



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Rise Like a Phoenix

By Linda Lubin, Lay Minister

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To *rise like a phoenix from the ashes* means to emerge from a catastrophe stronger, smarter and more powerful. The *phoenix* comes from Greek mythology. It was a feathered creature of great size with talons and wings, its plumage radiant and beautiful. The legend is told that the *phoenix* lived for 500 years before it built its own funeral pyre, burst into flame, and died, consumed in its own fiery inferno. Soon after, the mythical creature rose out of the ashes, in a transformation from death to life. The story of becoming born again predates the story of the *phoenix rising from the ashes*. It's seen in myths of ancient Egypt, China, and Russia, and the one we are most familiar with may be the resurrection story as told by Christians.

There is something primal in the human belief that out of destruction comes renewal. Perhaps it is only an aspect of the "hope springs eternal" saying, the mindset that keeps us going when the going gets very rough, and we are riding stormy seas in a small and leaking vessel. Or perhaps there is in our awareness a basic realization that out of chaos arises possibility and potential. The Rising Phoenix shows us that the world is being remade even amidst all of the chaos and destruction.

Chaos Theory is a branch of mathematics focusing on the study of chaos. Within the apparent randomness of chaotic complex systems there are underlying patterns, interconnectedness, constant feedback loops, repetition, and fractals. If that's as clear as mud, there is the well-known metaphor of a butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon and causing a hurricane in Texas. The Butterfly Effect refers to the small initial changes, "tiny initiating events," that may have profound ripple effects on the outcome of the whole system.

This concept is also illustrated in the proverb entitled “For Want of a Nail”, which many of us remember from childhood:

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.

For want of a shoe the horse was lost.

For want of a horse the rider was lost.

For want of a rider the message was lost.

For want of a message the battle was lost.

For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.

And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

In this proverb, the lack of a simple nail sets off a linear chain of accumulated subevents, which together have a major impact, the downfall of a kingdom.

Could it be, that a tiny microbe, a virus making its home in a bat living in a cave in China, eventually, through a series of accumulated subevents, made its way around the world wreaking havoc as it became entangled with the human biome: perhaps this is one such butterfly effect. Suddenly major issues are bubbling to the surface, including the degradation of the environment, the gross imbalances of income distribution, lack of adequate health care, corrupt politics, religious beliefs that foster the denial of science, education that feeds the mind while it ignores the heart and soul, a disconnection of humans from their natural environment, the promotion of brutality, selfishness, greed, the acceptance of violence in all its forms, success measured by the accumulation of material gain regardless of the expense it causes. Every major unresolved issue is coming up, forcing us to see and acknowledge it more than ever before. They are all interrelated. Seeing clearly, and understanding how they are all intertwined, we now have the chance to begin to reverse engineer this chaotic mess and make the world whole again. Tikkun olam. The Kabbalistic phrase means to repair the world.

I would say that all of the above, and more, were what led to the uprising of the human spirit with the cri de coeur “I CAN’T BREATHE, I CAN’T BREATHE, MAMA, I CAN’T BREATHE.” In the aftermath of the horrific, gut wrenching, soul awakening, cold blooded murder of George Floyd we are finally, finally, FINALLY opening our eyes and not only seeing, but beginning to feel the suffocating pain of people of color, here in the U.S., and around the world. It’s about time.

In the movie Cast Away, FedEx operations executive Chuck Noland, played by Tom Hanks, is single-mindedly focused on time and efficiency. Relationships take a back seat to the demands of his job and the belief that what he does is important and meaningful. On Christmas Day Chuck is rushing off to catch yet another FedEx plane for a business trip. The flight experiences technical difficulties, in one of the most harrowing plane crash scenes ever filmed, the plane goes down in the vast south Pacific. Chuck washes up on the shore of a deserted island. He realizes that his priority is survival - which primarily means food, water, shelter and fire - and rescue. As time progresses, he goes through a range of emotions, from hope to hopelessness, from fear to acceptance.

Chuck lives through a dramatic escape and is rescued. Arriving back home after four years on the island he is, of course, a changed man, and he literally comes to a crossroads where he must decide – does he try to recapture the past, or does he let go and move into the future? He is on a threshold, as we are all now experiencing, having our old world, our former lives, upended, and cast away. What comes next, we don’t know, we can only try to imagine. What we do know is that we will not return to what was. In letting go, we open to the possibilities of what phoenix will rise from these ashes.

Cast Away is an entertaining and thought-provoking movie, and it speaks to our times, as we hear over and over that the aftermath of this time we are moving through will look and feel very different from what came before.

We are in liminal space. We don't know what will come, yet we do know it will be very different from our former lives. The stakes are high. This is not neutral territory for those who live on the edge. Christian Peele, writing in the journal *Oneing*, tells us: "Liminal space is betwixt and between, and the lived experience of marginalize men and women exists within a dangerous liminality. By another name, that liminal space is oppression. Within the ordinary, unassuming surroundings of everyday life, the poor, the immigrant, the minority – those who are deemed *other* – are forced outside the boundaries of society's established rules and power. . . systems that oppress aren't upheld by Hollywood-level evil. They're maintained by all of us when we choose to look away." Or, in the words of Edmund Burke, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

Think about it. Just pause for a moment and think about it. . . . We have all the time in the world. And time is running out.

Otto Sharmer is a senior lecturer at MIT, and cofounder of the Presencing Institute and Katrin Kaufer is a research director at the same Institute. In their book, [Leading From the Emerging Future](#), they write that we are in a state "of organized irresponsibility, *collectively creating results that nobody wants*. What's being born is less clear but in no way less significant. It's something that we can *feel* in many places across Planet Earth. This future is not just about firefighting and tinkering with the surface of structural change. It is a future that requires us to tap into a deeper level of our humanity, of who we really are and who we want to be as a society. It is a future that we can sense, feel, and actualize by shifting the *inner place* from which we operate. It is a future that in those moments of disruption begins to *presence* through us." I encourage you to check out Otto's brilliantly innovative work at his website ottoscharmer.com. The link is posted in your Order of Service.

And what might that future of possibility look like? Let's use all of our creative energy to reimagine our relationship to the environment. Reimagine human relationships.

Reimagine the understanding of human biology. The infusion of money and talent in researching the Coronavirus has the potential to dramatically change our understanding of human biology and disease. Let's reimagine the economy. Economy is from the Greek word meaning management of the house. Let's get our house in order. Let's reinvent an economy that serves us all, not just the top 10%.

Let us consider The Great Mandala. The Wheel of Life. Birth, death, birth, death. One doesn't happen without the other. The phoenix cannot arise from the ashes if it doesn't die first. The Wheel of Life moves us through the continuous evolution of the human experience. Change is the only constant in life. You never step in the same river twice. Movement, change, evolution, there is the intrinsic awareness and acceptance of these givens in life, and there is the tension created by the opposing desire to stay still, to hold on to the past.

Our fear of change is deeply rooted in our DNA. We learned that what is unfamiliar may be dangerous and so we tried to protect ourselves by not venturing into the unknown. In this way, we are all conservative, cautious, careful and resistant to change. It's not an entirely misguided approach to life. We want the stars to be fixed in their orbits because this helps us to feel safe. When we learn that everything is in a constant state of flux, including the stars in the universe, and the very ground beneath our feet, it's unsettling. Our instinct for self-preservation makes us want to lock everything in place. However, as the book *Evolutionaries*, notes "*we are moving. The things that we think are fixed, static, unchanging, and permanent are in fact moving. We are going somewhere.*"

Whether we are forced into a place of dramatic upheaval, or we choose it, it is happening. We are in a liminal space where anything is possible. By its very nature it can be experienced as terrifying or exhilarating. Or both. I hate roller coaster rides. Always have, even as a kid. They scare the heck out of me. But you know what, I'm on this rollercoaster, along with all the rest of you. There are moments when I'm white knuckling it, and there are moments when I'm at the apex of the curve, my eyes are wide open, and I can see the

landscape for miles around me. And it is beautiful. It feels filled with possibility and potential. If I blur my eyes a little bit, I can imagine a world vastly different from the one I was born into. I can imagine a world where justice is a given, where poverty is unknown, where we don't have to put most of our energy into protecting ourselves from one another.

Yenvy Pham is a 32-year-old restaurateur in Seattle. You may have read about her in *The Lily*. She and her siblings own and operate several restaurants in Seattle. When the virus hit her city, and Gov. Inslee ordered all restaurants closed, they saw sales plummet 90% overnight. The family came together, and in conjunction with other restaurateurs, reimagined their businesses. As it became clear that the pandemic wasn't going to end anytime soon, Pham and her siblings had to start making tough decisions. Ultimately, they had to lay off 15 of their part time employees. But if any of their current or former employees need something, the restaurant owners try to help: "My restaurant dynamic is very Vietnamese," Pham said. "It's very practical. If [workers] need money, help [or] loans, we just kind of do what we can."

Reflecting on the impact of the pandemic her response may surprise you. "I like the world stopping for a second to reassess our morality and get us out of this state of complacency," she said. "We're doing powerful thinking about each other, ourselves, about the world ... and looking at what are priorities and what are not. We're being more creative too and helping each other out," Pham added.

So you see, this is a time when creative energy is being unleashed. The funeral pyre is burning, and the phoenix is about to rise from the ashes. It is the best of times; it is the worst of times. Most of all, it is time, time to begin anew, time to trust and believe in our capacity as humans to envision and begin to create a better world, a vastly better world.

What are we to do at such a threshold moment? There is an ancient Celtic tradition that provides a simple response. In moments of transition, we are simply to be. We are to

pause, at this apex of this roller coaster, and acknowledge that a transition is taking place. Instead of seeking to abruptly pass through a threshold, we are to tarry. During the druidic season of Samhain, the words of this popular blessing are spoken in moments such as these:

This is a time that is not a time

In a place that is not a place

On a day that is not a day, Between the worlds, and beyond.