

“Living in Difficult Times”
Vanessa Rush Southern, preaching
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Opening Words:

Arab American Poet Naomi Shihab Nye in her poem “Kindness” writes of how we so often learn to know and befriend kindness – in the face of loss and in the company of devastation.

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness...

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
You must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
Like a shadow or a friend.

Reading from “Antidotes for Fear” in Strength to Love by Martin Luther King, Jr. The book is a collection of sermons all written during or after the Montgomery Bus Protest. I invite you to listen to the resonances it has with things of late.

“In these days of catastrophic change and calamitous uncertainty, is there any man who does not experience the depression and bewilderment of crippling fear, which, like a nagging hound of hell, pursues our every footstep?

Everywhere men and women are confronted by fears that often appear in strange disguises and a variety of wardrobes. Haunted by the possibility of bad health, we detect in every meaningless symptom an evidence of disease. Troubled by the fact that days and years pass so quickly, we dose ourselves with drugs which promise eternal youth [and the list goes on]...

Especially common in our highly competitive society are economic fears, from which, Karen Horney says, come most of the psychological problems of our age. Captains of industry are tormented by the possible failure of their business and the capriciousness of the stock market. Employees are plagued by the prospect of unemployment and the consequences of an ever-increasing automation.

And consider, too, the multiplication in our day of religious and ontological fears, which include the fear of death and racial annihilation. The advent of the atomic age, which should have ushered in an era of plenty and of prosperity, has lifted the fear of death to morbid proportions... our fanatical quest to maintain ‘a balance of terror’ only increases our fear and leaves nations on tiptoes lest some diplomatic *faux pas* ignite a frightful holocaust.

Realizing that fear drains a man’s energy and depletes his resources, Emerson wrote, ‘He has not learned the lesson of life who does not every day surmount a fear.’”

Sermon:

I tossed this week’s announced sermon topic in the great recycling bin of religious life, because this week it seemed there was something else that was crying out to be named, something we are all wrestling with in the dark of the night and the cringing of mid-day glances at market updates and welling up underneath all conversations with friends and neighbors. If I had to give a name to what this combined specter is that dogs us these days, I’d call it uncertainty -- economic, political, human uncertainty -- and fear.

Uncertainty, it turns out, is one of the things that we human beings like least. It is one of the greatest psychological stressors. So it turns out that we human beings find it much easier to take certain news, even much of the worst of certain news, than uncertainty. And, yet, we are now steeped in, immersed up to and sometimes beyond our breathing apparatuses in uncertainty. Is it any wonder we feel we cannot breathe some days? Moreover, standing with uncertainty in all of this, just behind her and holding her hand is fear, bringing her own challenges to our lives.

To me, the metaphor that keeps surfacing about how these last few weeks have felt is that of an earthquake. It feels to me like we have all been through an earthquake. The tectonic plates on which we used to stand secure have moved beneath our feet and shaken the foundations of much of what we had come to take for granted.

I remember being in California on my college campus in 1990 when such an earthquake shook our world. It was a 7.0 on the Richter scale so no small event. We all walked around in a daze afterwards, in disbelief. People returned home to find out their dorms had been condemned, or closed down until they could be inspected by engineers. Our trailer (temporary campus housing that stuck around for 20 years) was one of the safer places to be. Its aluminum sides, after all, shook, but rarely broke or cracked and so our floors were soon covered with friends and their belongings in one big post-disaster sleepover that lasted for over a week until people could return to their rooms or were found alternative housing.

For a while, after the quake, there was nothing to do but wait and see how things settled. We had to wait to hear what the experts ruled about what had been ruined, what needed repair but would survive, and what miraculously remained unscathed. And in the midst of this waiting there were an unsettling number of aftershocks that continued for days; mild, unpredictable bouts of shaking that would send us running to the doorways to stand until the shaking stopped. These aftershocks were not serious but they made the world feel like a still uncertain, still unsafe place to be.

It is hard to live life amidst all of that – ready to dash to safety, living and sleeping even on your toes, and harder still when there is no clear place to run where you know you'll be safe. It's such a great metaphor, really, that the safest place is perched for a while in the doorways. That, we were told, was always the best place to wait out the ride.

I have felt of late, like we stand in this same kind of place, in the aftermath of a massive earthquake. Everyone is agreed that the shaking hasn't yet ended. We aren't sure what will be condemned, what resurrected, what stands sure and strong despite the upheaval. And there are aftershocks that keep us nervously on our toes. Moreover, we are living in that hard place too, standing in the doorways, uncertain, waiting, hoping, and afraid too.

