



*The Unitarian Church in Westport*

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**SERMON TRANSCRIPT:**

***Dancing with Calamity***

*By Dayle Brownstein, Lay Minister*

*Sunday, July 19, 2020*

I keep a hammer in my car. Now, that's not because I plan on stopping on my way to CVS or Trader Joe's and building something. No. It's for the same reason that I have a rope in my car. And flashlights. And water bottles. And a tool kit, and first aid supplies... And those tiny aluminum blankets in those itty bitty plastic bags. I'm not sure what they're supposed to do, but the word "emergency" was on the packet, and that's not a suggestion I can pass up.

I have these things not because I'm a pessimist, but because I've been dancing on this planet long enough to know a few things.

Few things number 1: The World is a scary place.

Now, I have many friends who will argue with me on this point.

"It's scary," they say, "if you choose to see it that way."

"It's scary if you don't believe in yourself."

"It's scary if you focus on fear."

But the truth is that I see it – the world – in all kinds of ways, and I do believe in myself, and I focus on a plethora of all things beautiful, and light, and musical.

And I love this world. I do. I love this beautiful, musical, magnificent, and very – scary world.

Yet, what I have come to understand is that if you are an inhabitant of this planet, you are dancing with calamity on a daily basic.

And if I couldn't convince my friends of this reality, I feel that 2020 has swooped in and done it for me.

In late January, I started having conversations about this novel virus threatening to undo us all.

"We'll be fine," I heard over and over.

And I murmured, “This one is different.”

Now, that’s not because I have some keen insights that my friends lacked, or because I understand all kinds of medical and scientific patterns, and algorithms. No – it’s for the same reason that I keep a hammer in my car. Face it, The Universe has a lot on its mind, and there are a million ways that things can go wrong, but only a few ways that they can go right.

One of my favorite Broadway songs is Stephen Sondheim’s “No More” from *Into The Woods*. In it he ponders the travesties of existence:

*“How do we ignore*

*All the witches*

*All the curses*

*All the wolves, and the lies*

*The false hopes and good-byes*

*The reverses*

*All the wondering what even worse*

*Is still in store?”*

And, of course, there is plenty – we know – that is still in store for us. Plenty of witches, plenty of wolves, plenty of false hope- and perhaps, most sorrowfully, plenty of good byes.

So, I guess, what’s been on my mind lately is “how do we contend with all of the suffering and despair that comes our way?” How do we manage to dance with calamity on a regular basis, and come out okay – make it all worthwhile- greet a new dawn with joy?

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, at about 1:30 pm, an email was sent to every adult in the school where I work.

“At 2:45 this afternoon,” it read, “all Westport schools will be closed until further notice.”

Shortly after the onset of the lockdown, there was a meme showing up on social media. It went like this:

*"The CDC says: To prevent Coronavirus stay home, avoid physical contact, and don't go into large crowds.*

*The introverts respond: I've been preparing for this my entire life."*

At first glance, I chuckled in recognition. I had always identified as an introvert. I derive energy from quiet and contemplation, and a number of solitary pursuits. Within seconds, though, I knew this was not for me. Was not what I wanted. Or needed. The thought of spending hours upon hours isolated from friends and family, and even strangers, felt dark and empty. No, my idea of solitude was more about being in a room with living, breathing beings who just wouldn't talk or annoy me too much. But, they were there. And, I wanted them there.

If I was going to make it through this current dance of calamity, it wasn't going to be a solo act. I wanted a whole chorus line there beside me. Or, at least a sidekick or two. I have learned that to be with those I like is enough, says Walt Whitman. The thought kept reeling through my mind that these connections was all that I really feared missing.

