

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

March 15, 2020

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Faith in Anxious Times

The scheduled topic for today was “Wisdom of the Generations.” I had planned a lovely service on that topic, working with Kendra Peffers and Sally Armstrong. We had a story and activities chosen; we were going to have an intergenerational service with youngsters sharing their thoughts about wisdom, and someone from her 20’s talking wisdom, and someone from her 40’s...

But then the coronavirus happened, and a few days ago we made the decision to go to this brand-new format of offering worship through the internet instead of in person, and this week it felt like everything changed. Hopefully another day we will be able to do the “Wisdom of the Generations” service that we had planned. Today, however, I chose a new topic of “Faith in Anxious Times.” That seems much more appropriate for today.

I want to share a Facebook post from a friend of mine. This friend—her name is Kerry Langan, and she and I went to church together years ago, at my home fellowship in Oberlin, Ohio. Kerry is about my age, and as you’ll hear she is writing here about her dad—about her dad when he was a young kid, so this was quite a few years ago. Her post is about an earlier generation, and about an experience of quarantine. Here’s what she says:

Orange Marmalade by Kerry Langan

When my father was 6 or 7, his home was quarantined when one of his sisters contracted scarlet fever. He and his siblings stayed with various neighbors, though they visited with their mother daily, they in the backyard, she in the kitchen window. My father was staying with a kind, elderly woman, hard of hearing, who made delicious lunches that he took to school each day. He was especially fond of her chicken sandwiches. On occasion, however, she packed dreaded orange marmalade sandwiches. Awful! He complained to his mother who assured him that he should simply tell the neighbor that he didn't care for them. He was shy but one night summoned his courage to mumble, "I don't like orange marmalade." She said, "What?" He repeated, with slightly more volume, "I don't like orange marmalade." She asked again, "What?" and he shouted, "I DON'T LIKE ORANGE MARMALADE!" He was terrified of having shouted, of having appeared ungrateful, but she gave him a huge smile and said, "You LIKE orange marmalade? Wonderful!" From then on, it was orange marmalade sandwiches every day. He was thrilled when the quarantine was over and he could return to his own home. As an adult, Dad came to be fond of orange marmalade, although not as fond as I was of this story, one I begged him to tell over and over. I smile thinking that supermarkets may be low on hand sanitizer and toilet paper, but my guess is there's plenty of orange marmalade. Dad, how I'd love to share a sandwich with you today. ❤️

Blessed be the words of Kerry Langan.

I like this story because it shows us some perspective on an experience a little bit like what we’re experiencing today. We have done this before--as a nation, as a family, as a people, as a tribe, as a race. We have dealt with diseases and quarantines and epidemics and infectious outbreaks before. Knowing this, we can see that maybe we will live to joke about this moment. The time when the toilet paper ran out. The time when we stayed home from church and watched Drew preach from an empty sanctuary on a Zoom call. I also like the story because it contains humor, and heaven knows we could all use a little bit of that right now. And it demonstrates hope and resilience, which we will all need to pull through this current crisis. Like the elder woman who took in the boy in the story, we will need to help each other too. That’s what our earlier reading today talked about also: “This is the time when we offer our spare bedroom to the college student whose dorm was just closed...right?”¹

Earlier in the week, I was on another Zoom call like this, but it was a Zoom call of ministers encouraging each other. And the host asked each of us to say what gave us hope right now, and here's what I said. In a time of crisis like this, two human impulses might come to the surface. On the one hand, I could give in to a human impulse to be selfish and greedy. I could use my strength to elbow other people out of the way to get the last toilet paper on the shelf, the last food, the last medicine. Because I need mine, I'm going to get what my family needs and push others out of the way to do it. This, I propose, is a fundamental human impulse. And equally—or hopefully more powerfully—humans have an impulse for generosity. Like the elder woman in Kerry Langan's story, we react to a crisis by helping others, being generous. So what gives me hope today? The hope that I, and others, will react to this crisis by choosing generosity and not selfishness.

May I encourage the generous impulse in myself and others.

Actually, I read just this morning before coming to church—there was an article in the New York Times that said there has actually been research about how people react in a crisis. And the selfish behavior I was talking about a minute ago? That is so rare as to almost be a myth. The fact is, and the research shows, that most people in most crisis situations will react with generosity: building community, pitching in, helping others.²

So I chose the topic today of “faith in anxious times.” For a religion that doesn't have a common agreement about the divine, or God, or truth and meaning, it may be hard to say what we all have faith in, here in this unsettling moment. Perhaps we can claim faith in human nature, faith in people being good to one another.

I have faith also in this religious community. This faith community will survive; and it will help us survive. UUFCM is not defined by the building. As a spiritual community, we are willing to explore the metaphysical: what does it mean to be connected across time and space? Let's find out.

As I said at the beginning of this worship service, I believe in the scientific connection between us. There is a cord coming out of my computer, running all the way down the hall to the office and plugged into the internet router. There is electricity and computer code that somehow brings my image and my voice to your living room.

And I believe in a different kind of long-distance connection between us. You can call it Love, you can call it long distance Reiki healing, you can call it Prayer. It's harder to grasp and to prove than technology, but it's real. We are connected across space by Love: I believe in it and I can feel it.

May we be connected, in ways seen and unseen, and may we be strengthened by the connection in these troubled times. May it be so.

¹ poem by Rev. Elizabeth Nguyen, untitled and unpublished.

² Jose A. Del Real, “The Anchorage Earthquake Was Terrifying. But the Damage Could've Been Much Worse.” NY Times, March 15, 2020. Retrieved at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/01/us/anchorage-alaska-earthquake.html>