I know I'm not the only one feeling the uncertainty and uneasy with it. Every interaction I've had over the last two weeks had that imprint on it. Let me give you some examples:

- I meet a strong, older woman, a scientist with a razor-sharp mind, prudent and wise who has endured incredible professional barriers to make her mark in the world. She is a sound financial planner, I am sure, and generous and deeply reasoned in her choices. She wonders out loud if she will be able to afford her medicines when all this is over.
- I meet a man who works for one of the banks that was not overly invested in sub-prime loans. In that firm he has recently been promoted with nothing but strong reviews, but when his normally polite boss sends a brusque message summoning the man to his office, the man realizes that his first thought is whether he'll be carrying his belongings out the door in an hour. After that he notices at the main door every morning as employees swipe their ID cards how gallows humor prevails. If for a moment the card doesn't read or register someone as familiar everyone laughs that perhaps he or she has been let go.

- People tell me how they've put off vacations or new cars; one woman comes to the office saying she needs help finding a smaller apartment now that her investments are down and the income she relies on from them is certain to be down too.
- And there are other ways I see the effects too. Monday night at the church I attended two meetings. When I left that night, I did notice the moon was full, and wondered if the full moon effect that New York policemen always say has their precinct's crime and craziness doubled had affected us too because those meetings that night were not our best. People were on edge and let's just say that the spirit of kindness and easy give and take was noticeably eroded in both. In both places, good people approached one another in more sharply-edged tones, with less forgiveness, and greater shortness of temper than I've seen in such a concentrated dose.

It is hard to tell which anxieties at this point are real and which illusory. There is too much dust in the air, but the uncertainty is choking us, blinding us too – not just to what is probably the reality on which we will plant our feet in the years ahead, but to what's important to hang on to amidst the aftershocks.

As King very rightly pointed out in his sermon on fear, an excerpt from which I read this morning, fear and uncertainty are not innately dangerous or destructive. He writes, "Fear... is a powerfully creative force. Every great invention and intellectual advance represents a desire to escape from some dreaded circumstance or condition. The fear of darkness led to the discovery of the secret of electricity. The fear of pain led to the marvelous advances of medicinal science. The fear of ignorance was one reason that man built great institutions of learning. The fear of war was one of the forces behind the birth of the United Nations." (p.116-7) The thing that is important about fear, then, is knowing *when* to be afraid and *how*. What is important is not simply surrendering to fear when it comes knocking.

So, I have been thinking a little about the when and how of fear. As for the *how* part of the challenge, I like Emerson's reminder that life, a life that is lived boldly and with passionate commitment, is about daily surmounting some fear. In that sense we might take some comfort and encouragement from the challenges of the last few weeks. You might say that for some of us these weeks are a kind of boot camp training for that kind of Emersonian life. We are being fed a steady diet of personal roughage that is bound to cleanse our systems of a reliance on comfort foods, and easy pre-processed living. We are being called to reconsider our way of life a bit. I expect all of us will slim down a little in the months to come, and not just our budgets but some spiritual flab should come falling away too. And I expect we'll be stronger for spirited living in the end.

Even my dentist this week, a man with a sleek office and a family of four kids to support in this part of the country that is both expensive and competitive said, "Well this just gets us back to what's really important." For a moment I wondered if maybe he said this to please me. I was after all a minister standing in his office! Except that there was such a deep sense of *relief* in his voice. It made me think that for him and men and women like him in our communities it may be hard, unpleasant and unwelcome work to be sucked into always trying to keep up with the Jones' (and so easy to fall into that trap) and maybe nice to have an excuse not to compete, or for the bar to come down all around. Perhaps like Nye's poem we'll find that facing these hard times

might put us in the company of kindness, all kinds of kindness -- neighbors helping neighbors and even the kindness of a life brought back into a more human scale.

So, maybe we befriend fear. Maybe we respond not by closing down but by opening up. None of us would dream of this hardship, but maybe we look for and find the opportunities in it.

And maybe the “how” for how we deal with this fear and uncertainty is also channeling it into a bit of righteous anger. The Bible was big on righteous anger! Maybe we get mad about privatized gains and socialized losses, but don’t let it end there. Maybe we refuse to ever again feel guilty about advocating for a regulated mixed economy – shut down anyone hereafter who has the nerve to argue that we are anything BUT a mixed economy. Maybe this reminds us too of the need for a social net, for there is nothing like thinking you might need to be caught in a net to make you hope it is there and strong to boot. Maybe we channel this experience of fear into nurturing a generation of prophets (not “profits”) for a greater, more broadly shared economic and social health to be built from the wreckage.

