

## 8 21 22—UUFM

### Rev. Rita Capezzi—Life Calls Us On

“You (and I mean me, you) think your pain and heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, and then you read.” So says James Baldwin. “You think your pain and heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, and then you read.” Or you witness, you tune in, you allow yourself to imagine moving along the path of someone who’s different from yourself. But, let’s begin with the unprecedented pain and heartbreak, individual and collective.

I don’t know about you, but I feel that I am still navigating and learning from pandemic times, which maddeningly, have not yet ended. Discombobulated and disoriented, a little wary and confused. *What happened to me?* Well, I was stuck in the house with one loving and entirely human spouse, two needy cats, and way too many unpopulated rooms. Family members a thousand miles away died. I had to find a way to keep congregational life going in unfamiliar and totally untested ways. Black and brown people continued to be killed by the state, by police or in prisons. Black and brown people, poor people they became so-called “essential workers,” got little in the way of essential protection or compensation, and died from Covid so the rest of us could get our groceries and have our trash picked up. Health care workers were left to treat those destined to die alone, and they were abandoned in their helplessness and their grief. Our political climate grew so toxic that nothing short of hating neighbors of the opposite party seemed the logical and sane response. Our democracy, which many of us just take for granted is good, which most of us take for granted will endure, well, it is under siege, and we may be poised to lose the promise of that grand experiment imagined by for-thoughtful fathers and mothers.

I know all of this. You know it, too. But it is a good thing, sometimes, to take inventory, to line it all up, to list all the details. Not to re-live it, not survive it again, but rather to recognize the reality that might be so painful that we just want to push it away. Because whether or not you allow yourself to acknowledge it, you experienced many of these same feelings. And more than I myself know—loss and pain come in waves unending. All of it terrible and painful.

Sometimes I felt stoney and immobilized. Sometimes I felt entirely cracked open, unable to stop the flood of tears. Often, I felt alone, even though I zoomed a lot. Sadly, the little camera dot just can’t compare to being in the company of a warm human person, smelling them unconsciously, sensing their movements unspokenly. Bodily presence beyond words, a two-fold silence speaking of love. I feel the necessity of such reflection, because I realize all these events that might have crushed me have not, in fact, crushed me. And I want to know why.

I suffered lost connection, feeling bereft and something-other-than myself at not being able to touch other people. I felt agony for those whom I knew lived completely alone. I suffered lost possibilities, connections that could not ripen into friendship or mutual work. I lost connection with myself, with who I think I am in this world. I felt stabbed by the conviction that nothing I did really mattered, nothing I did produced any good effects. I ruminated over the decisions I made—should I be doing this? Ought I to be doing that? I wondered: what does life mean in such isolation. I thought, I bet prisoners could give me some answers, but I did not know any to ask. And I thought, what a shame, that my circle is so narrow

that those likely with the answers are inaccessible to me.

“There it is again, that funny feeling. Total disassociation, fully out your mind. Googling derealization, hating what you find.” Bo Burnham had some good ones there. I suppose I felt like that mountain might have—dislocated, pained, broken, gushing and yet unable to really speak it plainly. For now, I know that I have changed, but just how is yet a mystery. I am still waiting to see what garden grows in the crevices of all the breakage, mine and yours. But there is Bo Burnham, with his funny feeling, singing the blues, and so in some way no longer having the blues anymore. Somehow, some way, the nightmare of pain and suffering becomes transmuted into something else. As the poet asks, “*How can a body withstand this?*” I try to “hold life like a plain face, and say, yes, I will take you. I will love you, again.

Now, I am not an expert in pain, especially chronic pain from illness of the body or the mind. And I mean to say nothing frivolous or insensitive to those suffering in pain. What I do know is that lots of the pain we hold onto is transitory. It passes, like many feelings do. What if we could hold onto that kind of pain long enough to allow it to transform us, and then let go? Hold onto it for the millenia-millisecond it takes for a stoney mountain to break open enough to enable a seed to grow? What if I can take the plain ordinary face of life and love it enough that joy breaks through?

“You think your pain and heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, and then you read.” Or you witness, you tune in, you allow yourself to imagine moving along the path of someone who’s different from yourself. The Buddhists remind us that suffering simply is. To be human is to suffer. Our pain is not our own. Our pain is a shared human experience. Some of us may have it worse than others, but we all have pain. How can sharing this human reality, knowing that we share it, how can it enable us to share something else: the ability to grow more empathetic, more able to be companions with each other in our pain. And thus more able to be companions in potential transformation.

Sorrow hurts for sure, and it can also be a source of creativity. And it is, even when the sorrow persists. Creativity, generativity, joy. Destruction of some things is inevitable, though, even necessary or valuable, for creativity always involves transformation, one thing becoming something else. Wax and pigment become crayons. Wood becomes charcoal. Stone becomes soil becomes the ground of growing life, the ground of being itself. Flower petals wilt and reveal tiny seeds, fecund and ripe to grow. Some do and some don’t. Destruction is not always devastation, though perhaps we are built to feel it this way.

One reason we become overwhelmed with the pain and the heartbreak is that our modern living separates us from each other, maybe also from our own selves. We count more on our iPhones than on our fingers and our voices, on our own reasoning minds and compassionate hearts and helping hands. We become separated from the rhythm of sorrow and joy that is the true and enduring rhythm of our human existence. That is part of it. We are modern, even when we return to the physical life—nurturing our bodies, giving birth and helping birth, repairing wounds, gardening, feeding our friends, looking for what connects us rather than divides us. And also, and I think this is the harder part, we have these limited lives. We cannot live as mountains for eons before change happens and can be acknowledged and processed and celebrated. We long to see the results of change in our world and in our lives, the

change that soothes the tearing and the tears and enables joy to enter and to plant seeds and to foster a whole new landscape, one full of beauty and generativity and fulsome, wholesome life thriving for all beings.

“You think your pain and heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, and then you read.” Or you witness, you tune in, you allow yourself to imagine moving along the path of someone who’s different from yourself. You remember that suffering is a human reality and beauty is a human necessity. Beauty—that whole amazing and vigorous process of growth and decay, of life arising over and again in multiplicity and diversity, calling us on when we wish to cover our heads with blankets and pillows and resign from human connection and relationship.

Last month, the Webb telescope has shown us glorious images of the birth of the universe, we a small but creative and conscious part of the vastness of space and time. And still, I do not know why life arose on this small green-blue speck in space. But life is and I am alive and you are alive and I can’t help but feel that there is something miraculous and beautiful and tender and frightening in that, and I want to see it and admire it and gently hold it and praise it for all the time I have, no matter if the time is full with pain and sorrow and evils I cannot change alone.

I used to think that beauty was just about loveliness, was simply the pretty and the nice. I know something different now, something that invites me to live in wholeness, neither denying the heartbreaking nor living forever in it. I know something different now, something that challenges me to live in wholeness, neither pretending that joy is everlasting nor my need of it the center of the universe. I know now that the bloom shoots up through the stoney ground. And see the bird with a seed, with a leaf in her mouth. After the flood all the colours came out. And though the floods return—the floods, the fires, the shootings, the oppression, the indignities—they all return, we cannot be swallowed up by them.

I know, because I am intending, I am purposing to know. I am choosing to live in this way, even when it is hard, hard as stone and harder than the sadness and pain that swells unbidden. We cannot gush the tears of pain and anguish, as real and needed as these are, and not see also the work of the helpers, of loving and righteous companions determined to make the beauty in the midst of ugliness, to cultivate the love that draws us forward in the great mystery of our existence in this vast cosmos. I am not a hopeless case. You are not a hopeless case. We are not a hopeless case, as long as we persist, as long as we “Keep a little fire burning; however small, however hidden.” And we do that best when we share the fire making and the fire tending. We do that best when everyone brings their bits and bobs to eat together beside the fire. We do that best when the singers sing, when the artists paint and drawn, when the makers make. We do that best when we know we each, all of us, everyone of us, has a part to play in ensuring that joy is noticed, that joy is encouraged, that joy is celebrated. And all of this, all of this, when life feels threatened and threatening, when life feels most vulnerable to simply disappearing.

Buddhists say suffering is. And we need our sangha to make it through that. We are the sangha, the community who helps each of us through. And I see life as all the more beautiful and glorious because

we have each other as companions with which to share it: beloved family, good friends, all the potential companions, to enlighten and challenge me to joy every day. Though we necessarily weep, may we live today as if our lives were the life of a mountain, that our lives upon lives over generations grow into a mountain where joy abounds and stays and enables us to continue living fully and creatively and joyfully.

I get that funny feeling all the time—what the heck, why do we go on, what is worth all the work, why does life hurt so very much—and yet, I find myself poised always in that visible silence, in this close-companioned inarticulate hour, the twofold silence that is love—vast, encompassing, stoney and wet and redolent of growth and possibility, too. “May our hearts soar with gratitude for the gift of life. May we gently hold all that is broken here. May we be challenged to open our minds and hearts ever wider. May we, together, draw the circle of love and justice ever wider.” And, though we will weep, joy has come to stay. May we all feel it so and cherish the feeling, together, always together. As you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so. May it be so, and may we say together, “Amen!”