Toward the end of A.A. Milne's children's story, [The House at Pooh Corner](#), Pooh and Christopher robin discuss the joys of togetherness:

*"Where are we going?" said Pooh*

*"Nowhere," said Christopher Robin.*

*So they began going there, and after they had walked a little way Christopher Robin said:*

*"What do you like doing best in the world, Pooh?"*

*"Well...what I like best...?"*

*And then he thought that being with*

*Christopher Robin was a very good thing to do,*

*and having Piglet near was a very friendly thing to have:*

*and so, when he had thought it all out, he said,*

*"What I like best in the whole world is Me and Piglet going to see You, and You saying 'What about a little something?' and Me saying, 'Well, I shouldn't mind a little something, should you, Piglet?,' and it being a hummy sort of day outside."  
"I like that too," said Christopher Robin."*

And, isn't that what we all want?

Which of our days, of our moments- have brought us the greatest joy? If you are like most of us, it is not the fancy vacations, or when you bought your first car or house. Most likely, not even the grand celebrations. No, I would say, it is most likely the good friends, and the "hummy sort of days."

It is the simple pleasure, and the unmatched comfort, of companionship. This is what heals us. This is what makes life's slings and arrows bearable. This is what helps us endure the inevitable suffering that comes with dancing on this planet decade after decade.

It is companionship that carries us through the plethora of problems that we humans contend with. Through ravishes of disease, of old age, of social turmoil. There is no other way to survive. And there never will be. Perhaps for some. Maybe some wolves, or sharks, or some deep water bacteria get on well without connection to others. But, for our human species, we are hooked, flesh and bone within the flesh and bone of others. We hold on to each other as if our lives depend on it. Because, of course, they do. This is how we dance with calamity. This is how we make our world a better place.

Charles Dickens reminds us:

*"No one is useless in this world who lightens the burdens of others.  
Our survival then, depends on being with, and being FOR each other."*

After the announcement of Westport's virtual shutdown, my feelings went from anxiety to a surprised sense calm, and, finally, to relief. Of course, part of that relief may have been that we were given permission to protect ourselves. But it was something more than that.

Looking back, I think I was feeling the recognition that we are all in this together, and we are here to protect each other. That whatever would happen from here on in, there would be some sense of community, and shared experience.

And in the midst of all this calamity, something happened that I had never experienced to this degree in the almost two decades I have lived in Westport. I started seeing posts on the local social media pages:

From a neighbor:

*"I thought I would take this time to learn how to bake, but I can't find flour anywhere. Has anyone seen any?"*

And the responses:

*"I have a fifty-pound bag...way more than I need. Let me know if you want to drop by, and I'll leave some in a container on my front porch."*

And:

*"My ten-yea- old son has been asking for a bike for his birthday for months, and I can't find an open store. Is anyone selling one they don't use anymore?"*

*"My youngest just got a full-sized bike, you can have his old one."*

And on and on:

*"If anyone is concerned about going to the grocery store, let me know, and I will be happy to pick up anything you need when I go out next time."*

Or:

*"I'm home from college, and I have lots of time on my hands, if there are any seniors or people with health issues, I can make trips to CVS or Trader Joes. No charge."*

We all know the truth, don't we? When it comes right down to it...? We all know that our very survival depends on our friends, our neighbors, our fellow citizens.

Not for the flour really...Or the bicycles. Or even the prescription medications that we can't pick up ourselves. Not really.

We know that we survive by being seen. Being heard. Being cared for. And by doing the same for others. We know that we thrive by claiming, in unison, to all of the dark, nefarious shenanigans of the universe that we are all in this together. That we are on each other's side.

We're on to you, darkness. We know you're there. But we're good. We're okay. Our bond is stronger than disease. It is more powerful than injustice. It transcends even our own existential fears.

Astrophysicist Neil Degraass Tyson says:

*"I am driven by two main philosophies: know more today about the world than I knew yesterday- and lessen the suffering of others."*

Tyson's words remind me of a poem I found on my parents' bookshelf when I was six years old. Author unknown. Maybe you've heard it.

