

ALL OF US
Sermon by Audette Fulbright
Sunday, August 25, 2019
All Souls Church, New York City

The question that I feel compelled to ask everyone I meet right now is, “how is it with you, friend?” It seems reasonable to anticipate anxiety, to expect that we are overwhelmed, exhausted, or in hiding from reality. It is a difficult time to be informed, aware, and engaged.

Therefore, it reminds me of a story I encountered a while back, from a colleague, Scott Alexander. He says:

“I have a friend who traces her family roots back to the seventeenth-century French Huguenots, a Protestant Reformation sect whose members, like those of so many other religious minorities of that time, were mercilessly persecuted by the established church. They were finally forced—those who had not already been killed—to flee France altogether. The story about their escape, which has been orally passed down in my friend's family through all the generations since, is that her ancestors were jammed into a tiny boat and forced to row across the choppy and treacherous Channel to safety in England.

“As they began to row for their lives, it became painfully clear that there were *just too many people* in the small craft. Unless something was done, the boat would quickly swamp and all would perish beneath the cold waves. What did the group do? Draw lots and throw the losers overboard? Set upon the defense-less sick, young, and elderly and toss them to a watery death? Decide who were the least productive members of the community and force them out of the boat? I suppose they could have decided on any of these "rational" courses of action. But these beleaguered Huguenots did something *else*, something far nobler. Without any wailing or whining, the people in the boat decided they would take turns—several at a time—swimming alongside the craft. For the many hours of the crossing, as swimmers tired, others would quietly, willingly take their place in the numbing waters. And thus it was that the small boat and everyone who had sought refuge in it survived the treacherous crossing.” (from Worship Web)

How shall we survive, my beloveds? I have another story. A good friend of mine, who is also a minister, in his days before seminary, worked helping to care for developmentally disabled adults. He was really perfect for the job; caring, patient, invested in the wellbeing of others - great teaching skills. For a good while, the job went well; he cared about the people he worked with, he was a compassionate and effective caregiver.

And then one day he realized he was becoming deeply impatient with the limitations of the people he was caring for. He was speaking harshly and wasn't being considerate when he had to help them move - his touch was rough and uncaring. He walked down the long hall to the supervisor's office and quit, effective immediately.

It sent him into a long, dark night of the soul; he felt that he must not be who he thought he was: someone caring, compassionate, certainly not someone who could be impatient or dismissive of those who could not help their limitations.

He suffered from something that can happen to any of us: compassion fatigue. It happens when we are overwhelmed by our circumstances, are not taking care of ourselves properly, or when we don't have the resources we need to do what is asked of us to do. I think my friend stumbled on

the self-care front, but he was also working in a system that did not do a very good job caring for him as a worker, nor did it pay or train or manage the patient load well.

Jesus noted this problem as he preached. In Matthew, it says, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Like people in a small boat on a dangerous ocean, we need the laborers who will take their turns swimming alongside us. But we also need our turn in the boat. As the Buddha taught: balance. Jesus went off from the crowds to pray and renew himself with his God; the Buddha taught for six months each year, and retreated six months each year.

How do we develop genuine balance - and I mean, balance that includes our work life or how we spend the basic hours of our day, self-care that includes how we eat, sleep, and get exercise and time in spiritual practice and in nature, and how we serve the world through acts of service - also known as volunteering, or showing up?

The challenge is, of course, that there’s a great temptation - and a lot of cultural pressure - to run to excess. I myself tend to pinball wildly between overworking and being consistently overscheduled, to then pull away and doing things that are not particularly meaningful or genuinely renewing - eating bad food, binge-watching television or movies. It’s why I tend to love January, from a spiritual perspective: because I do pay careful attention in January, and make the most of the clean slate and give my best to seeking and working toward better balance.

One corollary extreme is one I saw in seminary, which surprised me. In pursuit of “self-care,” which was drummed into us and for good reason, I witnessed a great deal of saying no and refusing to participate that was mostly a pendulum. So many of us, having come from lives where we had not taken care of ourselves, and, being naturally inclined to serve, had said too many yeses... now there was a reactive process of no’s. Refusing to get into the water and take turns also creates risks for us all. And although it’s worth a sermon all on its own, we have to consider the ways that the endless distractions and entertainments of modern life fritter away time that might be spent in pursuits that enrich ourselves and the world.

A compassionate life is a life where we value ourselves as an important part of a larger whole: we pay attention to how we are doing, and make sure to take in nourishment - food, sleep, spiritual or artistic or natural experiences - *and* we engage in acts of service. We seek to share our gifts and talents in a way that keeps our small life’s boat afloat.

My beloved colleague, the Rev. Theresa Ines Soto, says (pg. 27, “We Hold Hope Close”) “When I think about my ministry here with you, I feel pulled - I want to encourage engagement, I want to shout that faith without works is dead, I want to know that all of you - not just the compassionate 20 or so of you that I see often on the front lines of justice work - I want to know *all* of you will show up to stand with those who are hurting, who are fearful, who most need our love and solidarity. I really want you out there, living our faith.”

And then I feel pulled deeply into that other truth, that each of you is hurting in your own way - that each of you has full lives that encompass private responsibilities and challenges. I want you to be able to come to All Souls and have your cup filled; I want you to find succor and to be renewed, so that you can survive your days.

This is why the lifeboat metaphor matters. All Souls - or Unitarian Universalism - is our lifeboat. Sometimes, we need to rest within it - we need to hold on, as the waves of life storm about us. But we must never forget that our lives are held up and moved forward by the efforts of those who love us, paddling in the water beside us. We must, whenever we can, jump in and take our place in the water, paddling with our own life's energy to move the raft of our common life forward, toward a safer shore.

I am an optimist. I believe that, although we have never yet lived up to the founding romantic ideals of this nation, we one day could yet do so. We could believe that, We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all are created equal, that [we] are endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among [people], deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

I believe that we are a nation of immigrants - for good and ill. We are founded on the horrors of genocide and slavery, and we are foolish and bold enough to believe that we can be something new upon the earth: a people brave and free, self-governing and democratic. As Unitarian Universalists, we are uniquely committed to this well-nigh hopeless project: our 5th and 6th principles are the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large and the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. But I ask you: what better thing to dedicate oneself to, than the pursuit of the highest and most aspirational goals of all? And what better time to devote ourselves wholeheartedly than right now, when so much is at stake?

We are turning the corner into a new church year. It coincides with a time of national and international turmoil and change. Our lives, like the lives of those who have come before us, are sacred. What we choose to do matters. What we neglect or leave undone will shape history. We need, therefore, to be a people of wisdom, hope, courage and persistence. We need to create a lifeboat community for one another, and for all that we love. It is essential that we find a rhythm of resting in the grace of our beloveds, and then taking our turn guiding one another through the storms. As Theresa I. Soto, our poet and theologian for this morning says, "all of us need all of us to survive." It is her wisdom that I want to share, as a closing to this sermon today.