Finally, maybe we befriend fear by drawing closer to each other as people always have in such times. The older members I’ve talked to lately have gone back naturally and immediately to stories of the depression when I’ve talked with them these last few weeks. Part of the stories they tell are about how tough things were. They tell of the shanty towns in the marshes on the way to New York and how people would come to the door asking for a cup of coffee or food to get them through the day. Others of the stories, however, are also about how people would take evicted friends and neighbors into their own homes and how you shared what you had, whatever you had.

I’m not sure we’re headed there, but would it help the fear factor if we agreed to get through this together? So, if we cannot afford fancy nights out can’t we simply put up our big screen TV here and watch old Garbo movies together with fresh popcorn and homemade brownies. We have a kitchen here equipped for catering after all! Think of how well our kids will get to know each other. And the days can be hard but in the nights we can host dance lessons with our own members as resident dance teachers (we have some competitive dancers among us), and salsa and rumba and waltz the hard nights away. To the folks who need medicine, we can promise to help them get it. To those afraid they might go hungry we can promise to cook together in a daily re-enactment of the childhood classic “Stone Soup.” ***What are we afraid of that we cannot get through together or is the fear that whatever happens we’ll have to get through it alone?***

We don’t have to get through it alone.

We have all lost a lot in the last few weeks and months. We have lost savings, retirement, some of us have lost jobs, all of us have lost some of our sense of security. But what have we really lost?

Amidst all the uncertainty, certain certainties remain. Our portfolios of love and friendship haven’t taken a hit in the past few weeks unless we took our anguish out on them. The privilege of breathing the morning’s first whispered beauty didn’t drop in value with the DOW or become less available in the marketplace of life. A healthy body or a quiet hour with the God of our understanding, whether that be found in quiet prayer or encountered in the majesty of the woods

that lie nestled up against our homes – none of this has been taken from us in the latest devaluations or can be lost in the upcoming elections. Much of what is most important is *certain* and *remains*.

When the earthquake in California hit that senior year spring, I was in the gym where I practiced as part of the fencing team for my college. I was in a bout, in full fencing gear, the pants and undergarments, the metal-weave vest, the headgear with its strong mesh of wire that prevented the wayward strike from breaking through to an eye or ear. I didn't know what had happened when the quake struck. I thought I'd slipped on sweat or water on the floor. All I knew was I lost my balance and then when I looked up I saw my teammates rushing to the doors, pulling the equipment we were tied to behind us, foils and epees cast to the floor. As I ran I could see through my mask white stuff falling from the ceiling. Everywhere it was coming down. I tried to dodge it fearing I'd be knocked out and buried underneath what must surely be pieces of the ceiling breaking off all around me.

Once at the door I tore off my mask and then almost immediately the world stopped shaking. At that moment without the mask or the shaking of the world I could see clearly for the first time since the quake began. I could see that I was safe. I could see that my team mates were safe. I could see to the courtyard outside the gym doors and that the sun was still shining and the clear blue sky dotted with white clouds was as gorgeous and blue as ever. *Everything I loved was still intact*. Even the gym seemed whole.

However, there on the floor of the gym, scattered everywhere by the hundreds and perhaps thousands, were what I had seen through my mask. Not pieces of the sky falling, Chicken Little, but basket loads of white badminton birdies from decades of classes and countless generations of wild shots that lodged them in the gym's high beams! I had to laugh.

What I had feared in the midst of that earthquake, all of it, had been for naught. Sure, I would return home to a trailer that was shaken with some broken glass to sweep up. Yes, I would cook that night for ten displaced friends and step over them on my way to class each morning for weeks to come, but life, in all the important ways I had known it, would go on despite all the dramatic rumblings.

So, drawing from my experience of real life quakes of all kinds, allow me to give the following ministerial investment advice. Divest these days in fear's most destructive derivatives. Hold tight to what shares of a fundamental faith in life you already own. My advice, like Warren Buffet's, is that in these days we double down, but in my case I'd say, double down on what is precious in your life and write off the rest and absolutely, absolutely keep the faith.

Writing in very different but also despairing, uncertain and fearful times, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote of the power of such faith. He wrote, "This faith transforms the whirlwind of despair into a warm and reviving breeze of hope. The words of a motto which a generation ago were commonly found on the wall in the homes of devout persons need to be etched on our hearts:

Fear knocked at the door.
Faith answered.

There was no one there.”

In the words of Unitarian Universalist minister, Jane Rzepka: “O Spirit of Life and Love, we aren’t the giants we’d like so much to be, and the world can loom so large. When all is quiet and we are small and the night is dark, may we hear the tender breathing of all who lie awake with us in fear, that together we may gather strength to live with love, and kindness, and confidence.”

So may it be for us all. Amen.