

## When Despair for the World Grows in Me...

Readings: 'The Peace of Wild Things' by Wendell Berry  
'How to Survive the End of the World' by Molly Housh Gordon  
'There is a Brokenness' by Rashani Réa

Last May, on a Sunday morning much like this one, we had a question box service. You all submitted questions and I answered as many as I could during the sermon time. There were a lot of good questions...

And there was one that spoke to a reality that so many of us are grappling with right now:

'Do you ever feel overwhelmed with a feeling of existential dread? (Sometimes, not all the time 😊.) Gratitude helps.'

I've kept that slip of paper close in these past months. Noticing my own moments of overwhelming existential dread and feeling less alone because someone else feels it too. This feeling of overwhelming dread might be the central challenge for us in this time. This time of climate strikes and political outrages and senseless violence and personal heartaches. How are we called to live now?

I don't have all the answers. I wish I did. But I do have some answers. I will share them with you now.

First, we need to feel our feelings, whether they are dread, despair, or joy. Notice the overwhelming dread, the 'fear of what my life and my children's lives may be.' It is uncomfortable to do this. It's hard. It doesn't feel good. It's easier to escape or numb ourselves to our true feelings. Whether we numb ourselves with wine or social media, television or drugs, sugar or shopping, overscheduling and overcommitting so we are too busy to feel or something else, it is an easy trap – one I fall into more often than I would like. Many of you have heard me quote folk-singer Ani DiFranco who sings, 'Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right.' All of the behaviors I just named are both tools and weapons. They are tools when they give pleasure and connection. They are weapons when they create separation and numbness and disconnection from what matters most. Notice what you turn to when the overwhelm creeps in. Is it helping you reconnect to your sources of strength or is it a way to numb your way out of distress?

For me, I know it's often easier to watch a funny video on my phone or check in on the latest argument unfolding on Facebook or have some ice cream than it is to still myself enough to be present to the overwhelm, the dread, the existential fear that's living in these times brings me. This doesn't mean I don't still sometimes do all those numbing things, but I'm working to do that less, because I know that numbing doesn't serve me – or us – in the long term.

And we need to feel what we feel, because we don't get to selectively numb ourselves. Brené Brown is a research social worker and author. She researches shame and vulnerability and leadership and she says, "You cannot selectively numb emotion. When we numb [hard feelings],

we numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness.”<sup>1</sup> And if there is to be a way through these times, we will need all the joy, gratitude, and happiness we can muster.

So, feel your feelings, especially when they are overwhelming dread, despair, and fear. And then, don't hold onto them too tightly.

I recently discovered a powerful little book, *Hope in the Dark* by Rebecca Solnit. It is about having hope in times of uncertainty, recognizing that all times are times of uncertainty. Solnit describes going on book tours and having her audience, mostly people on the political left, get angry with her for encouraging people to have hope. She writes, 'The despairing were deeply attached to their despair, so much so I came to refer to my project as stealing the teddy bear of despair from the loving arms of the left. What did [despair] give that particular sector of the left? It got them off the hook, for one thing. If the world is totally doomed no matter what, little or nothing is demanded of you in response. You can go be bitter and idle on your sofa if you're already comfortable and safe.'<sup>2</sup> Let's feel our despair and dread and overwhelm and fear – and let's not get comfortable with it. It can't become an excuse for inaction.

So how do we keep our despair from becoming a cozy teddy bear that we snuggle with as we don't do anything? Again, I wish I had all the answers to this. I don't, but I know some of the answers. This is what I know.

Find your teachers. Who are the resilient beings in your life? Look to your ancestors, both biological and spiritual. Molly Housh Gordon who wrote this morning's second reading is the minister at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Columbia Missouri. She writes 'Remember your ancestors, and the things they survived. Find the resilience that is your birthright and the courage that made way for your life.'

All of our biological ancestors survived long enough to reproduce. What do you know about how your ancestors survived? What can they teach you about surviving these times?

I've been learning a lot about my great-grandmother Alice, a woman who grew up on the prairie, who was a dressmaker and farmwife, and who held her family together after they lost their farm in the Great Depression. She is one of the stories of resilience that I hold close. She made children's clothes and quilts out of her husband's threadbare suits. In the midst of the depression, she and her family arrived in a new community pursuing a job for her husband that didn't pan out as well as they hoped. It was too late for planting season and they had very little money. Her family survived that winter because their new neighbors, mostly Mormons, shared their harvest with the new Methodist family in town, my ancestors. After that, her generosity was extravagant. In my own times of uncertainty and challenge, I remember her. I know that I can create and adapt and give and receive generously in challenging times. I exist, quite literally, because people

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Brené Brown. 'The Power of Vulnerability.' Ted Talk. Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en)

<sup>2</sup> Solnit, Rebecca. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006. Page 138

welcomed the new, different family in town and made sure they were fed. This is not an exceptional story. We all have stories of survival in us. Who are your ancestors? What do they have to teach you about living through times of uncertainty, dread, despair, and fear?

And our ancestors, of course, are not only our biological family. As Unitarian Universalists, we are the descendants of people who survived challenging times, who held fast to their deepest principles despite painful consequences. Our Unitarian spiritual ancestors believed that revelation is not sealed, which means that truth was not dictated once, but is always making itself known – and we should change our beliefs in response to our growing understandings and the latest teachings of science. Their commitment to the right to change one's mind religiously sometimes led to martyrdom and death but their ideas survived. That is a powerful legacy that we have inherited, a powerful testimony of adaptation, learning, and commitment to truth. Let that guide us, especially in this time of climate crisis. Our understandings need to shift as science discovers new truths. Our Universalist spiritual ancestors were committed to the idea that everyone is worthy of love, that everyone is ultimately reconciled to the Love that surrounds us always. Everyone has inherent worth, no exceptions. Let that guide us, especially in this time of polarization, when so many are eager to discount those who do not agree with us as less than human or unworthy of love and care. Our ancestors show us another way, rooted in the idea that all have inherent worth and dignity. No exceptions. No matter what.

And of course, in this time, as we look for teachers of resilience and survival and facing overwhelming dread and despair and continuing to act, our best teachers could be the people who have been living with despair and dread and fear much longer than we have. Most of us here are white; not all of us are. Most of us here are financially secure; not all of us are. Many of us benefit from other forms of privilege whether that's rooted in our level of education, our sexuality, our gender identity, or being temporarily able-bodied. I have been learning that so many of our friends and neighbors and fellow congregants who don't share my privileged identities know a lot more about bearing despair and overwhelm and finding resilience than I do. They are my teachers in this time. Molly Housh Gordon writes, 'Sit at the feet of your most vulnerable neighbors and your own most vulnerable places. They have the most to teach you about survival. Listen.' I encourage you to listen, knowing that listening in this way is subtle and needs to be rooted in relationship. One can't just walk up to someone with a more vulnerable identity and demand to know how they survive. Listening in this way might also look like witnessing the people who endure hardship and drawing your own conclusions or reading or listening to lectures or otherwise finding people who are teaching about survival and resilience in these times.

And our teachers of resilience don't have to be human beings. Look to the natural world. In the poem that gave this service its title, white Kentucky poet Wendell Berry, writes that in the moments of despair and fear,

'I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.

And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps you are one to lie down on the shore of a lake and remember to be present to the current moment. Perhaps you find a rock that has survived millennia and reflect on what it knows of endurance.

The book *Emergent Strategy* by Adrienne marie brown is another text I recommend for these times. It is a collection of essays and interviews and a few spells that encourages us to look to the natural world as a source for resilience and strategy to make change. One of the natural teachers that is named is the starfish:

Someone interviewed in the book says, 'From Starfish I have learned that if we keep our core intact, we can regenerate. We can fall apart, lose limbs, and re-grow them as long as we don't let anyone threaten that central disc's integrity. We can grow so many different arms, depending on what kind of sea star we are.'<sup>4</sup>

Reflecting on starfish and their ability to shed limbs and grow new ones helps me think about what is my core and what I might be willing to sacrifice in this time of great change. What are we willing to lose, release, let go? What is our central integrity that we must protect and what might we need to shed in order to meet the challenges before us? I expect all our answers to be different, but I invite you to reflect on these questions with me. How might we be like starfish? How might we metaphorically fall apart, lose limbs, and re-grow them as we face the challenges before us? What new ways of being and doing will we get to grow? I don't have the answers, but I think these are the questions.

The final teacher I want to commend to you this morning is the oak tree, specifically the oak trees of the gulf coast. Poet Naima Penniman tells this story, also in *Emergent Strategy*:

'When Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast, almost everything lost its footing. Houses were detached from their foundations, trees and shrubbery were uprooted, sign posts and vehicles floated down the rivers that became of the streets. But amidst the whipping winds and surging water, the oak tree held its ground. How? Instead of digging its roots deep and solitary into the earth, the oak tree grows its roots wide and interlocks with other oak trees in the surrounding area. And you can't bring down a hundred oak trees bound beneath the soil! How do we survive the unnatural disasters of climate change, environmental injustice, over-policing, mass-imprisonment, militarization, economic inequality, corporate globalization, and displacement? We must connect in the underground, my people! In this way, we shall survive!'<sup>5</sup>

Finding our teachers of resilience, our examples of surviving through overwhelm, dread, despair, and fear, is one of the ways we knit our metaphorical roots together to survive the hurricanes

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<sup>3</sup> From 'The Peace of Wild Things,' in Berry, Wendell. *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*. Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> JoLillian T. Zwerdling, quoted in brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy*. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017, page 124.

<sup>5</sup> Naima Penniman, quoted in *Emergent Strategy*, pages 84-85.

that are part of life, especially in this time. For trees, binding roots together might be instinct, the natural consequence of growth. For us, it takes effort and intention. We knit our metaphorical roots together and become stronger by facing our emotions honestly and not numbing them, practicing generosity, telling our stories to ourselves and one another, and finding the beings, human and otherwise that can teach us about survival and resilience. None of this is easy work, but it might just be the way we make it through this time when overwhelm and dread, fear and uncertainty, are our close companions.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.