

**Stillness Inside and Out—Rev. Rita Capezzi**  
**UUFM—12 13 20**

Dear friends, I am here to tell you that the entire service this morning is constructed around my needs. I am in need of soothing. I am in need of quiet. I am in need of discovering the stillness within me and the stillness in the larger world. I am in need of soothing, quiet, stillness because I am feeling angry and miserable much of the time these days, and I am not pretending any more that that is not true for me. I am feeling angry and miserable a lot of the time these days. And why shouldn't I?

Why should I pretend that life is not exceptionally difficult right now, even if I do count the many blessings of my life? Alright, I'll begin by counting my blessings. A blessing—the people I care most about in this world—my spouse, my children, my parents—they are untouched by COVID. All of us, every one, have access to dependable health care. A blessing—I live in a warm and welcoming house with views perfect for the way my brain works: glorious nature—skies intermittently blue and starry, trees, water, birds, squirrels galore—and the human world just right there, too. I hear the constant sound of vehicles on the highway. I see buildings, houses, factories, roadways intermingled and entangled among the tree branches, as far as I can see. All this, the human and the other-than-human, this all is the great interdependent web. A blessing—I am called to serve the holy with a congregation vital and caring, engaged and growing in many substantial ways. Thank you. A blessing—my spouse has rewarding work, we want for nothing material, nor does any member of our family. A blessing—my children both remain employed in safe conditions where they are unlikely to contract COVID due to the negligence of their employers. A blessing—I enjoy the company of many vibrant and loving friends and colleagues, sharing this journey of life and work with me. A blessing—I continue to enjoy good health and remain able-bodied as I grow closer to the beginning of my seventh decade of life. I enjoy many blessings, I know that, and for them I am truly grateful.

And my gratitude for the blessings, though utterly essential in these times and I will come back to this, my gratitude for the blessings, it does not remove or even minimize the fact that I am angry and I feel miserable much of the time. Why should I pretend that life is not exceptionally difficult right now? Why should I suppress the full range of my emotions? I am angry, enraged really, that some leaders in our country and in our state are actively and incessantly working to undermine our democracy. I am sickened that the current president finds it a good way to leave office by ordering the executions of more death row prisoners convicted of federal crimes than any president in the past 130 years. I am in despair about the distance between slogans—Operation Warp Speed—and the actual amount of vaccine that will be delivered by the end of the year, 10% of what was promised. I am weary, weary to the bone, of the chasm between actual, verifiable events and information **and** the falsehoods, lies, and deceptions that are daily perpetrated against the people of this country. I am sick, sick to death, of my own outrage.

And I am so deeply, deeply sad about the death caused by COVID, death that could have been avoided. Death that strikes the most vulnerable—the elderly, the sick, the already perennially disadvantaged, those without health care or secure housing and food sources. Death that can be so easily limited by

wearing a mask and keeping a physical distance. Death that could be avoided except that wearing a mask and keeping a physical distance have become statements about political affiliation or expression rather than public safety measures based in science and epidemiology. I am so sad thinking of the suffering of people dying alone. Of the families who cannot comfort their dying loved ones nor the living left behind. Of the health care workers who are helpless to stop the death and must stand in for family, bearing witness to the dying because their families cannot. Imagine the trauma these caregivers are forced to bear—too many dying too soon and too little time to process, to seek repair for the moral injury they are enduring because of the stupidity and carelessness of how this pandemic was mismanaged.

Death is the first thing I read about each morning when I open the paper. Deaths in our region. Rates of infections. Numbers of ICU beds available. Rates of death and infection in other parts of the world, where leaders have made different choices. I read first of death, so that I begin my day in awareness of the reality that is, no matter that it does not affect me directly, no matter that I will begin my day in deep sadness. Now, of course, death is always with us. It always will be. We are the kind of being that will die out away from the consciousness that forms our living. People have always died, every day. We die from inevitable disease. We die from preventable conditions. We in accidents and in war. We die from violence to ourselves or perpetrated upon us by others. Other pandemics have killed proportionately more of the earth's humans than this current one will. All of this is true, and still the death we are enduring is pressing upon us, and it is sad, whether or not it is our own loved ones dying.