*"Through the toilsome world alas*

*Once and only once I pass*

*If kindness I may show*

*If a good deed I may do*

*To a suffering fellow man*

*Let me do it while I can  
No delay for it is plain  
I shall not pass this way again."*

I was moved by the passion and the dramatic language. And touched by the simple message of compassion. And it forever informed me of what I would come to believe is true about what it means to be human.

Our healing is in the healing of others. Our salvation is to save.

The anthropologist, Margaret Mead, was once asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. Now, we have all heard a lot about symbols of culture. Of civilization. We have visited museums and seen the pottery, and the tools that early humans fashioned. We have seen the pictures on the walls, and the primitive clothes from animal skins. And so, the student expected to hear about some of these artifacts. But Dr. Mead surprised him. She responded that a thigh bone that showed signs of having been broken and then healed, would be such a sign. She pointed out that for a person to survive a broken femur, they would have had to been cared for, protected, fed, and sheltered long enough to heal.

Being present for one another, then, is remaining long enough to experience healing.

Seventh Grade wasn't a great year for me. I was shy, and each day felt like a dance of anxiety and uncertainty, and as we all know...middle schoolers can smell insecurity. At least Stacy Zurenski could. We had a few incidents with each other, and after one of them, we each ended up in the counseling suite hashing out our differences.

Mr. Jackson was the 7<sup>th</sup> grade counselor. He wore the high-waisted pants popular at the time, with bright shirts that matched the colors of the inspirational posters on the walls. I can still see them, out of the corner of my vision, as I look into Mr. Jackson's warm eyes:

*“Yesterday is but a dream.  
Tomorrow is only a vision,  
But today, well- lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness  
And every tomorrow, a vision of hope.”*

Mr. Jackson spoke softly, and not too much. But I remember that he asked me what was important to me- what I really wanted and cared about.

I confided that I wanted to be an actress, and that I had memorized every scene from the Brady Bunch, and had recruited all my friends to act them out in the courtyard on our street. It all seems pretty silly now, but Mr. Jackson looked at me in the same way that he would have had I said I wanted to save the world from all the dark forces of the universe.

The next day, he showed up during my social studies class. He peered in and motioned for me to come talk to him. When I walked out of the room he handed me a small piece of paper. On it was a phone number, an address, and the name of a theater... The Harlequin Dinner Theater.

He looked down and said, in a calm, but important, tone.

“You have an audition Saturday morning for the next play. Be there at 10 am... Okay?”

I mumbled back, affirmatively, not sure about any of it, but sure my life had changed.

And it had.

To describe how I felt those few days leading up to my audition would be to describe a first kiss, or those early days of spring, or a long awaited reunion of sorts.

To describe how miserable my audition actually went, I would have to use a whole slew of other kinds of descriptive language.

What would be even more challenging though, would be to describe the transformative experience Mr. Jackson had brought to my life. The experience of being seen...being heard...and being valued.

And it wasn't just me who was transformed by this experience.

And it wasn't just then.

Not a month goes by that I don't channel Mr. Jackson in my own relationships with the students I work with. Whether it's through a kind word, an extra moment of patience, or a listening heart.

Good, simple, ordinary gifts of compassion are often what it takes to heal so many of the broken places in our lives.

I often wonder, and I imagine you do too, how different the world would be if everyone had had a few Mr. Jacksons in their lives.

In her poem "Good Bones," Maggie Smith reflects on the despair of our world, and the possibility of salvation.

*"Life is short, though I keep this from my children.  
 Life is short, and I've shortened mine  
 in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,  
 a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways  
 I'll keep from my children. The world is at least  
 fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative  
 estimate, though I keep this from my children.  
 For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.  
 For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,  
 sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world  
 is at least half terrible, and for every kind  
 stranger, there is one who would break you,  
 though I keep this from my children. I am trying  
 to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,  
 walking you through a real f--wreck, chirps on  
 about good bones: This place could be beautiful,  
 right?  
 You could make this place beautiful."*