

Blessings, Everyone!

September 13, 2020

Keeping in Touch With Our Church Family

Celebrations and Concerns:

We hold in prayer:

Carole Jolie – grieving the loss of Don  
Marlene Joe – grieving the loss of Gil  
Martha Hubley – grieving the loss of Bud  
Cheryl Holmes – grieving the loss of her mother, Shirley Webster  
Rae Kay's children – grieving the loss of their mother  
The family of John Cummings, Lee's son

We hold in prayer:

Mattie Cummings – who (fortunately for her but unfortunately for us) will be moving to Maine in early October  
Dianne Simmons – working as a nurse on the COVID-19 hospital front lines  
BTW, over 7,000 medics have perished already from COVID-19 around the world. We should remember to be grateful for those who literally put their lives on the line in their treatment of people who are sick or infected, and we should keep them in our prayers.

Thank you to:

Jim Holmes – for faithfully ringing the church bell every Sunday morning and for sending us pictures of the church so we remember what it looks like  
Darlene Sanderson for regularly changing and refreshing the two wreaths on the front door of the church  
All those who have been faithful in their yearly pledges to the General Fund  
The new members of our church family who are supporting us financially in ways that are helping us survive this difficult time.

Congratulations to:

Kristen Sanderson Springer, a cognitive-behavioral therapist who specializes in the treatment of anxiety disorders and who is well known to our church family (and especially to her parents), has just had her first book published by New Harbinger Publications. It is entitled, *The Big Book of Exposures: Innovative, Creative, and Effective CBT-Based Exposures for Treating Anxiety-Related Disorders*. It immediately became number one in new releases in various psychological categories on Amazon. Bob L'Heureux has already obtained a copy, has read it, and absolutely loves it. He assures us that if he can read it, understand it, and get a lot out of it, anyone can!  
Congratulations, Kristen!

We recently received a letter from Abby's House in Worcester thanking us for our recent gift and for faithfully supporting their outreach to women and children in need, providing them with a home where they can stay and be safe. As they noted in the letter, we have supported Abby's House with one of our mission offerings since 1996.

There are times when we become so absorbed by our own situation, our own struggles, that we forget about others who are even less fortunate than we. We should hold in our prayers the people of California and Oregon whose lives have been ravaged by wildfires, the worst fires by far in the history of both states. Millions of acres of forest and grassland in each state have been burned to the ground, homes and even entire towns destroyed, lives have been lost, and hundreds of thousands of people displaced. And the fire season for both states, the months of September and October, is just beginning.

Could we also think of the animals who have been horribly and painfully burned to death? We need to remember them, too.

Also, we need to remember what happened nineteen years ago this past Friday. We need to remember the 2,997 people who died during the September 11 attacks and the more than 6,000 who were injured. We need to remember those, we know not how many, who since that day have succumbed to illnesses that could be traced back to that attack, and the many who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or other psychological symptoms. We need to remember and give thanks to the first responders: police, fire, and emergency personnel, as well as some volunteers and rescue dogs, who moved forward into the blazing inferno instead of running away, who risked their lives in search of people to save.

We need to remember how, following that day, we had the sympathy of the entire world with us. For one brief moment, we were all united in a bond of caring and in our determination to defeat terrorism. In the intervening years, how that feeling, that bond has slipped away. I wish we could get it back again—the feeling, the awareness that we are all in this together.

### The Pastor's Reflections

*"And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." (Gen. 1:31)*

*"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it." (Psalm 24:1)*

*"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like a little child, you will not be able to experience, to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matthew 18:3)*

Many of us, most of us are still having a difficult time with this pandemic and its attendant restrictions. I know that Darlene and I are. Some of us are holding our own, living one day at a time, meeting challenges the best we can as they arise, and trying to keep our sense of humor. Some claim they are actually doing better, that they are rising above the adjustments to their lifestyle that they are forced to make. (I remain skeptical of the testimony of these people, suspecting that they may simply be feeling better because they are on heavy drugs.) Some people, in fact many people, report that they are doing worse and some report that they are doing much worse. They are being worn down by this pandemic. They say that they feel not only worn down; they feel "beaten down."

You know the symptoms: difficulty falling asleep or maintaining sleep; exhaustion; diminished energy level; feelings of sadness or occasional bouts of crying; difficulty concentrating; negativistic thinking; pessimism about the future on both an individual and a collective level; a low threshold for irritation and anger; anxiety about the future; an existential feeling of vulnerability; the sense that life is not under control; impatience; and anhedonia (the things or activities that usually give you pleasure no longer give you pleasure).