And all the other outrages of our time, all the lies, all the corruption, all the mismanagement and deception, all the injustice. All of that was there before the pandemic, just less visible to some of us, including me. The founding myths of our country that ignore or downplay the genocide and enslavement at our foundations. The wealth and well-being stolen from Black and Brown people through broken treaties and redlining and deceptive lending practices and inequitable prison sentencing norms and ill-informed medical research and so many other social habits that squander talent and goodness and about which some of us have to force ourselves to care about because it is not part of our own direct experience. The untreated mental illness and drug addiction rampant in all part of our culture, transcending all locations, socio-economic groups, religions. The neglect of rural communities, of impoverished communities, with medical treatment and the everyday, necessary utilities of internet and broadband presented as too costly for the bottom line of the for-profit world.

When I describe life in this way, well, it's no wonder that I am angry and miserable, is it? And you might wonder: Why doesn't she just turn her thoughts to something else, something nicer like a good book or a sweet TV show about Christmas? That might be good advice, but not for me. While anger, sadness, and misery are not the loveliest of emotions, they are a reasonable, even a useful and necessary, response to the world as it is, especially that world that is so antithetical to the promise of American democracy, society, and culture. Even if the ideals of equality, freedom, and justice are not yet realized, they are ideals worth striving for, and no distance of any measure between how life is and how it ought to be should deter us from working for the beloved community about which we dream.

I am not prepared to distract from, to ignore, to disregard all that evokes sadness, anger, and misery in me. That would be a denial of reality. We all ride into this world on the birth pangs of our mothers, on bodies laboring in pain to bring forth life. We are prone to have our feelings hurt. We are prone to physical and mental disease. It is the real and actual nature of our humanness. I am not prepared to turn away. But I am prepared to face life with all its fullness, and so I began with gratitude—gratitude for the adventure of life, for the journey through time, for all the blessings that have come my way, giving my life a good shape with all that anguish and grief, too. Joy and woe are woven fine, after all, clothing for the soul divine—or the ordinary human being. Wholeness is made of the gentle as well as the tumultuous.

But gratitude is sometimes hard to come by. Sometimes it is hard to evoke, especially when I let it be drowned out by torrents of pain. It is too easy to see-saw from one extreme to the other, without the balance that is true to the nature to our reality. Life is shadowed from the beginning by its companion Death, not overshadowed or cast into gloom, but accompanied by this ending, the transitioning into the unknown. And in order to face this reality, to hold gratitude and pain in tension, I need stillness. Not silence, not inaction, but a pause to recognize the tuning within myself that is also a tuning to the larger reality.

My path to misery is paved by the pain in the world. My path to gratitude is paved by stillness. Not silence only. Not lack of all motion. But rather the space between. Like the gap between letters that makes for words. Like the interval between sounds that makes for music. The spaciousness to be unattached to the detail, the patience to wait to see what comes. Stillness found in the love of a companion, cluttered with nothing, which is everything. No material to get in the way of hearts beating in harmony. Stillness which emerges when “one begins to be in touch with a mysterious element that is within each of us.” Mirroring the quiet deliberate undulations of creatures fulfilling their possibilities, I begin to notice my breath and the beating of my own heart, the sounds of my body doing its work of keeping me upright and alive. In just twelve short seconds of silence, we could “all be together in a sudden strangeness,” enabling us to view with tenderness our sweet honey-soaked and stung, broken selves. In stillness, the small voice deep inside all comes to awareness. “Through the roar, through the rush, through the throng, through the crush,” you might hear not only the stillness in yourself but the stillness resonating in the whole world, tuned to you as it is to all that is *of and on* the web.

Each morning, I begin with death. And then I move into stillness. I take a photo of the tree outside my window, still there every morning. It feels like it is waiting for me, and I will know what it has to show me when I take the time to be still. I am faithful in my practice, and then I feel gratitude. For all the beauty that is my life. For the pain that connects me to the real and the true. I am still here. We are still here. My place is in the pain-filled world. I hope you will be there with me, too, 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 in be so, and may the people say together “Amen.”