

Disappointment Pierced Me Through
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
UU Church of Minnetonka
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First Reading: ***From Anatomy of an Illness***
 Norman Cousins

“Is it possible that love, hope, faith, laughter, confidence, and the will to live have therapeutic value? ...I have learned never to underestimate the capacity of the human mind and body to regenerate – even when the prospects seem most wretched. The life-force may be the least understood force on earth. William James said that human beings tend to live too far within self-imposed limits. It is possible that these limits will recede when we respect more fully the natural drive of the human mind and body toward perfectibility and regeneration.” (p. 48)

In the next chapter, Norman Cousins writes: “Twice in one day [watching Pablo Casals play a Bach concerto on the piano in the morning, and then the cello in the afternoon] I had seen the miracle. A man almost ninety, beset with infirmities of old age, was able to cast off his afflictions, at least temporarily, because he knew he had something of overriding importance to do. There was no mystery about the way it worked, for it happened every day. Creativity for Pablo Casals was the source of his own cortisone. It is doubtful whether any anti-inflammatory medication he would have taken would have been as powerful or as safe as the substances produced by the interaction of his mind and body.” (p. 74)

Second Reading: ***From Learning to Fall***
 Philip Simmons

We’re stubborn creatures, and it takes a shock to make us see our lives afresh. In my case the shock was the news, when I was just thirty-five years old, that I had the fatal condition known as ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease, and would probably be dead within a few years. By now – more than seven years later – I’ve outlived those predictions and also the sense that my predicament is so unusual. Life, after all, is a terminal condition. At some point we all confront the fact that each of us, each individual soul is, as the poet William Butler Yeats says, “fastened to a dying animal.” We’re all engaged in the business of dying, whether consciously or not, slowly or not. For me, knowing that my days are numbered has meant the chance to ask with new urgency the sorts of questions most of us avoid: everything from “What is my life’s true purpose?” to “Should I reorganize my closets?” What I’ve learned from asking them is that a fuller consciousness of my own mortality has been my best guide to being more fully alive.

SERMON: *Disappointment Pierced Me Through*
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

On the night of December 16, 2008, this congregation made a presentation to the Wayzata City Council asking them to rezone a piece of residential property in the Holdridge neighborhood for institutional use in order for us to construct a new church building. Presenting our case that night were Bob and Christy Dachelet, current owners of the property, three other congregation members, our architect and our attorney.

That moment was many months, if not years, in the making. Almost since the time we moved into this building in 1965, many attempts have been made to move to bigger, more modern or more spacious quarters. But each time, and for a variety of reasons, the attempt didn't work and we stepped back from the edge of change and stayed where we are.

In the most recent attempt, according to the Congregational Record you created for your ministerial search, the Board established the Relocation Task Force (or "RTF") in 2005. For several years the RTF searched for property all over the western suburbs, including big box stores, former sports centers, quaint little wooded lots and existing church buildings. By the time I arrived here in the fall of 2007, the RTF had researched dozens of properties, compiling a "Top 20" list of 20 different pieces of property, located in Wayzata, Plymouth, Minnetonka, Orono, Chaska, Hopkins, and Excelsior, including a paragraph about each one, describing the price, location, and the amenities and detractors.

Members who had been adamantly against moving began to change their minds, and have a change of heart, and began to agree that a move was necessary.

In addition to the Relocation Task Force, we also hired a capital campaign consultant, an architect, an attorney, and numerous professionals to survey the land and conduct tests. We held an extremely successful capital campaign in the fall of 2007 that acquired pledges over the span of three years amounting to \$1.3 million dollars. Bob and Christy Dachelet – with the democratic blessing of a vote of good faith from the congregation – eventually purchased the land at 2030 Wayzata Boulevard East. We finally got on the schedule of the Wayzata City Council to present our rezoning proposal and request on the night of December 16, 2008.

At least 40 or 50 people from the congregation showed up that night. Our members and architect and attorney made their presentations. While two or three residents of the Holdridge neighborhood expressed their support for our project, many stood up to speak in opposition – some of them even stating that our presence there would be like a "cancer" in the neighborhood. After our years of work, and after a meeting that lasted over three hours, at the end of the night, Wayzata City Council denied our rezoning request.

What do we do when we run head-on into a brick wall of disappointment? What happens when everything we've envisioned for ourselves, our dreams and aspirations, suddenly come screeching to a halt? How do we respond when people in the world don't behave as well as we imagine they could? What do we do with the unexpected diagnosis of a dangerous illness? How do we wake up in the morning after the tragic death of a family member? What happens inside us when we encounter violence, betrayal or loss? As a phrase from the third line of our closing hymn says, what do we do when "disappointment pierced me through"?

