

In Case of Emergency

Readings: 'Killing Mark' by Richard Blanco
 'Find a Better Job' by Hafez
 'Saturday Afternoon, When Chores are Done' by Harryette Mullin

Disaster strikes. We know that is part of life. We have been harmed by others. We have gotten terrible news that leaves us gutted and heartbroken. There are disasters natural and unnatural that strike our lives and our building. What do we do?

Well, these experiences – and fear of more of them – lead many of us to worry. We are like the poet Richard Blanco, in the autobiographical poem I read earlier, about his experiences when his partner Mark comes home later than expected. We imagine what we think are the worst case scenarios, creating images of accidents and funerals. The thing is, that worrying doesn't change outcomes. Spinning out the worst case scenario doesn't impact whether or not it will actually happen. This is something I remind myself again and again, in many ways and that people have been reminding one another for probably as long as we have been able to communicate with one another.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus instructed his followers, 'Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?' and 'do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.' (Matthew 6:27, 34, NRSV).

Six hundred years ago, Muslim mystic poet Hafez posed the question Chris read earlier:

'Now

That

All your worry

Has proved such an

Unlucrative

Business,

Why

Not

Find a better

Job.'

When I struggle with worry, my husband reminds me that worrying is paying interest on debt you don't owe.

So we try to set aside our worry – as best we can. We do the other work, the work that actually makes a difference. The work that help us be prepared. For me, the image of all this is the hair braiding described in Harryette Mullins poem – 'We gather the strands together with strong fingers, to keep what we do from coming apart at the ends.'

We prepare by plaiting the metaphorical braid well so it won't unravel with the first gust of wind, the first jumping jack, the first hardship. Those of us who have braided hair, know there is an art to it, to getting the hair tight enough that it stays, but not too tight to be painful. Keeping the groups of hair evenly balanced so it doesn't look wonky when we get to the end. We braid or plait or weave things together in our lives to keep them from all falling apart when things go bad, so our lives hold together in

the hard times.

Some of this plaiting things together is practical – like the fire drill we will be participating in in a few minutes. It is important to have drills for the most likely emergencies – how do we get out of this space and keep ourselves safe. We need to practice, so we know in our bodies and in our memories what to do in case of emergency, when we might be overcome by adrenaline and emotion. There are many practical tips for emergency preparedness. Practices. Resources. Plans. Those are all valuable. For the rest of this sermon, I will focus on the spiritual work we can do to be ready for a disaster or emergency.

There are things we can do now to make it easier to bear when disaster, a bad diagnosis, the death of someone we love, or other suffering happens. I will list them in descending order of importance and see how far I get before our fire drill.

The first is we should come to an understanding of why bad things happen. Theodicy is the word that philosophers of religion use for this. This is how we answer the question 'why me?' or its siblings, 'why anyone?' or 'why is there suffering and evil in the world?' In this community, we are not bound together by shared belief. We hold many different answers to these important questions – and many other fundamental religious questions. Our answers to 'why me?' include 'random chance,' 'the will of a higher power,' 'cause and effect' 'the human capacity for evil,' and 'why not?,' alone and in combination, among others. All of these answers are good attempts to answer what might be a fundamentally unanswerable question. However you answer, I encourage you to come to some time with these questions before an emergency compels you to cry those words out. Think of it as a spiritual fire drill, building memories and experience to carry us through when we need it.

This is not to say that that carefully thought through answer will hold true through your emergency. It might not. Our Unitarian heritage is rooted in the teaching that revelation is not sealed, that our understanding of what is true is always evolving as we have new experiences and as we learn more about the world around us. Our martyrs died for the right to change our minds religiously. Your answer never has to be your final answer. Struggle, pain and loss often shift our understanding of the world in powerful ways, as any profound experience can.

But please don't wait until the emergency to start asking these important questions. In my experience, both personal and professional, people who haven't seriously wrestled with 'why me?' have an additional struggle in the midst of a spiritual emergency. They are the ones who don't know where the fire exit is. On top of coping with whatever hardship they are coping with, they are also shaking off an inaccurate or sometimes harmful theology that they might have absorbed, but never really thought through, like 'you aren't given more than you can handle' or 'if I'm good enough nothing bad will happen to me.' The crumbling away of that often unconscious understanding adds extra pain in a painful time. Please do your future self a favor. Ponder this now if you haven't already. If you need a partner in this pondering, I am available.

The second spiritual emergency preparation we should make is to have people we can turn to for support. There's a beautiful reading in our hymnal that captures this. It is by George Odell and is called, simply, 'We Need One Other:'

We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.

We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid.

We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again.

We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone.
We need one another in the hour of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs.
We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure, and stand again.
We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey.
All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.¹

This is, in part, what church is for, though I hope you also have relationships of support outside this religious community. And building community is something that we need to do in the good times, when we have the time and the energy and the ability to show up for others, so when disaster strikes, we have our supports in place, our relationships of love and support. The people who will show up with food and comfort, love and listening. In the emergencies that arise, we need one another to point the way to the exit and help us find our way to safety.

¹ #468 in *Singing the Living Tradition*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993. From *Gates of Repentance*. Central Conference of American Rabbis and Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, 1979.