You will note that all of these are characteristic symptoms of depression, and that depression is a common psychic response to loss. I also would remind you that some people are more vulnerable by nature, by the structure of their personality than others. In the language of Jungian typology, feeling types, who feel things deeply, are generally experiencing more difficulty with the current situation than thinking types. Extraverts, whose lives and identities are tied to social contacts, are having an especially difficult time with social isolation, with separation from loved ones. As would be expected, extraverted feeling (EF) types are having more difficulty than introverted thinking (IT) types. If you fall into the EF category, you might try

cutting yourself a little slack (without being stupid unsafe). If you know an EF, or if you live with someone like this, you might try to be a little more understanding and supportive. If you live with or know an IF, bear in mind that he/she is probably also suffering in his/her own way.

These symptoms, the forces or dynamics that are wearing or beating us down, are tied not only to the pandemic, but also to the state of affairs in our nation. We are discouraged by the overt expressions of white supremacy and its attendant racism, the movement toward authoritarianism, the embracing of totalitarianism in our own country. It is no great consolation that the movement down the slippery slope toward fascism, which we thought we had destroyed in World War II, is happening in other countries around the world as well. For those of us who read the news and care about the upcoming elections in November, this has created yet another layer of anxiety and depression in addition to the layers of our personal anxieties and the limitations, frustrations, and fears that accompany the pandemic.

I still maintain that the problem is not the pandemic; it is our response to the pandemic that is the problem. I know that you may find this annoying, sort of like blaming the victim, but I believe it is true. And therein I find a glimmer of hope. There is a place we can start. I believe the same dynamic is true of the problems we face as a nation and a world. The problem is not fascism; it is our tendency, our propensity to choose fascism over the dizzying freedom and challenge of democracy, diversity, complexity, and social evolution. If we want to change the world, which most of us do, we have to begin with ourselves.

John Dewey said it best. BTW, I don't know why "modern" educators roll their eyes and turn up their collective noses whenever anyone mentions John Dewey. I wonder how many of them have actually read Dewey. But that's not the point. The point is, as Dewey suggests in *Freedom and Culture*, which was published in 1939, at the beginning of World War II and the rise of fascism in Germany, Italy, and Spain (not to mention Russia under Stalin):

*The serious threat to our democracy is not the existence of foreign totalitarian states. It is the existence within our own personal attitudes and within our own institutions of conditions which have given a victory to external authority, discipline, uniformity, and dependence upon The Leader in foreign countries. The battlefield is also accordingly here—within ourselves and our institutions.*

This theme was picked up and amplified by the existential psychologist Erich Fromm in his 1941 masterpiece of social psychology, *Escape From Freedom*, where he discusses from an historical and a psychoanalytic perspective how and why freedom can be frightening and how and why totalitarianism can be tempting. In this book, Fromm says that too many of us are willing to hand away the freedom and the awesome responsibility of individual decision making to someone else. He then says that for every person who wants to give away his/her freedom and its attendant responsibility, there is someone who is only too happy to gobble it up. Fromm assures us that authoritarian/totalitarian leaders, that cult leaders have only the power we give them. If we did not give them this power, they would not have it. Even though this was written in 1941, it speaks to us, to our nation, and to our world today.

Let's move from the general to the specific. We will not be able to "be the change" we need to be, the change that we hope to bring to our nation and the world, if we cannot find a way to stay physically, mentally, and emotionally alive during these difficult and demanding times. The "experts" tell us that we need to practice self-care during this extended period of restrictions and limitations and frustrations. That sounds like good advice. Actually, it is. However, try telling that to a mother of three young children who is working full-time from home and is trying to homeschool her charges, all of whom need computers (which not everyone has) as well as internet access (which, contrary to popular opinion, not everyone has). If you venture to suggest to her that she needs to practice more self-care, that she needs to take some time to be

with friends, to go to the gym, and to have some solitude, sometime just to be alone with herself, be sure to duck! I have found that because I now conduct my therapy sessions through Zoom, I can give people this well-intentioned but highly impractical and insensitive advice without running the risk of having a cup of coffee dumped over my head!

