

Keeping in Touch

First, let me thank all of you who have responded positively to the revised format for these missives. And thank you for your positive feedback on my reflections. That means a lot to me.

We were saddened to learn of the passing of Sue Baust's mother last week. Sue, a member of Pilgrim Church, is a long-time friend and supporter of our church and regular attendee at our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Exploration Reading Group. I had the opportunity to meet Sue's mom, an absolutely delightful woman, on one occasion after Sue brought her to this area from the Amherst area, where she was close friends with two of my long-time Jungian colleagues. Our thoughts and prayers are with Sue in her time of loss and grief.

Our thoughts and prayers are also with Dianne Simmons following the loss of her brother-in-law, Jack Doboer. This is one more loss for Dianne who, as a nurse, is one of our front-line workers, and it will present a serious challenge and difficult adjustment for Dianne's sister, Joni. Our thoughts and prayers are with Joni as well.

It seems like we have had more than our share of losses over the past five months. The losses hang heavy over us, probably because we have been unable to celebrate these precious souls with a memorial service celebrating their lives and a collation where we can be with the family and with each other, a gathering that serves to heal the break, the wound in our community that comes through death. We do the best we can, but we know it is not enough.

Please let me know if there are any newsworthy items that I can include in upcoming missives. If you don't, I may be forced to give you updates on how the Red Sox are doing this year—especially in comparison to the Yankees.

The Pastor's Reflections

*"Let your eyes look directly forward,
and your gaze be straight before you.
Keep straight the path of your feet,
and all your ways will be sure." (Proverbs 4:25-26)*

*"Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to an inhabited town;
hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress;
he led them by a straight way until they reached an inhabited town.
Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
For he satisfies the thirsty,
and the hungry he fills with good things." (Psalm 107:4-9)*

"So, let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith." (Galatians 6:9-10)

In Luke 9, there is a whole section on perseverance in prayer. It includes the following:
"I say to you, ask and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you."

This past week, listening to people, I have heard a common refrain. I have found myself saying it, as well. When asked how it is going, or how each other is doing, a common response is “One day at a time.” “All I can do is one day at a time, because I don’t know what the future holds in store for me and for all of us.”

This brings to mind the above scripture passages, especially the theme of not giving up that they articulate so eloquently, of keeping to the path no matter how dark and difficult the way may be, of simply putting one foot in front of another when this is the best we can do. It reminds me of the importance of trust, of faith in God. It reminds me of the deep wisdom that has been shared with people in recovery *and with all of us*, by Alcoholics Anonymous. A person in recovery is advised to get down on his/her knees every morning and ask for the help of his/her Higher Power to refrain from drinking, not for the rest of his/her life, but just for today. Just for today. I may not be able to promise to remain sober for the rest of the year or the rest of my life, but with God’s help, I know that I can make it through today.

We are all going through a difficult time. It is difficult, if not impossible, to see the road ahead. This is part of what makes the ordeal, the times, so difficult, so confusing. We feel impatient with those restrictions that we know are for the good, for the health, for the safety of ourselves and others. But we chafe against these restrictions. It takes a lot of willpower to say “no” to opportunities to gather with friends or loved ones in ways or places that are not safe, to say “no” to indulging in those simple pleasures, those little moments of pleasure that we know, deep down, we should eschew. Like going to Home Goods and just wandering around. Like meeting for worship and coffee hour. (Please don’t think that I am equating these!). But we can do what we need to do to be personally and socially responsible. Just for today.

I think the personality characteristic, the characterological strength that is called for from us during this extended pandemic period is perseverance. It is resiliency. It is the ability, no matter how difficult the times may be, no matter how dark the road ahead may appear, to keep to the path (or get back on it immediately if we have fallen off). We can put one foot in front of the other. We can all do this. And there are days when this is the best we can do. On days like these, we need to know that the best that we can do is really a lot.

We can’t allow ourselves to give up. When we give up, when we give in to those emotions that, at times, take possession of us, we make the present situation worse. Of course, we will experience these feelings, these emotions. There are times when we will feel anxious, depressed, lost, empty, agitated, and angry. But we don’t need to indulge these feelings and the childish rationalizations we use to justify them. We don’t need to enshrine them in our heart, to cherish them, to nurture them. If we do, they will poison our life, make life more unpleasant for others, and make the time we are going through much more difficult.

When I think of resilience, the ability to bounce back, to rise again when life has knocked us off our feet, I think of a short television interview with a Black man from New Orleans that took place shortly after New Orleans was devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. This hurricane caused 1,200 deaths and wreaked over \$125 billion in damages. The man’s parish, his neighborhood, had been totally destroyed. He and his family had just lost their house, all their possessions, their pets, their neighborhood, their church, and his job. Fortunately, he, his wife, and their children had survived.

The reporter, I thought somewhat insensitively, asked the man what it was like to experience that much loss. The man, after a moment’s reflection, said, “Well, I would say that this was definitely a bad week.” (A mastery of understatement!). Then he said, “Well, I guess we are going to have to head up to North Carolina and live with my wife’s sister for a while. We are going to have to rebuild everything we have lost. When we get back on our feet, I’m not

sure if we will move back here, to the city we love, or if we will go somewhere else. But we will decide that when the time comes.”

I was dumbfounded! How was this (apparently) ordinary, everyday man, who didn't seem to have much of an education, capable of making a statement such as this? How was he capable of such a high degree of resiliency, the capacity to bounce back from a disaster, a tragedy that would break the spirit of many of us? He obviously had a dry sense of humor. I'm sure that helped. I would like to think that he also had a strong and healthy religious faith. He seemed able to give and receive love. And he knew the secret of life, that there are times when you just have to put one foot in front of the other. Since that interview, this man has been my role model for resiliency. His depth of faith, character, hope, trust, or whatever, also puts me to shame when, I am ashamed to say, I buckle under much less adversity. Much less.

I think the matter of perseverance is also important in our relationship with others. It helps us not to give up on other people, even when they are selfish, mean-spirited, or act in ways that are socially irresponsible. It helps us not to give up on our country, even when we observe a discouraging degree of dark, racist, white supremacist, xenophobic feeling manifesting in our fellow citizens. It helps us not to give up on the world, though so many countries are seeking and empowering populist, fascist dictators. It helps us not to lose hope that we can reverse global warming (which is not a hoax) and save our planet.

When I think of this kind of perseverance, I think back to when I was the Protestant Chaplain to Foxborough State Hospital from 1972-75. The two head psychiatric nurses on one of the wards were unusual, exceptional women. Mrs. Cleveland and Mrs. Alexander were big women, powerful women, and deeply caring women. They wore the old white nurses' gowns and caps that have gone out of style nowadays. They were both older than I. They had such a sense of authority to their bearing that I would never have considered calling them by their first names (which I assumed they had).

Mrs. Cleveland and Mrs. Alexander had set up a behavioral modification program on their unit that was designed to move long-term institutionalized patients to a place where they could leave the hospital and move into a far better housing arrangement. They used tokens. Patients could earn tokens by making their bed, taking a shower, shaving, combing their hair, coming to breakfast, using table manners, taking their medications, being courteous and helpful to fellow patients, doing chores around the unit, and being cooperative with staff. This got them treats or cigarettes (I know, but this was the old days).

After moving successfully through the program, a patient would be ready to be released from the hospital and placed in a half-way house. Suffice it to say that many, if not most, of the patients were ambivalent or outright resistant to being released from a place they had called home for years, sometimes for decades. It didn't take them long to master the art of passive resistance. The first night they were out in their new lodging, they would intentionally break one of the rules. A common one was smoking in bed. The person in charge would “catch them” doing this, and, for the safety of the other residents in the house, would have them transported back to the hospital. I swear that I saw many of them return with smiles on their faces.

So, how did Mrs. Cleveland and Mrs. Alexander respond to the returning patient? They may have rolled their eyes. They may have sighed deeply. Then they put the patient right back into the program. They absolutely wouldn't give up on their goal of finding these men and women, these human beings a better place to live. They never, never gave up on them. Even the repeat offenders, whom I'm sure they must have found annoying. And because these two women persevered, many patients were able to overcome their fears, their resistance to change, and move forward into a much better life for themselves. I learned a lot from these two women. They are role models of perseverance.

My final example, my third role model of resilience, of perseverance, of the dogged determination to put one foot in front of another even when the road ahead looks dark and difficult, if not impossible to traverse, is the nineteenth-century Scottish essayist, historian, and philosopher Thomas Carlyle. Among other things, Carlyle is the author of two of my favorite quotes:

The greatest of faults, I should say, is to be conscious of none.

Under all speech that is good for anything there lies a silence that is better. Silence is deep as Eternity; speech is shallow as Time.

But that's not the point.

Carlyle had just finished a massive undertaking: a manuscript, a lengthy three-volume study on the French Revolution. He believed it was his greatest work. He was extremely proud of it and happy with the way it had turned out.

When he completed the manuscript, Carlyle sent it to his close friend, John Stuart Mill, asking Mill to proofread it. Several days later, Mill's maid mistook the manuscript for trash and burned it.

When Carlyle learned what had happened to the only copy of his document, he sank into a deep depression. Years of labor had been lost. Carlyle wondered if it would be possible for him to recover, to restore the lost document, or if he would be able to find the willpower, to muster the energy to ever write again.

According to legend, not long after the horrible mistake (which must have left Mill with some serious feelings of guilt and possibly put a strain on their relationship), Carlyle found himself walking down a street. For some reason, he stopped walking and began to watch a stone mason slowly, carefully, faithfully building a long, high, stone wall. He watched the mason build the wall one stone at a time. Filled with inspiration from watching this man patiently setting himself to the daunting task that lay before him, Carlyle resolved to write just one page a day—from memory. Just one page a day. And another page the next day. And the next.

Before long, Carlyle had rewritten the entire manuscript from memory, achieving what he described as a book that came “directly and flamingly from the heart.” And the end result, in his opinion, was better than the first.

There are times when, like the psalmist, we may feel we are “wandering in desert wastes.” We may find that “our soul faints within us.” We know we need to “look directly forward,” and we need to “keep straight the path of our feet.” When this happens to you, who are your role models, those whom you seek to emulate when it comes to perseverance, to resiliency? If we do our part, if we are truly yoked to God through Christ, we will find an unseen and unexpected source of help, of hope. We can discover or rediscover that God who reaches out to us and embraces us and our world with a “steadfast love.” Then, perhaps, we can share this sense of hope, of trust, of faith with others and with a world that desperately needs it.

Be well. Stay safe. Be patient. Be disciplined. Persevere. Don't give up. Think of others. Keep the faith. See through the illusion, the delusion of the self-cherishing mind, the thief that takes away our sense of inner peace and that brings suffering to ourselves and others. Trust in God. Don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul