



*The Unitarian Church in Westport*

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## **SERMON TRANSCRIPT:**

### ***Everything Belongs***

*By the Rev. Dr. John Morehouse*

*Sunday, November 1, 2020*

Some years ago, I preached at the Unitarian church in Santa Barbara, CA, a Spanish revivalist church right across from a beautiful park. As I was walking across the patio between services, I tripped. (Exclaiming Jesus Christ). I didn't fall. I caught my balance. It was pouring rain. The worship associate apologized for the hole and said "despite our success there are holes. I suppose the holes belong as well, everything belongs". I smiled at the koan.

Despite these apocalyptic times, I do believe in a strange sense perhaps that "everything belongs". Nothing that is good and light and true can be such without its opposite. Darkness yields to light. Wrong is made right. Yes, the wrong is so outpaced by the right we hardly recognize our lives or this country. But all of this wrong will, in fact, as the Buddha said, yield to the right. And only when we recognize the inevitability of suffering, only when we no longer see suffering as our fault, can we move beyond the anxiety of what will be and work with what we have. Work with what we have. We work with what we have because as Pena Chadron puts it "Things fall apart. So, they can be put back together again." ( From Things Fall Apart by Pema Chodron) It's in the falling that we see what we truly must do to make the world, our country, our lives right again.

Today is All Saints day according to the Christian Calendar; that day following All Hallows Eve, when we remembered the dead and kept watch over those unsettled spirits that would cause us harm. A study in contrasts isn't it. According to Pagan and then Christian calendars this is the time of crossing between worlds, a thin place between what is dead to a new time celebrating what is alive. All Saints Day commemorated the bringing in of the harvest, the food that would hold the people through the dark winter ahead.

As a Christian festival All Saints Day, recognized all of the Saints in the Catholic and Anglican tradition for guarding over us in the winter ahead. Tomorrow November 2 is All Souls Day when we thank our ancestors for keeping us through another year. The power of this three-day holy day is the contrast it reminds us of, the necessity of death to have life, and the necessity of life to give way to death. Everything belongs.

Many years ago, I visited a Shinto shrine outside Kyoto, Japan. Shinto is the native religion of Japan; an optimistic faith that believes the dead watch over the living and are one and the same with the over eight million gods of the universe. Shinto shrines have a place to make offerings to the departed, thanks for giving them life. Often small photos are left at the shrine

along with fruit, flowers and money. What our guide told us has always fascinated me: part of the ritual of thanks is a recognition that the supplicant will also die someday. In other words, Shinto is a religion that understands death as an active part of life, nothing to be afraid of, only recognized. Death belongs to life, as life belongs to death. We here in the West are ashamed of death. We would just as well like to see it done away with. And oh, we do try, don't we? Plastic surgery, bariatric surgery, billions on cosmetics. And when someone dies we have a short memorial and depose of the body as soon as possible. We fear death. Most of us anyway. Woody Allen summed it up: "I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens." But death belongs to us, just like life and the wrong and the right belongs to us. As I recalled the Shinto space I remembered what the Catholic mystic Richard Rohr asked: "What part of yourself do you find dying when you enter a sacred space?" (In Everything Belongs). That's what happens when you enter a massive cathedral. The immensity of the space, takes your breath away and reminds us that there is more to the cosmos than us. God might be there or at least the infinity of it all. We all die a bit when we walk in here into this church. I know so many of you haven't been here in a long time and that in and of itself is a dying. But it's still here and it still takes a little of your breath away. You don't feel it perhaps but it's happening, these massive windows unto the magnificence of Nature reminds you that YOU are not the center of the world. You might be the center of your world, but not the rest of the world, most of whom don't know or even care if you are alive. Ego death, the Buddha called, Samsara. Letting go of your self-preoccupation allows you to join the universe again. Everything belongs.

Richard Rohr asks "If we've never lived, we will be terrified of death. How do you view death?" How do you view living? If living is a race against death, you have already lost. Life, said one sage, is like getting into a leaky boat and putting out to sea knowing the boat will sink but we get in anyway. (Ibid Chodron)

I bring all this up on All Saints Day, this day between the worlds, this time of anxious waiting for the election and all it promises, so that we can see that in the grand scheme of things, everything does belong and when we accept that the bad comes before the good, that life comes before death and that light follows dark, we can find strength in knowing that whatever comes, it belongs but will not be forever. We can change the wrong to right, bring light to the dark, one small light joining millions against the moonless dark sky. We can do this not in spite of our suffering but because of it.

The Japanese know, as the Buddha so long ago taught, that our brokenness is our first reality. The many broken things brave people are falling down from, gives them something to push ourselves up from.

There is an argument in philosophy known as the Hole Paradox. On the one hand, the reality in which we live is a solid ground of sensory perception. This pulpit, your chair, our bodies, are real manifestations of the vibration of energy in a time-space continuum. But on the other hand, it is quite possible, argue some astro philosophers, that this reality, indeed our

very known universe is a hole, a brief reality created by a force far outside our comprehension, and that black holes, which suck up every bit of matter and energy around them are not holes at all but the tendency of reality to come out of this aberration. (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spacetime-holearg/>).

The Buddha would agree. Reality is illusionary. What we suffer is only a momentary sensory hiccup in the true emptiness of the universe. If we see brokenness as an illusion or at least as necessary, we are suddenly free to move on. Everything belongs. Children, food, waste, puppies, snakes, health, disease, wrong, right, life, dark, life and death. Everything. In the everything is where God lives, waiting for us to make real the dream we thought was only a dream.

Philip Simmons was just thirty-five years old when he learned that he had Lou Gehrig's disease. As a young husband and a father, at the start of a promising literary career, he had to suddenly come to grips with the fact that he was dying. As if to add a sad irony to his life, he lived in New Hampshire, among some of the most beautiful hills in the world, hills he once used to climb. For the last ten years he has watched his limbs slowly and unrelentingly cease to function. (In Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life)

What is so remarkable about his story is what he was able to do with his tragedy. His lessons, like the lessons of so many of you, are the inspiration for what I want to say today. Everything was a struggle. Falling just to walk to bathroom. And yet he lived on seeing the success of his life in loving.

I won't be trite. I and too many of you have known the devastating pain of loss, the heartache of divorce, the fear of disease, the hopelessness of relationships that cannot be rebuilt. We know that when we fall it hurts. And even when we get back up it still hurts. It may never stop hurting. So, let me begin by saying that I find no redemption in pain. Pain is pain. It hurts and while we may grow stronger from it, it will always be what we seek to avoid.

I think the lesson might be deeper than this. What we need to do in order to live is to learn to fall. Actors and stuntmen learn to fall. Athletes learn to fall. How do they do it? Surely they hurt. And they do. But what they have learned to do physically, I believe we can learn to do spiritually. (ibid, Simmons)

Sometimes when you are falling you look far enough down towards the ground that you can imagine what you will hit first. Falling emotionally is no different. First, we look and notice that we are falling. Part of what hurts us emotionally so much is the surprise of the fall. (ibid, Simmons) Like slipping on ice, we are often the last to know our spouse is having an affair. What we thought was a cold, turns out to be cancer. Just because bad happens doesn't mean good can't emerge. It does.

Others can lend you a hand and help pull you up. This is the idea behind our candles of joy

and sorrow. As I remind us each week, a sorrow shared is a sorrow diminished and a joy shared is a joy enhanced. When you share where you are going, even if it is death, you are breaking the hurt of the falling. Sure, the leaving is tough. Sure, it breaks our heart. Sure, we will miss those we love. But by sharing not only our sorrows but the accomplishments of our lives we bring joy back into the world and give some positive direction to our falls. Sometimes the best way is to let go of the outcome. I have watched more than a few people die over the years and I know that something changes when the dying let go of their grasp on life, when they don't tense up. When we see that sometimes it isn't up to us and we can't will it to be otherwise, when we let go and fall into the hole of the next reality.

Those who survive drug addiction or any other addiction know that what gets you through the day is realizing that you don't get yourself through the day. This is true healing. Some call that God. But there is a surrender that when it happens it really makes the difference on how you can get back up or how you are going to leave this world.

Spiritually, our life is often a bit of mess. We might try to live life with integrity but we slip, don't we? We might try to meditate but we get bored or fall asleep. We might try to pray but feel silly. We might believe we are going to support that cause but we forget to send the money. Perhaps this is the real meaning of "holiness". Recognizing that the world we live in is full of mistakes seen and hidden and then choosing to live bravely even with that knowledge. In the book Holes by Louis Sachar and the movie by Disney, a boy, through little fault of his own, falls into the hole that is our juvenile justice system. Accused wrongly of theft he is sent to a work camp in the middle of the desert. There, lorded over by an evil warden and her henchmen, the boys are forced by the warden to dig endless holes in the desert, in what was once a lake, searching for a mysterious chest of treasure, lost said legend off the end of a boat by thieves. Our hero finds the treasure by accident only when he falls into a hole trying to escape, and eventually rights what is wrong.

And what if we can't right what is wrong. What if this election goes the wrong way. What if the ones you love die tomorrow? Then embrace the brokenness and love as fiercely as you can until your time is done. Love, God known by another name, is most often profound when life is its most fragile. Another paradox we can't explain. Amazing grace in our hearts with grit in our teeth. There is a Zen parable about the man who was being chased by a tiger. The man ran and ran and came to the edge of a cliff. He had no choice to leap. As he was going down he saw a branch growing out of the hill. He grabbed it. Not knowing what to do next, he looked down and what did he see? Another tiger. Just then his eye caught sight of a small strawberry growing just within his reach. He plucked it, how sweet it tasted! (ibid, Simmons)

As the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich reminds us:

Whatever we inherit from the fortunate  
 We have taken from the defeated  
 What they had to leave us—a symbol:

A symbol perfected in death.  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well

Amen