I have become aware of or especially sensitive over the past few months to a powerful agent or activity of self-care that is available to almost all of us. In one of my first Keeping in (Virtual) Touch communications, I mentioned how, when I walk our dog, Brie, every morning, I noticed that I was becoming increasingly aware of the different flowers and shrubs that, each in its own time, were coming into bloom. They, of course, had been there all along, but I don't remember noticing them. We have lived in our house for over forty years, and I have walked one of our dogs every single morning over the same basic route during this time span. I counted it as a benefit, as a positive of this pandemic that I began to experience a connection with nature that I had not previously experienced.

Rather than think about climate change, the pollution that is produced from the burning of fossil fuels, and how global warming and drought have contributed to the fires in California and Oregon as national and global problems, let's think for a few minutes about nature. Once again, I think the problem is not the existence of oil and natural gas deep within the ground and under the sea. The problem lies with us—with our greed, with our lack of social responsibility and care (like people who don't socially distance or wear masks). It basically arises out of a feeling of alienation from nature. It is this fundamental disconnect with the world in which we live that enables us to view our earth as a sphere of dead matter, that leads us to poison our environment with impunity, without a second thought.

This is what the Buddhists have been saying for 2,500 years. Most of our problems and all of our evil arise from the fundamental illusion (delusion?) that we live separate and autonomous existences. They call us to realize the fundamental interconnectedness of all that is, especially our deep connectedness with all sentient beings. They say that in order to kill someone, which we do in war and which we do to our own citizens in many different ways, we have to picture them as being separate from ourselves. If we saw them as a part of ourselves, we could never hurt or kill them.

This way of viewing the world and all who dwell therein is also a part of our Judeo-Christian tradition. Time and time again we are reminded that everything that exists has been created by God. Another way of looking at this, a way that I like better, is that everything that exists is an incarnation of God's creative Spirit. We are told that when God looked at creation, the things, the plants, the animals, and all the different kinds of human beings, God realized that it was very good. We should note that a central theme of Jesus' ministry was breaking down the self-serving barriers that exist between people and between groups of people, between castes both in his day and ours, and also breaking down the artificial barriers that we have erected between us and God. He calls us back to the beautiful innocence of childhood, that time when we realized the beauty, the majesty, and the mystery of creation and the realization that we are an important, and integral part of it.

So, how did we become so alienated from nature, from the earth, from the great flow of life out of which we arose? Here, again, Fromm offers a suggestion. In his chapter entitled "Freedom—A Psychological Problem," he reminds us that if we go back not even too far in history, nature was not only a problem, it was an enemy that had to be conquered. Nature was perceived as hostile to human life. Early human beings quickly learned about the dangers of lightning strikes, earthquakes, floods, droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes, wild animals, and all the little germs (though they really didn't understand the concept of germs at the time) that can kill us. The goal became to conquer nature or at least render her impotent to hurt us or even disadvantage us. So, we set ourselves to defend against intruders by building houses with

doors that lock, to defend against cold with heating systems, to defend against heat with air conditioning, to defend against drought with viaducts and wells and reservoirs, to defend against hurricanes, etc., with early warning systems. (Note how much of the eleven o'clock news is given to an analysis of the weather not only for the next day, but for the next two weeks; it's more time that is allotted for national and international news combined). We developed the science and the art of medicine to not only postpone death, but to make it increasingly possible for us to live out our lives in relative health (if we have the sense to follow the doctor's advice).

There are parallels with the concept of wilderness. In the early years of our country, the pioneers carved out a small area of safety for themselves in the midst of a dark and dangerous wilderness that stretched on and on indefinitely. There was a crushing weight to the wilderness that they felt called to explore, to conquer. This is why the early settlers constructed forts within which they could live safely. Of course, Native Americans were considered outsiders, part of the hostile forces of nature. This made it easy, in fact, it became a civil duty or responsibility to kill them and take their lands. Nowadays, the wilderness that originally had no boundaries has been replaced by towns and cities, by roads, by civilization. The only way we can encounter wilderness now, the only way we can teach our children about wilderness is to go to a zoo, where we can glimpse it encapsulated safely behind the strong steel bars of the animal cages. "That," we tell our children, "is what a Bengal tiger looks like." Really? I can hear the child saying, "It doesn't look that dangerous." It also seems to me that we have little sense of the great wilderness that lives inside us, within the personal and collective unconscious—that is, until it erupts in the form of wars, inquisitions, and the racist ideologies and concomitant genocides like the one that is currently taking place in Mumbai.