Sometimes, for some things, we need time to adjust to new information. It takes time to absorb a sudden turn of events. During my year as a hospital chaplain resident, I was often present when families received news of a terminal illness or the death of a family member. And many times I could see the wheels turning inside each person as they heard the doctor's words, but just could not understand the meaning of "accident" or "cancer" or "dead." Even before *denial*, the first of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief, we often need to go through a period of time – a moment, or a few hours or days – simply in order to comprehend what's happening and how it impacts our life before we can even figure out what to do next.

Even if we are not overwhelmed or debilitated by grief, the disappointment and dashed hopes often propel us through, or touch upon, some variation of those five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The passage through these stages is not usually metrically marked by a steady beat. It is often a mish-mash of chaos and uncertainty, a clawing from one step into the next one day, only to fall into a hole two steps back the next day, skipping back and forth and leap-frogging over different stages depending on our mood, the events of the day, our relationships, and our understanding of ourselves. The way through grief and disappointment is not an easy path or a clear path, and it is often discernable only when we look back after we are far away from where we began.

So if our way is not clear, even as we are walking on the path of disappointment, at least one question that arises is a religious question, a question of spirit, a question of faith. The question is this: as we walk through life on an uncertain, unclear and chaotic path full of both open spaces and roadblocks, what kind of person do we want to be? That is, how do we want to engage the world? How do we want others to see us, and to engage with us? How do we want to move through our lives, and come to the end – whenever that may be – knowing that we did our best and lived to the best of our ability, and most of the time behaved as the people we always wanted to be?

The truth of our lives is that we don't know what's coming at us around the next bend. We may get our way or we may not. We may die tomorrow or we may live to be 100 years old. But one of the reasons we are not just singular spiritual seekers experiencing religious freedom alone on a mountaintop, but are drawn to bind ourselves together as a religious community is so that we may help and challenge each other to be the people we say we want to be.

But as Philip Simmons says, "We're stubborn creatures, and it takes a shock to make us see our lives afresh." Though uncertainty surrounds us every day, we allow ourselves to be lulled to sleep by a false sense of security. A primary task of life, therefore, and certainly a central task of the religious life, is not to create an existence that is more secure or certain, but to be awake, to be present to each moment in which we have the privilege to live.

Philip Simmons writes: "We're all engaged in the business of dying... consciously or not, slowly or not. For me, knowing that my days are numbered has meant the chance to ask with new urgency the sorts of questions most of us avoid: everything from "What is my life's true purpose?" to "Should I reorganize my closets?" What I've learned from asking them is that a fuller consciousness of my own mortality has been my best guide to being more fully alive."

Buddhism teaches us something similar. The Four Noble Truths are that:

- 1) Life is suffering;
- 2) Suffering is caused by attachment or "desire";
- 3) Suffering ends when attachment ends; and
- 4) Attachment ends by following the dharma "middle way" path taught by the Buddha.

Now, some people, especially in Western society, instinctively tend to react to this Buddhist teaching with defensiveness by asking, “So I am not supposed to have dreams and aspirations and goals? Does this mean I can’t have any hope? If I am to follow a Buddhist path, does this mean I’m not supposed to make plans or have passion? In short, live a hopeless, passionless, depressed life?”

We only need to look at the life and actions of the Dalai Lama to know that this exaggerated Western view of Buddhism is not accurate. The fourth Noble Truth – following the “middle way” path of dharma – is a shorthand expression for the Eightfold Path. A component of this Eightfold path is “mindfulness.” When Philip Simmons says, “What I’ve learned from asking [the urgent questions] is that a fuller consciousness of my own mortality has been my best guide to being more fully alive,” he is talking about mindfulness. Mindful of living in a world of uncertainty and chaos, Simmons is addressing the question of what kind of person he wants to be.

To live a life without attachment does not mean that we do not make plans. It does not mean that we do not work to make the world a better place. It does, however, mean that we need to realize we will not always get our way. We will not always get the job we want. We will not always have the relationship we want. We will not always be healthy. We will not always attain the vision we strive for, or achieve it in the way we expect.

We do not have power over anyone else, but we still need to live in the world. The only power we have is the power over our own actions and reactions. So we do the best we can because we know it is right, or because we know it has meaning, or because we know an action creates more love in the world. If we then run into a brick wall blocking our path, it is merely an opportunity that reminds us to be mindful, to question once again, “What kind of person do I want to be?” Or in the case of our congregation, the question we could ask is: “Through our sense of religious freedom, religious community, and religious justice, what is our path going to be for creating more love in the world?”

The other issue this raises is the courage to discover and articulate our own part in any dynamic of pain or healing. In his book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, Norman Cousins tells the story of his own illness, of being diagnosed with a life-threatening degenerative disease. His initial explorations had to do with what he had done that contributed to his contracting the illness, and his later explorations and action dealt with his active participation in his own recovery. But he could not engage in his own recovery until he had discovered his own participation in causing the illness in the first place.

Let me give you an example from my own life. For about ten years after college I was a youth worker involved with a number of both church and nonprofit youth programs. During that time many years ago I was fired as a Youth Director. The precipitating event was that I had not discovered four youth who had snuck alcohol into an overnight. At the time I was fired, I had been working as an adult Youth Director in UU churches for six years. I had grown up a Unitarian Universalist. I had been deeply involved in the UU youth movement in the early 1980s when I was a teenager myself. My parents were both UU ministers.

On the other hand, my supervisor had been a Unitarian Universalist for barely two years, and had been working in religious education as my supervisor for only a year and a half. I felt I knew far more about both UUism and teenagers than she did. So when I was fired I was in disbelief. I was angry. I was indignant and self-righteous. I was hurt and depressed. I could not understand how this had “happened” to me, how this cruel thing had been “done” to me. It was my first huge faith crisis with my beloved Unitarian Universalism, because I thought, “If we’re supposed to be full of love and acceptance and the democratic process, and yet they can do this to me, then I don’t know if I can continue in this faith.”

I was so hurt, and so self-righteous that it took me five years before I could even *begin* to look at my own participation in my firing. One realization I came to was that I had been guilty of the sin of pride. I had argued with my supervisor a lot because we saw youth programming from different perspectives. In reality, it may be that I knew more about UUism and teenagers than my supervisor did. But that wasn’t the point. The point was that she was my supervisor. The point – if I wanted to keep my job – was that I either needed to do my work according to the direction my supervisor gave, or I needed to continue behaving according to my experience and values at the risk of losing my job. I came to realize how naïve I had been when I wanted both things: to continuously argue with my supervisor because I was doing what I felt was right *and* keep my job.

This was a difficult realization for me, and one that irks me even to this day. I’ve heard it said, especially in regard to committed relationships, that we often have a choice between “being right” and “being happy.” At the time, I very much wanted to be right. But now my preference is to find ways that increase happiness and love in the world. Let me be clear. The reason for examining our own participation in our grief or illnesses is not to “blame the victim.” The reason for reflecting on our own participation is so we can move from a place of feeling like a helpless victim to a place of feeling empowered. And we can only do that when we take responsibility for our own actions and behavior.

Norman Cousins writes: “I have learned never to underestimate the capacity of the human mind and body to regenerate – even when the prospects seem most wretched.” Part of the emphasis Cousins makes is that the regeneration comes through creativity and a sense that we are doing something important. Creativity is the cortisone that helps us move through times of pain. Creativity and mindfulness and intentionality are some of the tools we use to give us perspective, to see our condition in a broader scope with a more normalized perspective.

All that we do when we hope and dream and plan and engage our creativity is not futile. Our work is not hopeless or pointless or lost. Connections are being made. Energy is being harnessed. Community is being built. Perspective is gained, vision is expanded, and possibilities inspire.

After our December 16, 2008, presentation to the Wayzata City Council, many people responded to the Relocation Task Force to express their thanks for all the hard work and effort and planning. I found two of those notes, which the authors allowed me to share, especially moving and descriptive of where we are, and *who* we are as a congregation.

Fred Hulting wrote:

Christy, It was a very disappointing result, but I want you to know that tonight I was very proud to be a member of our church. You and your team were so well prepared, and were such great representatives for all of us. I have no idea what else you could have done...I cannot thank you and Bob enough for all you have done.

- Fred

And Kevin Watts wrote:

Bob and Christy and Relocation Task Force,
I want to express my thanks to you both, as well as to the entire Relocation Task Force for the time, energy, and planning invested on behalf of UUCM. At one point during the presentation to the Wayzata City Council I turned to look at the turnout of fellow members. Simultaneously, our congregation's brief history and mission were being conveyed. This combination stirred in me the greatest sense of pride that I've felt since becoming a member in 1993. There have been numerous milestones – positive and negative – when I've remained encouraged about our potential, but this one topped them all! Certainly the “no” vote was a big disappointment. I am convinced that its other outcome will be to further solidify our resolve to reach our goal...

- Regards, Kevin Watts

Amen.