for reciprocity in all of life. It turns out that the everlasting arms that hold us up are not divine arms, but human ones.

The same is true of us here at All Souls. We are united within this religious community by a shared sense of moral purpose and a mutual sense of destiny. When you encounter pain and sorrow in your life, when you find yourself troubled, or fearful, or feeling weak in body or in spirit, it’s time to lean on the everlasting arms. At its best, a community of faith like All Souls comforts us in times of trouble, encourages us in times of fear, and supports us in times of weakness. Put your arms around my neck, we say to each other, and I will carry you.

Lean on me when you’re not strong, for it won’t be long until I need somebody to lean on. When we have each other to lean on, there’s always tomorrow.