Over the past few months, I have read three books by John O'Donohue, an Irish poet and philosopher whose readings touch and illuminate a deep spirituality. He has become my very best buddy! (I would love to have met him, but unfortunately, he is dead.) O'Donohue, in *Anam Cara*, *Four Elements*, and *Walking in Wonder*, gives eloquent testimony to the healing power of nature, especially the healing power of the Irish landscape that he loves. His writings remind me of the line from one of our beloved hymns that reminds us, assures us that there is a "balm in Giliad," something that can "cure the sin-sick soul." I see John as standing in the spiritual lineage of Francis of Assisi, who spoke of "brother sun" and "sister moon." To Francis, the sun and moon were alive. The ancient Greeks, who personified the route of the sun through the heavens as the journey of the titan Helios, the moon's soft, gentle light as Artemis, and the sometimes calm sometimes raging seas as Poseidon. They felt that Gaia, the whole earth was alive, and that, if we listen carefully, we can hear her breathe. Have you ever tried that? Don't smirk, writing this off as some kind of new-age fluff. Try it some time. But you have to be very, very quiet. (Turn your cell phone off first.)

There is a healing that can come to us when we not only realize that we are a part of nature, which we have not always realized, but when we actually feel that we are one with nature. We live within nature, and nature lives within us. There is a landscape that we can observe outside us. When Darlene and I go for a ride, I find myself especially drawn to fields, to solitary trees, to unusual rock formations. There is also a landscape within us, the landscape of our soul. Because it dwells within us, we find ourselves drawn to its outer forms, forms that give us hints of spirit, of soul. Isn't this why so many of us feel drawn to the ocean—to just sit and watch the waves, to listen to them break upon the shore? When I ask people what they would like to do if they had a week or two to get away on a retreat, almost everyone says that he/she would like to be by the water. The water out of which we came and which we carry with us and within us throughout our lives.

When we were little children, little children like our grandson Miles, we were deeply embedded in nature; we felt one with her. (Note how nature is always feminine, as in *Mother Nature*. This may be why the patriarchal Judeo-Christian religion denigrated her, describing

people who find God in nature “pagans.”) William Wordsworth speaks to the spiritual realm, the realm of eternity from which we came in his classic poem, *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*. He tells us that the child enters this world “trailing clouds of glory.” Sadly, our awareness of the heaven from which we came eventually begins to “fade in the light of day.” Parents and school will do that to you. As we grow up, we become alienated from our true home. As Roger Waters (Pink Floyd) tells us, we become “another brick in the wall.”

But all is not lost. We can rediscover this realm of the divine through our spiritual disciplines. We can reconnect with it if, as Jesus tells us, we change and become like a little child. We can rediscover it in nature—in the power of a lightning storm and the fragility of a little flower. And this can become the beginning of a spiritual quest, a quest that will bring us closer to God and to the deepest parts of ourself.

One of my favorite authors, Peter Matthiessen, who wrote *In Search of the Snow Leopard*, a book that shaped my hopes and my expectations when I was trekking through the Himalayan foothills in the wilderness of northwestern Nepal and the Tibetan plateau (unfortunately, I never got to see one), has written,

*Soon the child's clear eye is clouded over by ideas and opinions, preconceptions and abstractions. Simple free being becomes encrusted with the burdensome armor of the ego. Not until years later does an instinct come that a vital sense of mystery has been withdrawn. The sun glints through the pines, and the heart is pierced in a moment of beauty and strange pain, like a memory of paradise. After that day, we become seekers.*

In the week to come, take some time to sit—to sit quietly. Then look—at the stars, the moon, a flower, the trees, a blade of grass. Then listen—to the sound of the wind, the chirping of tree toads, even the sound of silence. Then feel—your oneness with nature, with God, with the Holy Spirit, with the deepest core of your own being. Perhaps you will experience a brief moment when the sun, as it glints through the pines, will pierce your heart with a moment of beauty and strange pain, like a memory of paradise.

Perhaps then you will realize why you have become a seeker, why you feel called to return to the Source. In that moment, you will also realize your call to be a caretaker, a loving caretaker of this beautiful, mysterious world that has been entrusted to us. When you bring these two realizations, these two peak experiences together, you will discover the healing power of nature, a grounding and timeless remedy for the stresses and anxieties of uncertain times.

Be well. Stay safe. Be patient. Be disciplined. Persevere. Don't give up. Think of others. Care. Keep the faith. Focus on the broader, the bigger vision. 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 throw anything precious away. Repair the breaks in your life and in your relationships with gold. Take time to be with nature, to be in nature, to appreciate landscapes. Don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul